

Faith and science combine as religious leaders join fight for Maules Creek

Thea Ormerod, Sydney Morning Herald, 12 March 2014



Storm clouds gather: Phil Laird in Leard State Forest, at Maules Creek in north-western NSW.
Photo: Dallas Kilponen

Faith leaders travelled to Maules Creek this week to support local protesters who are trying to stop a new mine. People who think religion should stay out of politics may be rattled by such a move, and certainly it should not be seen to bless anyone who breaks the law. But a Buddhist monk, a Catholic priest, Uniting Church ministers and other believers nevertheless joined their voices to the calls to stop expansion of mining in the area.

You may ask how such a group could endorse anything so radical, but this is a well-worn path for people of faith. The group is in lock step with other nonviolent resistance movements such as those that ended apartheid in South Africa and segregation in the southern states of the US. All these movements had strong, faith-based constituencies.

The fact that they may be seen as “radical” reflects the place coalmining has been accorded in the popular imagination. Australians perceive mining as an industry that brings wealth to the country, provides jobs and supplies global demand. It's a convenient picture for the miners.

So what could be wrong with coalmining?

At various times the leaders of major faiths have put out statements holding that the Earth is precious and humanity is responsible for taking care of it. Many such statements include exhortations to act individually and communally to combat climate change. These traditions are rich with teachings about protecting the vulnerable and the relative unimportance of material wealth to human flourishing.

The faith leaders at Maules Creek are familiar with these teachings and have not been blind or deaf to the available information around coalmining and climate change.

Analysts warn that we can only burn up to one-fifth of the world's known reserves of fossil fuels before creating an unacceptable risk of exceeding 2 degrees of warming. If we continue with business as usual, in just 15 years we would reach this limit.

Without a swift, concerted shift away from fossil fuels, climate change will displace and impoverish large populations in the coming century and condemn many species to extinction. Fresh in our memories is the devastation caused by typhoon Haiyan, the floods in Pakistan in 2010 and the thousands of Russians who died in their hottest summer on record. If predictions come to pass of a 4 degree rise by the end of this century, there are doubts that humanity will be able to adapt.

The moral requirement to address climate change has become urgent. Yet current plans include doubling coal and gas exports over the next 10 years. Hubs for this “development” include areas such as the Galilee Basin near the Great Barrier Reef and Maules Creek in north-western NSW.

Then there are local impacts. Whitehaven's plans to build the largest new coalmine in the country are fiercely opposed by residents in the Maules Creek area. They cite the potentially devastating impacts on their health, water, air quality, agriculture and biodiversity.

It is no great leap of the imagination to see why religious people are taking a stand.

The movement to wind down coalmining in Australia may be counter-cultural but it is the truly conservative one. Its aim is to keep the Earth's ecosystems more or less intact for those who suffer the impact of climate change in developing countries, for our own young people here and for future generations. Not a radical position at all.

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