

THE AUSTRALIAN MOVEMENT AGAINST URANIUM MINING: ITS RATIONALE AND EVOLUTION



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This paper begins with a brief historical overview of the Australian movement against uranium mining, before focussing on two major campaigns: Roxby and Jabiluka. It describes the reasons the activists gave at the time for their blockades of the Roxby Downs uranium mine in South Australia in 1983 and 1984. These reasons - such as perceptions that the industry is unsafe - have changed little over time and were the basis for the campaign against the proposed Jabiluka mine in the Northern Territory in 1998. They continue to be cited by environmental groups and Aboriginal Traditional Owners to this day as new situations arise, such as the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident.

The paper then describes how the movement evolved between the Roxby and Jabiluka blockades, with changes to the movement's philosophy, strategy, tactics and internal dynamics. This analysis includes a comparison between two anti-nuclear bike rides, one a year after the 1984 Roxby blockade and involving some of the same activists, and another at the time of the Jabiluka blockade. This author was present at all these events, and provides an emic (insider) perspective within a longitudinal participant-observation methodology. Although this perspective obviously has a subjective element, the paper fills a gap in that there is little written history of these blockades (particularly Roxby) and more generally of Australian resistance to uranium mining, let alone the aspects of nonviolence and movement evolution. It is an introductory history of these campaigns, examining the direct action components, the practicalities of nonviolent campaigning, and the evolution of Australian anti-uranium activism.

Historical background

Uranium has been mined in Australia since 1906¹ on a small-scale and since 1954 in a major way; Australia's known uranium resources are the world's largest, at 31 per cent of the global total.² According to the World Nuclear Association, in June 2014 '[t]here are three [sic] operating uranium mines in Australia, Ranger in NT, Olympic Dam [Roxby] and Beverley and Honeymoon in South Australia. A fifth is expected to start operation in 2013 [near Beverley]'.³ Uranium mined in Australia is primarily for export; Australia has no nuclear power stations, nuclear-powered vessels or nuclear weapons. A small amount is used at the Lucas Heights reactor in Sydney for research and production of neutron transmutation doped silicon, and medical and industrial radioisotopes - though some commentators are highly critical of both the need for this institution and of the activities there.⁴

Australian opposition to uranium mining dates back to at least the mid-1970s.⁵ Environmentalists worked with unions, and then with Aboriginal people after 1975 when opposition to Ranger uranium mine by local Yolgnu people emerged.⁶ A nationwide strike by the Australian Railways Union was sparked by the protest actions of one man, shunter Jim Assenbruk, in May 1976. Conferences were held and 400 people were ar-

¹ Jim Falk, Jim Green and Gavin Mudd, 'Australia, Uranium and Nuclear Power' (2006), *International Journal of Environmental Studies*, 63 (6), 845-857.

² World Nuclear Association, *Australia's Uranium* (April 2014), <<http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/Country-Profiles/Countries-A-F/Australia/>>.

³ World Nuclear Association, *Australia's Uranium Mines* (June 2014), <<http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/Country-Profiles/Countries-A-F/Appendices/Australia-s-Uranium-Mines/>>.

⁴ See, eg, Friends of the Earth Australia, *Lucas Heights* (2012) <<http://australianmap.net/lucas-heights/>>.

⁵ Verity Burgmann, *Power and Protest: Movements for Change in Australian Society* (Allen and Unwin, 1993) 195.

⁶ It is well detailed by Drew Hutton and Libby Connors, *A History of The Australian Environment Movement* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) 137-144; see also Sigrid McCausland, *Movement and Class: The Anti-Uranium Movement in Australia* (2003) <<http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/research/smg/pdf%20%20Conference/SigridMcCausland-AntiUraniumMovement.pdf>>



rested in a 1977 march in Brisbane. Anti-uranium bike rides to Canberra, organised by Friends of the Earth (FoE), occurred in 1975, 1976 and 1977.

Mass rallies involving up to 50 000 people occurred in 1976 and 1977, direct-actions tried to stop yellowcake from the Lucas Heights Reactor from being loaded onto ships, and the Waterside Workers Union went on 24-hour strike and refused to work with the *Columbus Australia*, a ship carrying yellowcake.⁷ Since 1977, 115 local councils, including Brisbane's and Adelaide's, have declared themselves Nuclear Free Zones, although these are more 'an important public statement' with 'limited legal significance'.⁸

The peace movement, which had marched for nuclear disarmament in the 1950s and 1960s, and worked to end the Vietnam War in the 1970s, became a prominent part of the anti-nuclear movement from about 1977. Other players in the movement were political groups, including members of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), socialists and anarchists, human rights activists and church groups. Civil libertarians, too, were concerned with the centralisation of political and economic power in the hands of financial and bureaucratic elites, and with the clandestine nature of this power.⁹

The ALP initially supported uranium mining¹⁰ but, between 1975 and 1982, they actively campaigned against it, and the movement concentrated resources into electoral strategies to elect the ALP. When these failed, the movement faltered. From 1982, the ALP watered down and then abandoned its anti-uranium stance, and the movement returned to mass mobilisation tactics, with Palm Sunday rallies peaking in 1984 and 1985, with some 250,000 people attending in cities.¹¹ In May 1982, the first nationally coordinated occupation of an Australian uranium mine occurred at the Honeymoon mine to the northwest of Broken Hill, briefly closing its pilot plant.¹² Although it only achieved limited publicity, it was a precedent for the major action at Roxby Downs a year later.

Opposition to Roxby Downs

From 1983, the campaign against uranium mining focused on the Roxby Downs project, owned by the 'Joint Venturers' - British Petroleum (BP) and Western Mining Corporation (WMC), who claimed that the uranium was just incidental to the project, which also involved gold, silver, copper and rare earths.¹³ In fact, it was the largest uranium deposit on earth.¹⁴ The project had been allowed by the ALP government, who just a year earlier had been promoting their anti-uranium credentials with stickers saying 'Uranium - Play It Safe: Vote ALP'. Activists were appalled by this hypocrisy.

Reasons for opposition

Many activists lived in dire fear of nuclear war during the 1980s, and this was the focus of much of the activism. A prime concern was that uranium fuels the global nuclear weapons cycle, either directly or by adding to stockpiles, which could also be accessed by terrorists.¹⁵

Aboriginal Elders from the Kokatha nation had clearly and repeatedly expressed their opposition to the mine. An independent anthropological report verified the Kokatha's claim of sacred sites at Roxby but this was ignored by the Joint Venturers.¹⁶ The main (Whenan) shaft had already destroyed one site of significance and others were threatened.

Most mining equipment would be imported rather than Australian-made,¹⁷ and the capital-intensive and highly-mechanised nature of the project meant that the much-mooted job creation was at the cost of hun-

⁷ Timothy Doyle, *Green Power: The Environment Movement in Australia* (University of NSW Press, 2000) 133-4.

⁸ Adelaide City Council, *Declaration of the City of Adelaide as a Nuclear Free Zone*, 27 February 1995, <<http://www.adelaidecitycouncil.com/assets/Policies-Papers/docs/DECLARATION-nuclear-free-zone.pdf>>.

⁹ See Joan Coxsedg; Ken Coldicutt and Gerry Harant, 'Rooted in Secrecy: The Clandestine Element in Australian Politics' (Committee for the Abolition of Political Police, 1982); J A Camilleri, *The State and Nuclear Power: Conflict and Control in the Western World* (Penguin Books, 1984).

¹⁰ Jim Green, 'Australia's Anti-nuclear Movement' (1998) 330, 26 August, *Green Left Weekly*, 14.

¹¹ Doyle, above n 7, 136.

¹² Ian Cohen, *Green Fire* (Harper Collins, 1997) 107.

¹³ Willy Wabeke, 'Down with Downs: The Reason Why It Must Stop' (1983) 14, *Honi Soit*, 11.

¹⁴ Doyle, above n 7, x.

¹⁵ Sharon Mullin and David Vincent, 'The Aims of Roxby' (1984) 22, (2 October) *Honi Soit*, 17; see also Coalition for a Nuclear Free Australia (CNFA), *Roxby Blockade Handbook*, (Campaign Against Nuclear Energy, 1983) 1.

¹⁶ Jeff Meikle, 'What a Goanna Won't Tell You about Roxby Downs' (1984) 64(11), *Union Recorder*, 25-26.

¹⁷ Mullin and Vincent, above n 15, 17.



dreds of thousands of dollars per job. Many more jobs could be created for the same money; jobs that were both ethical and environmentally friendly.¹⁸ Activists also argued that, as a society, it would be better to take energy efficiency measures, reduce consumption and develop alternative energy sources, such as solar, wind, biomass, geothermal, tidal and - where appropriate - hydro, rather than utilise dangerous 'high-tech' methods such as nuclear power.¹⁹

Another consequence of mining would be 400 hectares of tailings dumps left in mounds up to 30 metres high; these would be dangerously radioactive for hundreds of thousands of years, contaminating the soil, water, plants, animals and people in the surrounding area.²⁰ Strontium, a radioactive by-product of the extraction of yellowcake from uranium ore, was already being stored in large, open tailings ponds from which birds were drinking and bathing; there was nothing to prevent dispersal of radioactive materials by willy-willies and other desert winds.²¹ Carcinogenic radon gas would be emitted from these tailings for at least a million years. The gas is also released during extraction, is heavier than air and, thus, does not disperse easily, yet it was not measured by WMC, whose ventilation systems were considered inadequate to protect workers and their families.²²

Another concern was that 33 million litres of water per day would be taken from the Great Artesian Basin, an ancient and largely irreplaceable resource that had supplied oases around mound springs, used by Aboriginal people for millennia and, more recently, aided farmers from four states.²³ Roxby's extraction is one fifth of the total consumption of bore water in Australia²⁴ and 'the most extensive right to underground water ever seen in this country'.²⁵ The Basin would also be threatened by groundwater seepage of radioactive effluent sprayed onto the road to settle dust, and leaks of radioactive water from the tailings dams, which had only plastic liners to prevent seepage.²⁶

Many of these predictions have eventuated, with one spring drying up²⁷ and an estimated 110,000 litres of radioactive water being spilt during an accident at the mine's hydro-metallurgical plant in October 2003, which released an estimated 32 kilograms of uranium.²⁸ According to the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), this followed other major leaks and unpredicted serious safety failures, including extensive fires. There have also been terrorist threats to Lucas Heights in 1983, 1984, 2001 and 2003.²⁹

While the Roxby blockades were unsuccessful in stopping the mine, the campaign continues through protests and legal challenges, with the most recent in 2012.³⁰ The vindication of some of the protesters' arguments,³¹ stridently dismissed at the time by governments and mainstream media,³² requires acknowl-

¹⁸ CNFA, above n 15, 4.

¹⁹ Marty Branagan, 'Letter to the editor' (1983) 17, 31 October, *Honi Soit*, 2; CNFA, above n 15, 4.

²⁰ Branagan, above n 19; Wabeke, above n 13, 10.

²¹ Meikle, above n 11, 25.

²² Wabeke, above n 13, 10.

²³ Mullin and Vincent, above n 15, 17.

²⁴ Meikle, above n 16, 25.

²⁵ Cohen, above n 12, 114.

²⁶ Meikle, above n 16, 25.

²⁷ Kevin Buzzacott and the Arabunna People 'Opposition to National Radioactive Waste Repository being located at Billa Kalina, in Lake Eyre basin' (2005) *Wisdom from the Oldest Culture in the World, Aboriginal Tent Embassy* <http://www.lakeeyre.green.net.au/keepers_of_lake_eyre.html>.

²⁸ 'New SA uranium spill highlights need for urgent changes', 2003, Australian Conservation Foundation <<http://www.acfonline.org.au/asp/pages/selectlist.asp?strFilterNmValue=State&strFilterValue=SA&IdDocTyp=1>>; also, *NNN Bad Developers NNN*, <<http://baddevelopers.nfshost.com/Docs/roxby.htm>>.

²⁹ Anthony Hoy, 'Revealed: A Nuclear Nightmare in Sydney's Backyard', *The Bulletin*, 12 November 2003; Jim Green, (October, 2001) <<http://www.foe.org.au/anti-nuclear/issues/oz/lh/articles2>>.

³⁰ 'Police out in Force: Blockades of Roads to Roxby Downs' (13 July, 2012) *Nuclear Australia* <<http://nuclearnewsaustralia.wordpress.com/2012/07/13/police-out-in-force-blockades-of-roads-to-roxby-downs/>>; 'Aboriginal elder loses bid to block \$30bn Olympic Dam mine expansion', *Business, Australian*, 8 October 2103 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au>>.

³¹ This follows the pattern of the earlier Franklin blockade, which was fiercely resisted at the time by local media and many Tasmanians, but was later vindicated with World Heritage listing, Lyndon Schneiders, (2013) 2, *Wilderness News* 182, 2.

³² The Sydney Morning Herald, for example, cited few of these concerns, writing instead: '[t]he weird looking people ... want us to take them very seriously. They want to stop a project that has plans for a town of 30 000 people, jobs for 2400 and a revenue of \$500 million a year', Amanda Buckley 'Advertisements contested' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 August 1983, 3.



edgement to counter the automatic dismissal by elites of anti-uranium activism as irrational or emotionally-driven, as has so often occurred in the past.³³

Jabiluka

The rationale for opposition to the proposed Jabiluka mine was very similar, including the opposition of the Traditional Owners, the Mirrar people, on religious, environmental and land rights grounds.³⁴ Not only were the Mirrar's land rights contravened, but also many sites of spiritual, artistic and archaeological significance were threatened by the proposal. Jabiluka is

an outstanding cultural landscape, including over 100 recorded art galleries, numerous Dreaming places including the unique Mosquito Dreaming, and several creation trackways [the most important of which] is the Dreaming path of a gecko.³⁵

There were similar concerns about radon gas, with the Roxby Action Collective noting that there is no safe level of radiation, and that low doses of radiation, spread over a number of years, are just as dangerous as acute exposure.³⁶ The mine's contribution of the mine to the threat of nuclear war was a further concern.³⁷

One significant topographical difference is that while Roxby is in desert country, Jabiluka is closer to the equator and encounters monsoonal rains and flooding. The mine would create 20 million tonnes of radioactive waste, located within 500 metres of Kakadu's most spectacular wetlands.³⁸ The mine was seen as impacting on the World Heritage values of the region,³⁹ and impacting on local Aboriginal people who still undertake traditional food-gathering activities in the region⁴⁰ especially since there have been a number of reported spillages of radioactive material into river systems by the nearby Ranger uranium mine.⁴¹ In one incident, Ranger mineworkers were not told of a leak into their water supply, and drank and showered in the contaminated water.⁴²

Radioactive waste could create problems (and social and economic costs) for up to 200,000 years, almost certainly long after the company has ceased to exist.⁴³ With some exceptions,⁴⁴ few people seem to be working on how to communicate to distant future generations the whereabouts of these sites, their processes and toxicity levels.

Again, some of these fears have since eventuated. One example is an accident at Ranger in 2013, which traditional owners say released up to a million litres of acidic radioactive slurry, in one of the biggest nuclear accidents in Australian history.⁴⁵ Another example is the nuclear disaster at Fukushima in Japan in 2011, which involved uranium from Ranger, much to the distress of the traditional owners. In the highly

³³ See Karl-Eric Paasonen, *Building the Beast: Media Construction of Protest and Protesters and the Assignment of Responsibility for Violence* (MA thesis, University of Queensland, 1996), 43, 6-64.

³⁴ Although permission was supposedly given for a uranium mine at Ranger by Mirrar TO Toby Gangale, the Mirrar argue that this was not specifically given and was not legal, given the extreme pressure under which he was put (John Hallam, 'How on Earth: An Historical Account of Jabiluka', (1998) 77 (November) *Chain Reaction* 10). However, the Australian government amended the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* in 1980 so that mining agreements would stand even if it could be proved that informed consent was not given (Gundjehmi Aboriginal Corporation, 'Submission from the Mirrar People to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee' (April 1999) 34-36, www.mirrar.net; Senate of Australia, 'Jabiluka: The Undermining of Process: Inquiry into the Jabiluka Uranium Mine Project' (Senate Report, Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Reference Committee, Parliament House, Canberra, June 1999) 5.62.

³⁵ John Mulvaney, 'Uranium and Cultural Heritage Values' (2000/2001) 7 (Summer) *Dissent* 49.

³⁶ Roxby Action Collective, *Uranium mining: How it Affects You* (pamphlet, Friends of the Earth, September 1998), 3-4; see also Jon Land, 'Yes to Land Rights; No to Uranium Mining' (1997) 301 (10 December) *Green Left Weekly* 30.

³⁷ Environment Centre Northern Territory, 'Why Jabiluka Should Not Proceed' (20 September 2003) [3] <http://www.ecnt.org/uranium/jabiluka_shouldnt_proceed.htm>.

³⁸ Wendy Robertson, 'Kakadu Belongs to All of Us! Stop Jabiluka!' (15 October 1997) 293, *Green Left Weekly* <<https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/13606>>.

³⁹ Sarah Wilson 'Campaign Against Jabiluka Mine Continues' (1997) 287 (27 August) *Green Left Weekly* 3.

⁴⁰ Jacqui Katona 'Why We Oppose Jabiluka Uranium Mining' (1997) 284 (6 August) *Green Left Weekly* 13.

⁴¹ Sarojini Krishnapillai, 'Jabiluka: We're Not Going Away, Rio' (2000/2001) [Summer] *Friends of the Earth Journal*, 5.

⁴² Lindsay Murdoch, 'Uranium Drinkers Say Mine Cut Them Loose', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 April 2004, 1.

⁴³ Colin Marsh, *Society and the Environment* (Pearson Education, 3rd ed, 2001) 160.

⁴⁴ Paul Brown et al, 'Arts and the Deep Nuclear Future: A Prospectus' in David Curtis and Lucia Aguilar (eds), *Linking Art and the Environment Proceedings of the first EcoArts Australis Conference, 12-13 May 2013* (EcoArts Australis Inc, Wollongong, 2013).

⁴⁵ 'Calls for Ranger Uranium Mine to Shut After Spill' (8 December 2013), SBS News <www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2013/12/08/calls-ranger-uranium-shut-after-major-accident>.



developed, technological society of Japan, the Fukushima designers had expected that the venting or radioactive release of pressure of the reactors would occur electrically, but this proved impossible after the tsunami. Valuable time was wasted as staff tried to find and read blueprints showing how to do this manually (and fortunately they still *had* both blueprints and staff). Further time was wasted by a visit from the Prime Minister, as well as pressure from senior management in Tokyo not to use seawater to cool the reactors, as this may damage the equipment and reduce the firm's profitability. Fortunately the on-site personnel ignored these directives in the interests of human safety.⁴⁶

Nuclear power is currently being touted as a solution to global warming,⁴⁷ but opponents say that the time, cost and carbon-intensive resources necessary to build nuclear stations make it a poor option, which would merely substitute one problem for another.⁴⁸ This push for nuclear power comes in waves, and has receded since Fukushima, although some argue that a similar accident is unlikely to reoccur if there is effective legislation and more advanced technologies.⁴⁹ This, however, was said after Chernobyl,⁵⁰ but it *did* reoccur, with the Fukushima radioactivity impacting on human and environmental health locally, and travelling globally in atmospheric pollution and as far as the United States in ocean currents.⁵¹ Accidents and leaks of radioactive water continue to occur there; in February 2014, '100 tonnes, with a concentration of radiation eight million times the safety level, spilled after workers carelessly pumped it into a full tank'.⁵²

The fact is that anything human-made is prone to human error. As Einstein allegedly once said: 'Two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I am not yet completely sure about the universe'.⁵³ Let us turn now to various aspects of the evolution of the resistance to uranium mining.

Media

Roxby I (1983) was a media disaster, with violence which was widely reported and blamed entirely on the activists.⁵⁴ Nonviolence was more prominent at Roxby II (1984), with training and creation of affinity groups prior to the blockade,⁵⁵ which reduced the amount of violence. The media, however, remained highly selective, focusing on 'less respectable people (eg, lesbians)',⁵⁶ because:

Stereotypes of hippies and ... other 'oddities' are far more readable than peaceful good relations with the police, or a troop of nurses and doctors distributing health pamphlets to miners ... When it was realized in the first week that the blockade's actions weren't going to comply by providing the media with the sensational headlines they demand, most [media] left, leaving only one camera to represent the commercial stations throughout Australia.⁵⁷

Two participants wrote that there were frequent misquotations of the number of arrestees, minimal and biased coverage, false allegations of weapons, and sensationalism owing to the essentially conservative

⁴⁶ Mark Willacy, 'Heroes of the Meltdown', *Good Weekend, Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 June 2013, 16-19.

⁴⁷ See, eg, 'Top Climate Change Scientists' Letter to Policy Influencers' (3 November 2013) CNN <<http://edition.cnn.com/2013/11/03/world/nuclear-energy-climate-change-scientists-letter/>>.

⁴⁸ 'Nuclear Power: No Solution to Climate Change' (n.d.) *Nuke Free Future* <<http://www.nukefreefuture.com/nuclear-power-no-solution-to-climate-change/>>; Katherine Ling, 'Nuclear Power Cannot Solve Climate Change', (27 March, 2009) *Scientific American* <<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/nuclear-cannot-solve-climate-change/>>.

⁴⁹ Qiang Wang, Xi Chen and Xu Yi-chong, 'Accident like the [sic] Fukushima Unlikely in a Country with Effective Nuclear Regulation: Literature Review and Proposed Guidelines' (2013) 17, *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews*, 126-146.

⁵⁰ 'Accidents at Nuclear Power Plants' (2010) *nuclearinfo.net* <<http://nuclearinfo.net/Nuclearpower/WebHomeAccidentsAtNuclearPowerPlants>>.

⁵¹ Deborah MacKenzie, 'Fukushima Radioactive Fallout Nears Chernobyl Levels' (24 March 2011) *New Scientist* <<http://www.newscientist.com/>>; 'Radiation from Fukushima' (2014) *Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution* <<https://www.whoi.edu/page.do?pid=83397&tid=3622&cid=94989>>.

⁵² Richard Lloyd Parry, 'Japan Wants to Dump Radioactive Water from Fukushima in Sea', *Australian*, 11 March 2014 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/japan-wants-to-dump-radioactive-water-from-fukushima-in-sea/story-fnb64oi6-1226851651534#>>.

⁵³ Quoted in 'Two Things Are Infinite' (4 May 2010), *Quote Investigator* <<http://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/05/04/universe-einstein/>>.

⁵⁴ Marty Branagan, *Global Warming, Militarism and Nonviolence: The Art of Active Resistance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 79-80.

⁵⁵ Maria Theobald, 'Stopping Uranium Takes Good Vibes', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 August 1984, 40.

⁵⁶ Claire Runciman, 'The Right of Protest: Responses to the Franklin Blockade', in Human Rights Commission (ed), *The Right of Peaceful Protest Seminar, Canberra 3-4 July 1986 Papers* (Australian Government Publishing Service, 1986) 178.

⁵⁷ Sheree Berrier and Hanne Worsoe, 'Media Rocks Roxby - Information vs Implication' (1984) 22 (2 October) *Honi Soit* 16.



nature of the mainstream media, because of its economic interests, the politics of the owners and editors, and its need to sustain a wide audience.⁵⁸

Encountering such poor media, however, radicalised the activists, by removing their naïve beliefs about its impartiality. It showed them the importance of exploring measures (such as training and discipline) to minimise violence, and tactics (such as artistic ones) to obtain attention and favourable coverage. Moreover, it was a catalyst for many of the blockaders to seek alternative media outlets, such as student newspapers and radio, and to present their own accounts of the protest in order to sway public opinion.

By Jabiluka, technological changes and the birth of 'indymedia'⁵⁹ meant that activists could make their own media more easily, and use email or create websites to distribute them. Numerous documentaries were made about Jabiluka⁶⁰, while footage of a bike ride to Jabiluka, made by the riders themselves, was screened weekly on SBS. This move towards activist control of media coverage is an important development in the nonviolence area of 'conversion'. The growth of radical newspapers, such as Green Left Weekly (GLW), was also important in publicising the campaign. GLW, for example, covered the courtcases for people arrested at the blockade, some of which successfully exonerated arrestees.

Aboriginal leadership and solidarity

At Jabiluka, Aboriginal leadership of a major environmental campaign occurred for the first time in Australia. The authority and sovereignty of the traditional owners of Jabiluka, the Mirrar people,⁶¹ exercised via the Gundjhembi Aboriginal Corporation (GAC), was accepted by most activists, although there were some examples of ignorance and racism, grumbles about a 'doof' being prohibited, and problems caused by a Christian group which disregarded Mirrar directives. Additionally, some protesters continued to use drugs, such as marijuana and alcohol, at the blockade after being asked to refrain.⁶² Nevertheless, this Aboriginal control of a national campaign involving high profile environmental and student organisations was unprecedented, revealing increased understanding by activist communities of Aboriginal issues.

There was also growing solidarity amongst diverse Aboriginal groups opposed to uranium mining. One man was driving a vehicle from Alice Springs to a remote Western Desert community to take people to Jabiluka when, unfortunately, his vehicle overturned and he was killed. The great distress of the community prevented them from engaging in what may have been an historic alliance.

Larger, more professional campaign

Jabiluka was a larger, better-resourced and more widespread campaign than Roxby. There was backing from established national organisations such as The Wilderness Society (TWS), and the ACF (and its high profile head, rock singer Peter Garrett). Mobilisation of tertiary students by the National Union of Students, and high school students by youth socialist group 'Resistance', were noteworthy. Mass high school walkouts in support of the Mirrar occurred in 1998, mobilising 14 000 young people,⁶³ a number and action possibly without precedent for youth activism in Australia. A whole new generation was exposed to activism.

Jabiluka Action Groups (JAGs) were established throughout the country. Blockade numbers grew, with between 3000 and 5000 people attending before the end of the blockade at the onset of the wet season, and almost 600 arrests by the campaign's end.⁶⁴ A number of 'celebrity arrests' occurred, both at the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ This refers to independent media, often using the internet.

⁶⁰ These include Pip Starr's 'Fight for Country: the Story of the Jabiluka Blockade', Keith Armstrong's 'Interstate Ferrets for the Planet: Three Weeks at the Jabiluka Blockade', Cathy Henkel's 'Walking Through a Minefield' and David Bradbury's 'Jabiluka'. Distribution of alternative films, however, remains difficult in Australia (see Lauren Carroll Harris, 'Not at A Cinema Near You: Australian's Film Distribution Problem' [Currency House, 2013]).

⁶¹ As Paasonen interprets it (following Harold R Kerbo, 'Movements of "Crisis" and Movements of "Affluence": A Critique of Deprivation and Resource Mobilization Theories' (1982) 26, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 643), the Mirrar campaign was a "movement of crisis", whereas the nonindigenous activists were a "movement of affluence" (Karl-Eric Paasonen, 'Knifing your Nearest: Internal Conflict Dynamics in the Campaign Against Jabiluka Uranium Mine' [Statement of results] (University of Queensland, 4 November 2004) 8-12).

⁶² Anna Demant, 'Work in Progress' (2001) 84 (Summer) *Chain Reaction* 6.

⁶³ Jacqui Moon, 'Walkout planned against Jabiluka' (1999) 355 (7 April) *Green Left Weekly* 25.

⁶⁴ Jim Green, 'The Battle to Stop Jabiluka' (28 November 2001) 473, *Green Left Weekly*, <<https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/23794> 2001:28>; 'Jabiluka blockade' (2004) *Anti-Nuclear Alliance of Western Australia* <www.anawa.org.au/ntjabiluka-blockade.html>.



blockade and elsewhere, such as the arrest of author Nancy Cato, aged 80, in a Noosa action.⁶⁵ Perhaps one of the most internationally significant actions was the arrest of Traditional Owner Yvonne Margarula, for 'trespass' - on her own land!

The size of the Jabiluka campaign may also have been a result of decades of grassroots agitation such as at Roxby, leading to a deeper environmental understanding in society, and even the conservative Prime Minister Howard declaring in 1996 'We're all greenies now'.⁶⁶

Jabiluka campaigners also liaised better with groups overseas, who held their own awareness-raising actions in solidarity, or lobbied the World Heritage Commission.⁶⁷ Representatives of overseas anti-nuclear organisations, such as the Tokyo-based Citizen's Nuclear Information Centre, visited the blockade.⁶⁸ International actions of solidarity had been part of the campaign since 18 November 1997⁶⁹ and occurred again in April 1998.⁷⁰ On 19 May 1998, protests were held in Canada, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Britain, South Korea and the US, organised by John Hallam at FoE Sydney.⁷¹ Easier and cheaper international communications via the Internet no doubt helped this organising and awareness-raising.

Active resistance

As well as its size and Aboriginal leadership, another unusual aspect of Jabiluka was that there was little use of 'active resistance' techniques. These are techniques to make blockading more physically effective, using tripods, 'lock-ons', burials and other devices and processes.⁷² Active resistance development occurred by radical activists in Australia, at Terania Creek,⁷³ Roxby, the Daintree and, particularly, in 1990s forest blockades. Although these techniques were, at the time, frowned on by mainstream organisations such as TWS, who preferred orthodox or Gandhian nonviolence, they have now been adopted nationally and globally.⁷⁴

Active resistance initially occurred at Jabiluka, but GAC decided that tensions between the police and protesters were becoming too great because of secretive and militant actions, especially after some protesters had recklessly driven a van through locked gates near the mine, endangering police.⁷⁵ In another dangerous incident, one man was dragged along while locked onto the underside of a vehicle.⁷⁶

GAC was concerned at the possibility of injury stemming from such actions on their land, and felt personally responsible. They were also concerned because police were stationed on a sacred escarpment to catch secretive activists⁷⁷ and they decided not to allow secret actions anymore. A protocol was subsequently established with police.⁷⁸

Even without militant methods, the blockade was effective, with the sheer numbers of arrestees creating a drain on the Northern Territory's infrastructure. This was a strong affirmation that orthodox actions continued to be worthwhile:

The police were much more on side now covert actions were over, having sought out [police liaison activist] Anthony [Kelly] from our jail cell and begged him to stop actions for a while because they just couldn't cope with the number of arrestees.⁷⁹

⁶⁵ Jim Green, 'Arrests at Jabiluka Westpac protests', (1999) 357 (21 April) *Green Left Weekly* 3.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Hutton and Connors, above n 2, 3.

⁶⁷ At one point, there were reputedly so many faxes to the World Heritage Commission urging no mining at Jabiluka that they had to be carried in wheelbarrows!

⁶⁸ Tim E Stewart, 'Japanese Anti-Nuclear Activists Visit Jabiluka Blockade', (1998) 313 (8 April) *Green Left Weekly* 13.

⁶⁹ Land, above n 26.

⁷⁰ Francesca Davis 'International Support for Jabiluka Campaign Grows' (1998) 336 (7 October) *Green Left Weekly* 5.

⁷¹ Tom Flanagan, 'Jabiluka Struggle Intensifies' (1998) 319 (27 May) *Green Left Weekly* 7.

⁷² See Branagan, above n 54, 74-142.

⁷³ See Vanessa Bible, *Aquarius Rising: Terania Creek and the Australian Forest Protest Movement* (Honours thesis, University of New England, 2010).

⁷⁴ Branagan, above n 54, 128-9.

⁷⁵ See Chris Ryan and Melissa Ryan, 'PM Lookalikes take Protest to the Mine Face', *Age* (Melbourne), 30 September 1998, 12.

⁷⁶ Keith Armstrong, 'Confessions of a Green Blockader' (1998) 60 *Nonviolence Today* 6-11.

⁷⁷ Karl-Eric Paasonen, pers. comm., 1 August 2005.

⁷⁸ Karl-Eric Paasonen, pers. comm., 25 November 2004.

⁷⁹ Marty Branagan, 'Jabiluka' [email to environment groups and supporters] (Arid Land Environment Centre, c, 15 October, Alice Springs, 1998) 3.



Better support for arrestees

At Roxby there had been little support for arrestees - in fact there were so few people that no one noticed the air being let out of support vehicles' tyres. There had been no lawyers to advise or defend arrestees who, in an intimidating process, were found guilty of charges such as 'Failure to Cease to Loiter', which later resulted in further incarceration if fines were unpaid.

Jabiluka arrestees, by contrast, enjoyed groups of cheering people on release and being taken care of. Excellent *pro bono* lawyers managed to get some activists acquitted, despite the prosecution utilising the resources of police, mining corporation Energy Resources Australia (ERA), and the Surveyor-General's Department.⁸⁰ Jabiluka Arrestees Legal Information Service (JAILS) volunteers assisted with information and even found accommodation for people travelling to Darwin for trials.

Other changes in internal movement dynamics included consensus decision-making occurring more efficiently and smoothly at Jabiluka, though exposure to passive smoking was still an issue. Feminist action was very strong at Roxby I in particular; by Jabiluka, this was not so overt or involving separate actions, but was, nevertheless, clearly present, although there were still tensions over sexism.⁸¹

Improved relationships with police

Police liaison and relations were superior at Jabiluka compared to Roxby, where pitched battles had been fought, and many protesters and police had been injured. With the Jabiluka blockade more open to communication with police after the end of secretive actions, relations with them improved dramatically. Police were frequently befriended, and some wore supportive stickers inside their caps, or bought protest t-shirts from the activists, and even donated barramundi they had caught.

When a band traveled to the lease gates, one man drove an old Holden whilst playing a saxophone, while an electric guitar boomed through a speaker mounted precariously on the front, with more woodwind and the rhythm section in the back. The police, however, did not stop the band for traffic infringements, such as not having safety belts on, unsafe driving or being overloaded. In fact, they halted all car traffic for the band, the head policeman booming in his Scottish brogue, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, the road is yours'.

Nevertheless, as at other blockades, protesters were subjected to extreme physical and psychological abuse. Miners used explosives without sirens or warnings while protesters were only 200 metres away, while police allegedly assaulted activists locked onto machinery, denied activists prompt medical attention, and removed water supplies despite the sub-tropical heat.⁸² They also subjected people to atrocious jail conditions, and began to lay serious charges, with further threats of mandatory sentencing. On 9 September 1998, a semi-trailer smashed through the blockade camp's gates, demolished a bicycle, drove close to sleeping blockaders and swerved towards fleeing activists,⁸³ yet no charges were laid.

Jabiluka Activist Support Network (JASN) was formed as a result of this maltreatment, and lobbied to rectify the situation. This was, in itself, a radical political action in the Northern Territory, where a long-term conservative government and political climate had created a 'frontier mentality' where police actions were rarely questioned.

Anti-uranium bike rides

The two anti-uranium bike rides during this period were vastly different. Both had some successes and failures, but the 1998 Cycle Against the Nuclear Cycle (CANC) gained more prominent and better media coverage - supplied by themselves - and enjoyed a less confrontational atmosphere. Being a smaller group, the internal dynamics were smoother, and meetings were quicker and less painful.

While the 1986 ride ended unceremoniously, CANC's ended at the Jabiluka blockade, where they were greeted with a heroes' welcome, with the large crowd holding up their own bikes in homage to them. There was the aforementioned band, while ritual, symbolism and visual art added to the occasion:

⁸⁰ Peter Johnston, 'Jailings and Victories in Jabiluka Campaign' (1999) 351(3 March) *Green Left Weekly* 2.

⁸¹ Kristina Schmah, 'The Evasive Flavour of Ecofeminism' [pamphlet and email circular] (Arid Lands Environment Centre, 22 September, 1998).

⁸² Rebecca Meckelburg and Jim Green, 'Jabiluka's Political Prisoners' (1998) 325 (22 July) *Green Left Weekly*, 5.

⁸³ Rebecca Meckelburg 'Jabiluka Camp Under Siege' (1998) 333(16 September) *Green Left Weekly* 5.



Up rode CANC, the leaders five abreast holding a banner. The idea was for them to ride through a long sheet of butchers' paper, held taut by a few layers of *papier mache*. Unfortunately the people who'd done the *papier mache* had been a little over-zealous. Michael, holding the banner with one hand and having ridden 4,400 kilometres without mishap, hit the paper and went down, an ignominious end to a great achievement! There were welcomes, speeches, a meeting with some Mirrar who were presented with a t-shirt signed by aboriginal people from Adelaide upwards, and there were stickers placed on a giant map of Oz to indicate all the uranium-linked places they'd been. There was more song and dance, then they walked across a line of Benny Zable's radioactive waste barrels and received medals like Olympic champions.⁸⁴

Improved artistic activism

This move towards more artistic activism had begun at Roxby II.⁸⁵ With the emergence of a strong, feminised peace movement there had been a concomitant shift away from direct action: '[t]he emphasis is now on educating the community'.⁸⁶ The arts are particularly effective as a tool of education, and women's actions at Roxby II were consistently artistic, involving banners, theatre, painted faces and chanting, with a common song being 'Don't be too polite girls'.⁸⁷ One symbolic action included

a large women's symbol [made] out of strips of cloth [which was] half in and half out of the fence ... This was designed to show how we women refused to recognize the artificial barrier made by the fence.⁸⁸

There were veterans of Greenham Common, Honeymoon, Roxby I and Pine Gap protests, whose

songs and experiences helped to keep us aware of the many thousands of women who had already been involved in protest action and gave us the strength and energy to ensure that there will be many thousands more.⁸⁹

Through music, these veterans empowered newcomers to be confident and act, and ensured continuity of the movement. In this artistic way, radical history was passed on, largely orally and at a grassroots level, a history far different to that generated by mainstream media.

Artistic activism further flowered at Jabiluka, and, as argued elsewhere, this was because active resistance was curtailed, and energy was directed elsewhere.⁹⁰ There was also more equipment and resources available, such as for making music, puppets and sculptures. This may partly be due to the less remote location, but could also be attributed to movement evolution, a growing recognition of the usefulness of the arts in education, promotion and group bonding.⁹¹ Street theatre was more professional, with one performance having a larger cast (including doctors and scientists) than anything at Roxby, a public address system, an enormous puppet, and a script that was both humorous and contained scientific information. It drew in many passing tourists.

Live music was also more professional. The band referred to above had been created the night before, when band members had 'jammed' together. Such jamming occurred at most blockades, but rarely was it so well resourced. Blockaders had built a music stage, with a wooden floor and tent cover. High quality musical instruments and amplification equipment were left there unattended for anyone to use, in an atmosphere of remarkable trust rarely found in wider society. This availability of equipment and a music space led to many good sessions, which quickly became rehearsals and then performances. It was an ideal atmosphere for creating protest music in a short space of time with diverse individuals.

Corporate campaigning

Jabiluka's corporate campaigning was more sophisticated than Roxby's,⁹² and very successful in convincing institutions to withdraw shares and other financing from the uranium project. Quiet lobbying of businesses

⁸⁴ Branagan, above n 79.

⁸⁵ There had been some artistic activism - including jugglers and acrobats - at Roxby I, but it had not been widespread.

⁸⁶ Robyn Ferrell, 'The Doves Have Been Nesting', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 August 1984, 40.

⁸⁷ 'Don't be Too Polite Girls' (1984) 24(15 October) *Honi Soit* 13.

⁸⁸ Virginia Rigney, 'Women's Actions at Roxby' (1984) 24(15 October) *Honi Soit* 13.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Marty Branagan, *We Shall Never Be Moved: The Art of Australian Nonviolence* (Lambert Academic Publishing, Köln, 2008) 284-9, 295-7, 398.

⁹¹ This is discussed in depth in Branagan, above n 54, 176-216.

⁹² This involved a call to boycott BP, and the occasional, poorly-reported rally outside BP head offices.



by groups such as TWS, along with noisier occupations and protests of businesses by JAG members, led to significant withdrawal of money from the mine's backers. TWS's status as a widely-respected organisation enabled it to wield considerable influence over institutions which were supporting the mine indirectly through their shares in ERA, the parent company of the mine's developer - North Limited. Under pressure from TWS and the Mineral Policy Institute, seven institutions, including Sydney University and the South Australian Art Gallery, sold shares worth nearly seven million dollars.⁹³ The professionalism and intensity of this corporate campaigning was new, and very effective in putting financial pressure on the mining company, along with the social and moral pressure applied by other activists. Not only was this an effective new tactic, but also as argued elsewhere,⁹⁴ it shows how different types of groups can complement each other well, covering different ground but achieving an overall objective together. The tactics interlock, wherein youthful time-rich citizens can engage in (sometimes heroic) direct action which puts the issue into the public spotlight, while others can lobby their universities and banks to divest. While the latter may have more of a financial impact, the former provides the publicity, images, stories and physical centre for the campaign.

This sophisticated corporate campaigning is continuing with The Wilderness Society and other groups opposed to coal seam gas extraction in northwest NSW, using email and Facebook to direct people to websites and request shareholders to sign petitions, as well as using traditional meetings, albeit using laptops and powerpoint presentations with photos taken by phone cameras. Some of these technologies were used at Jabiluka, greatly facilitating communication, organising and publicity, but Roxby predated them all.

More sophisticated industry tactics

This movement evolution, however, has been matched by more sophisticated public relations and marketing by the uranium industry and the mining industry more broadly.⁹⁵ There has been a concerted campaign, since 2006, by groups such as the Australian Uranium Association to 'bring a more sophisticated approach to its advocacy on public policy', primarily utilising emotive strategies.⁹⁶ Another tactic has been to disrupt the united front that Aboriginal communities and environmentalists and peace activists formed at Roxby, Jabiluka, Billa Kalina and elsewhere. The AUA proudly admits to having 'turned its focus to the aspirations and feelings of [the mainly Aboriginal] people who lived near the mines ... [and] environmental activists were increasingly marginalised'.⁹⁷

Advertisements by mining corporations might create the impression that they are altruistic organisations that operate to create employment and help the community, rather than profit-driven businesses. The Australia Institute's, Richard Denniss, points out that, because of these advertisements, Australians believe that the mining sector:

- employs nine times more workers than it actually does
- accounts for three times as much economic activity as it actually does
- is 30 per cent more Australian-owned than it actually is.⁹⁸

When asked what percentage of workers they believe are employed in the mining industry, the average response was around 16 per cent, when according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) the actual figure is 1.9 per cent. The survey also found that Australians believe that mining accounts for 35 per cent of economic activity. However, ABS figures show that it only accounts for around 9.2 per cent of GDP - about the same contribution as manufacturing and slightly smaller than the finance industry.⁹⁹

The uranium industry has worked hard to promote itself and to counter the anti-uranium movement. The former has great material resources which can influence government policy and public opinion; to counter

⁹³ Chris Doran, 'North Shareholders Call Extraordinary General Meeting: Over Investment in Jabiluka', (1999) 155(June) *Wilderness News*, 18.

⁹⁴ Branagan, above n 54, 169-171.

⁹⁵ The latter's \$20 million advertising campaign against the proposed mining tax was arguably a major cause of the deposing of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2010 (Bernard Lagan, 'What Lies Beneath' [19 April 2012] *Global Mail* <<http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/what-lies-beneath/197/>>).

⁹⁶ David Paterson, 'Coal Seam Gas Industry has to Work Harder to Win Over Critics', *BusinessDay*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August 2013, 29.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Richard Denniss, 'Mining Industry Ads Work, but Fewer Manufacturing Workers Do' (8 September 2011) Australia Institute, <<http://www.tai.org.au/node/1776>>.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*



this, the movement will require widespread mobilisation as well as sophisticated, media-savvy campaigns, including shareholder-focussed actions and effective nonviolent actions.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a brief historical background to Australian resistance to uranium mining, and discussed the activists' rationale for blockading at Roxby Downs and Jabiluka. Reasons includes concerns that uranium fuels the global nuclear weapons cycle, and concerns over how mining occurs, including frequent disturbance or destruction of sacred sites, release of carcinogenic radon gas, and depletion or contamination of groundwater. Nuclear power was viewed as unsafe, centralised, secretive, and creating security risks. Disposal of long-term radioactive waste was another major concern. These concerns remain, and were most recently manifested in the outcry over the nuclear accidents at Fukushima power station and Ranger uranium mine.

What *has* changed over this period is the sophistication of the industry's PR campaigns, and the philosophy, strategies and tactics of the protest movement. Although it is problematic to generalise about the protest movement because of its diversity of individuals and groups, ranging from Roxby's anarchic Nomadic Action Group, and the loose, temporary network of JAGs and student groups, to established national environmental organisations such as ACF and TWS, it seems clear that there were some significant changes to the *modus operandi* of the movement over the period examined in this paper.

- Firstly, Aboriginal leadership of a major environmental campaign occurred for the first time at Jabiluka. The authority of the traditional owners was accepted by most activists. There was growing solidarity between Aboriginal people opposed to uranium mining.
- Jabiluka was a larger, better-resourced and more widespread campaign. There was backing from established national organisations. It liaised better with groups overseas.
- Technological changes and indymedia developments meant that activists could make their own media, such as documentaries, more easily, and use email or create websites to distribute them. New communication technologies also enabled faster communication within the movement.
- There was a stronger commitment to nonviolence after Roxby I. Training was offered, indeed strongly recommended, at Roxby II and Jabiluka, and consensus decision-making improved.
- There was better support for arrestees at Jabiluka.
- Relations with police were superior at Jabiluka.
- The bike ride to Jabiluka was more successful in local and national awareness raising, and in its internal dynamics.
- Artistic activism at Jabiluka was better resourced and more professional.
- Jabiluka's corporate campaigning was more sophisticated and successful.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the Roxby and Jabiluka campaigns is that the Roxby mine continues whereas the Jabiluka mine has closed. While many cite the campaign as the reason for this,¹⁰⁰ ERA claimed that it was only due to the downturn in the uranium market (although this may be partly attributable to international anti-nuclear pressure).¹⁰¹ This is a common claim, however, from corporations that face concerted and vocal public opposition. For example, the Whitehaven Company publicly asserted that a large-scale protest in 2014 had not impacted on their coal operations,¹⁰² while privately arrestees (including this author) were threatened with large compensation claims by the company for disruption to operations in letters sent by NSW Police. Similarly, in March 2013, coal seam gas company Metgasco announced suspension of its Northern Rivers (NSW) operations, citing regulatory uncertainty. It made no mention of highly visible and effective direct action campaigns, along with a strong divestment campaign (such as by staff and students at the Australian National University) which created downward pressure on the company's share price. In discussing this, Aidan Ricketts maps the Metgasco share price against social movement events, arguing that, while difficult to prove a causal relationship, there are clear 'temporal

¹⁰⁰ Australian Conservation Foundation 'A Decade Without Damage: Jabiluka Campaign Success, but Kakadu Still Faces Radioactive Risk' (13 August 2013) <<http://www.acfonline.org.au/news-media/media-release/decade-without-damage-jabiluka-campaign-success-kakadu-still-faces>>.

¹⁰¹ Similar pressure on coal, including divestment campaigns, carbon pricing, increasing competition from renewables, supply uncertainties and direct actions have many believing that coal is an industry on its way out (Mike Seccombe, 'Coal? It's Over', 29 October 2012, *Global Mail*, <<http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/coal-its-over/448/>>).

¹⁰² See James Robertson, 'War Veteran, 92, Arrested at Mine Protest', 1 April, 2014, *Sydney Morning Herald*, <<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/war-veteran-92-arrested-at-mine-protest-20140331-35u8z.html>>.



correlations between significant campaign events and weakening of investor confidence'.¹⁰³ In the same way, one can note that Jabiluka involved a sophisticated, international, multi-layered and highly-visible campaign against a mine proposal which has not eventuated. Importantly, the Mirrar traditional owners now have the right to veto any further mining there, and continue to do so.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Aidan Ricketts, 'Investment Risk: An Amplification Tool for Social Movement Campaigns Globally and Locally' (2013) 15 *Journal of Economic and Social Policy* <<http://epubs.scu.edu.au/jesp/vol15/iss3/4>>.

¹⁰⁴ Sydney Morning Herald, *Aborigines win veto on Kakadu uranium mining*, 25 February 2005, <<http://www.smh.com.au/news/Business/Aborigines-win-veto-on-Kakadu-uranium-mining/2005/02/25/1109180079111.html>>.

