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Mining our special places: a step too far

By Gary Taylor

The government proposes to remove 7058 hectares of protected conservation land from Schedule 4 of the Crown Minerals Act. It is also considering removing several hundred thousand hectares more in nine months time after a minerals survey is completed.

Not all conservation land is in Schedule 4: just the most protected places with the highest natural and landscape values. So the argument is not about the broader role of mining in our economy; it's about whether we should open up the very best of our publicly owned conservation land to private sector miners.

The government's discussion paper has generated a great deal of heated debate, inflamed by both the provocative nature of the proposals and the combative and spin-laden nature of the government's own rhetoric. Extravagant claims about the benefits of mining have created a sense of a gold rush, of our leaders losing their judgement. The way the matter has been mishandled has polarised people and is not conducive to a serious discussion about the role of mining in our conservation estate.

Promoting the idea of allowing gold and silver mining on Great Barrier Island came as a complete surprise. No sensible government would open that land to mining and no Environment Court would ever be persuaded to allow it. It is steep, highly visible, important for tourism and located on one of the most remote and undeveloped islands in the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park. And mining is prohibited under Auckland City's district plan. A mine on White Cliffs would need an access road, a cyanide extraction plant and a large tailings dam to store the toxic waste product on flat land at Claris.

If the tactic was to put the proposition up as a straw man, to make government look reasonable when it "listens" and decides not to allow mining there after all, then it has backfired. It has enraged many Aucklanders including the National member of Parliament and the Mayor and drawn people into the wider debate in their thousands.

The plan to open National Parks to mining is even more challenging. The government proposes to allow coal mining in 3315 hectares of the Paparoa National Park. It's one thing to mine *under* the Paparoa National Park with an entrance outside the park boundaries – that happens now – and quite another to mine *within* it. A large scale coal mine is usually open pit with extensive visual scarring from both the mine and the roads and infrastructure.

Our first National Park was established in 1887. They have all been set aside in perpetuity for their intrinsic values and are our most iconic protected places. Their purpose is set out in the National Parks Act:

It is hereby declared that the provisions of this Act shall have effect for the purpose of preserving in perpetuity as national parks, for their intrinsic worth and for the benefit, use, and enjoyment of the public, areas of New Zealand that contain scenery of such distinctive quality, ecological systems, or natural features so beautiful, unique, or scientifically important that their preservation is in the national interest.

Even if a national park was removed from Schedule 4 protection, the granting of access has to be done lawfully. The government has confirmed that it has no intention to amend the National Parks Act so it's hard to see how allowing any form of mining could survive legal challenge. Any applicant

would have to be very brave to see a way through the litigation battlefield to get access, let alone pass the formidable barrier of the Resource Management Act and get consents.

Then we move to the Coromandel Peninsula. At present all of the conservation lands north of the Kopu-Hikuai Road, the so-called green line, are protected from mining. That status was achieved after nearly 20 years of campaigning (see side bar).

The 3,038 hectares that are now proposed to be opened to mining on the Peninsula are described in the government's report as high priority sites for habitat and species protection and containing a number of threatened species. The areas north of Thames have high rainfall and are flood prone, are coastal, forest covered, steep and have outstanding landscape values. It's hard to see how underground mining with its roads, portal areas, water discharges and heavy traffic movements could be done without significant environmental damage. It's not exactly the Australian desert.

It doesn't end there though. In phase 2 *all* of the rest of the conservation land on the Peninsula will be surveyed for its prospectivity and possible removal from Schedule 4. Elsewhere in the country, surveys will examine Northland (including the famous Puketi and Waipoua Forests), parts of the central North Island and parts of Central Otago and the West Coast. They will also have a close look at opening a lot more of Paparoa to mining as well as parts of Rakiura National Park (Stewart Island).

Already the government seems to recognise that mining many of these areas will not be economic. Perhaps to save political face, it is considering wheeling in Solid Energy to be the nation's miner of all minerals. This is reminiscent of Sir Robert Muldoon's Think Big initiatives such as the hugely expensive Clyde Dam. It is deeply ironic given the government's preference for the private sector.

So what is a sensible way forward? How can we find legitimate ways to improve New Zealand's economic performance without losing our judgement?

For a start, we need a serious focus on how we can grow the economy in a sustainable way. Green growth, smart growth, clean tech – call it what you want – is what's needed. The Prime Minister is apparently warming to the idea of a task force to look at how we can move away from reliance on commodity production and resource-based industries and emulate countries like Finland, South Korea and Taiwan which have built prosperity on modernising and diversifying their economies.

We certainly need to take more care with our biggest single sector, tourism, which was worth \$21 billion last year. We make more from tourism than dairying and it can continue to expand in a sustainable, long-term way. The 100% Pure New Zealand tourism brand is vitally important to our long-term economic welfare. Mining our most precious places, including the National Parks that we use to promote that brand, seems absurd.

Mining has a role but it has to be in the right place. Schedule 4 protects just 13% of New Zealand's land area. It is the highest value land for nature conservation, the very best bits. Surely mining attention should focus on the other 87%. No land should be removed from Schedule 4 protection.

Coromandel Peninsula

In the late 1970s, Gold Mines New Zealand Ltd proposed a large open-pit gold mine above Otama, a white sand beach on the Coromandel Peninsula. This so enraged locals that they mobilised and set up Coromandel Watchdog. There followed 20 or more years of hard-fought community agitation, direct action and litigation. The National government recognised that the old Mining Act wasn't up to the job of assessing the environmental impacts of mining in such sensitive locations and Bill Birch introduced an amendment in 1981. Mining interests faced higher hurdles and many fell including the Otama proposal. Other mines on the Thames Coast failed to get access permission because of concerns about the environmental impacts, including an underground proposal at one of the sites

now being proposed for mining again. In 1997, after more than 25 years of campaigning, the public land on the Peninsula was finally protected from mining by virtue of being listed in Schedule 4 of the Crown Minerals Act.

The Government's Proposals

Schedule 4 of the Crown Minerals Act protects about 40% of our conservation lands or 13% of New Zealand's total land area from mining. The government proposes to take the following areas out of that protected status right away and to investigate hundreds of thousands of hectares elsewhere with more changes to follow in nine months time. Submissions on these proposals close on Tuesday 4 May (see www.med.govt.nz)

Location	Area (in hectares)
Te Ahumata Plateau (White Cliffs) on Great Barrier Island	705
Thames goldfield; Golden Hills near Tairua; Tapu, and Waiomu on Thames Coast; Hauraki Hill; Tokatea-Kapanga and Matawai near Coromandel township; and the Otahu Ecological Area and Parakawai Geological Area near Whangamata; all on the Coromandel Peninsula.	3,038
Inangahua sector of Paparoa National Park	3,313