

RAISING THE PROFILE OF THE MINERALS INDUSTRY

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When asked about the difference between a mine and a quarry it is essentially defined by the value of the material being won. The firing, loading, hauling, crushing and screening bit is the same, but in mining, particularly metaliferous mining, the material requires further downstream processing. Another obvious difference is that quarries are usually situated close to market, and that usually means situated in close proximity to residential areas.

From the late 1960's to the 80's the mining industry was "dogged" by the Green movement for its environmental performance; in some cases rightly so.

The modern mining industry has inherited a legacy of past environmental mis-practices which are all too obvious: Mt Lyell and environs, Mt Bischoff and environs, Zeehan; Lefroy, the North East tin fields. Terrible degradation and absolute eyesores. Embarrassments.

Environmentalists and people from Queenstown in particular publicly attacked the industry for the mess mines were making. Yet many in Queenstown saw the mine generated "moonscape" as a tourist attraction and actively discouraged rehabilitation. RGC walked away from Mt Lyell, Tasmania's best known mine, in a very public "sell-off", leaving a monumental mess (Though not of their making!)

It's true! Mines dig big unsightly holes in the ground and dump the waste in unsightly tails dumps and tailings dams, but it is what now takes place before, during the mining operation and after that makes an environmental difference (and a difference in public perception).

Mining also had the reputation of being dangerous, and though this has been largely overcome the media still beats-up mining incidents, and publicized overseas incidents don't help the image of mining in this country.

The mining industry, through committees on its fledgling Tasmanian Chamber of Mines, realized the "lie of the land" and implications for further development and began formulating policies on a range of problematic areas including environment, occupational health and safety and power usage. One such committee dealt with public relations and education.

The industry similarly began working proactively with government to develop environmental policy and safety guidelines, amongst other policies.

These developments came with a gradual personnel change in the mines. Younger, more environmentally and safety conscious people were entering the industry and the traditional mindset was challenged.

In the early 1990's early attempts to raise the profile of the industry included:

regular representation at the three agricultural shows.

Mining Week, beginning with a public launch and usually involving a theme.
sponsorship of various activities around the state, eg. West Coast sports carnival,
Fingal sports day and the World Coal Shoveling Championship, the Science
Talent Search, Schools mathematics competition

At the same time problems had been identified by the industry arising out of site visits by school groups. Many students on site tours seemed disinterested and occasionally disruptive, to the point where some industries were hesitant to allow school groups on site, despite seeing the benefits that such visits could bring. (It turned out that both the school groups and mine personnel involved in the visits contributed to the problem of students being "turned-off" when on site visits)

In 1993 the Chamber of Mines linked with the Department of Education and the then Mines Department to develop and institute education programs to suit the existing schools curriculum and link with the industry. A teacher position was created for this purpose.

The project involved the development of programs of work to be used before, during and after company site visits (which were encouraged by the companies concerned). It was essentially the brainchild of Paul Salmon, the then General Manager of the Pasminco Hobart Electrolytic Zinc Works. The Zinc Works already had an active and successful education program for Hobart schools. It had converted laboratories and engaged practicing teachers to run programs on site.

As a part of the thrust to promote the industry to the public, the new incoming CEO of the Tasmanian Minerals Council (Note the name change from the Tasmanian Chamber of Mines, for a similar image reason), Terry Long, was a journalist and media personality (ABC "Morning" Show), but knew very little about the industry. Terry maintains a high profile in the media, because he knows it and the personnel involved.

In 1994 as a further measure of enlightening the public the education position developed into a full time effort. The Mining and Minerals Education Centre was built and became so popular with schools using it that an extra two part time staff were employed to cope with the numbers. We were averaging presentations in-school and in the Centre of about 7,000 Primary and Secondary children per year, along with their teachers and parent help.

The program also included excursions, and student teacher and teacher tours including site visits.

In 1995 the Minerals Council of Australia introduced and funded the NEP – a National Education Program to lift the mining industry profile. Much of its early thrust was the relationship between what is mined and what we use (“The minerals industry allows us to live comfortably”). It produced a range of classroom resources; many of which were high in propaganda, and were not generally accepted by schools. Later resources dropped the propaganda and were very realistic in the messages portrayed. The message has reached its audience.

In the mid- to late-90’s resources targeted environment. A set of K-4 Readers were developed locally in response to a request from the Education Department Programs branch to target literacy in the Early Childhood years.

The School of Education at the university came on line and now we have units that we run annually with trainee teachers.

The Centre also caters for teacher professional development sessions. We run vacation teacher tours to company sites (eg. in 2006 just after the Beaconsfield tragedy and despite the media hype, teachers were still keen to go underground.). In response to enormous interest in the industry generated by publicity about Beaconsfield the Council published an underground mining poster for schools.

In school holidays people are free to visit the Centre. We have many parents arrive with children who have previously visited the Centre as part of a school group.

As a basic premise of our operation we do not get into any form of propaganda, After all, we do have Mts. Lyell, Bischoff and the NE. We tell it as it is. If we make a mistake (and we do) we don’t try to suppress it or publicly cover it up. Rather, it’s best to discuss the problem and elicit ideas and solutions.

We talk of past environmental damage in the following terms: In the days when the damage was done miners had little understanding of the concept of “environment”. They probably couldn’t spell it, let alone manage it properly. Thank goodness we now have that knowledge and can manage our operations along with the environment. But maybe in 100 years time future environmental scientists will point the finger at us and say.....!!

We give regular presentations to all public groups that want information about the industry, eg. Rotary, Probus, U3A, even the CWA. Involving older members of the community is a real plus. They talk to their sons and daughters and more importantly to their grandchildren. The message is spread!!

The industry regularly advertises its successes through the local newspapers and other media, but it also acknowledges that it must inform the public about its failures (accidents) too. It is “up-front” and it counters the fact that news travels quickly nowadays.

What we are doing, particularly with the education program, is along term strategy.

By linking with schools and the curriculum we not only supplement what schools are doing, we provide that practical, real life scenario that demonstrates the applications of what is being taught. There are spin-offs: Students getting enthused enough to enter the industry, we have a supportive population;

The question is often put to me... "Is it worth it?" My answer – "If one of these students gets enthused enough to do metallurgy and later refines a process to increase the recovery of, say zinc, from 80% to 80.5%" we have saved the industry millions of dollars"

The program certainly is long term, but in recent years many students who were involved in our early programs are returning; as geologists, metallurgists, teachers, environmental scientists.

We have had two independent evaluations of the program completed. One, funded nationally by the MCA and undertaken by Sydney University of Technology, was highly supportive and commended the Tasmanian program.

Beaconsfield! As disastrous as it was, it created an enormous amount of public interest in mining. Bookings in the M&M Centre and for in-school presentations increased. More resources were requested. Every primary school was teaching about mining. But we are still dealing with bad publicity, eg China, USA mine tragedies and environmental disasters overseas (Ok Tedi, Guyana, Esmeralda in Hungary)

What might the quarries industry do to better its image? Not that quarrying has a bad image. Quarrying doesn't seem to have a high public profile, nor is it targeted by any environmental movement. You already have the foundations. For example, the local quarries are always interested in allowing school groups on sight. The Boral Quarry at Bridgewater is incredibly helpful. We take four visits a year to the quarry where we look at all aspects of the operation.

Because quarry operations are usually located close to populated areas there is the potential for conflict with the "green" element of the public. Noise, dust, visual "pollution", heavy traffic, and even occupation of urban land.

We can advertise all we like, but to gain acceptance by the public we have to perform. Our mines are leaders in environmental technology. Each mine employs environmental scientists in the management team. Environmental practice is now mainstream and we've become pretty good at it. In the end it is performance that gains us credibility.