
Mostly out of sight and mined?

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(Note: Shorter versions of this article have also been later published in “WILD” magazine, issue #138, Nov.-Dec. 2013, as “Bauxite vs bushwalking”; and in Perth Bushwalkers Club ‘Venturer’ newsletter issue #389, Sept. 2013.)

Most local bushwalkers in Perth, Western Australia know the ‘monadnocks’ area well. It lies only 55-80 km southeast of the city. A popular section of the long-distance Bibbulmun Track passes through the area, and walkers exploring the granite outcrops around the summits of several ‘Mounts’ (Cuthbert, Vincent, Randall and Cooke) and the striking, bald dome of Boonerring Hill, are rewarded with expansive views across the forested Darling Range. The laterite-capped Bannister Hill, also flanked by granite outcrops, lies further south down Albany Highway, in a State Forest area, outside the Monadnocks National Park. It is more remote from the Bibbulmun Track and is much less known, though it has also long been popular with off-track walkers; the Perth Bushwalkers Club leads a walk there most years. Due to its varied natural habitat the whole area was once designated as a future key conservation area (the proposed Gyngoorda Conservation Reserve).



Walkers in wandoo woodland on the flank of Bannister Hill (photo: Dave Osborne)

On a recent bushwalk at Bannister Hill, the group of walkers traversed the laterite breakaway with its beautiful wandoo woodlands flanking the summit area and arrived at the western granite slope keen to take in the sweeping views. But rather than gasps of awe at the expected vista of extensive forests, there were groans of dismay at the sight of expanding mining operations almost wherever one looked: to the south, the Worsley (-BHPB) Mt Saddleback-Marradong bauxite mining operations expanding northward toward Bannister Hill itself; to the southwest, the Boddington Gold Mine expanding across a former alignment of the Bibbulmun Track; and to the northwest, the ALCOA

bauxite mining operations encroaching high around the slopes of distant Mount Solus, another favourite bushwalking area, where similar groans have recently been heard.



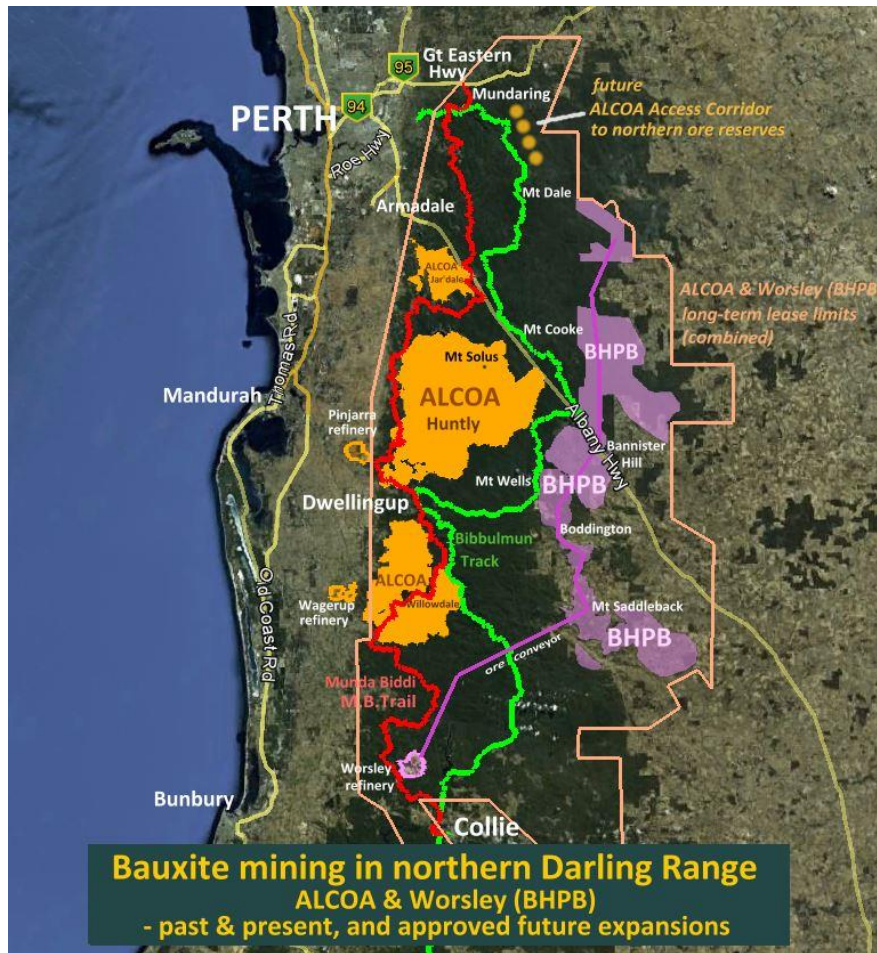
A view from Mount Solus across the encroaching bauxite strip-mining (photo: Dave Osborne)

It comes as a surprise and a shock to many bushwalkers to learn that in fact much of the northern Darling Range across the jarrah forests and wandoo woodlands, including many of the areas we regularly walk outside of the National Parks, is destined eventually to be strip-mined for bauxite. The affected bushwalking areas will stretch from Bannister Hill in the south to beyond Mt Dale in the north. The low-grade bauxite ore which produces alumina is recovered from below the thin (1-2m), laterite caprock that covers most of the hill-tops and low ridges across the Darling Range, including Bannister Hill. The mature forest and the laterite 'pods', with their bounding 'breakaway' landscape, are removed and then ['rehabilitated'](#) after mining with the beginnings of a young replacement forest on the restored topsoil. The mined areas expand at a rate of around 9.3 sq km per year.



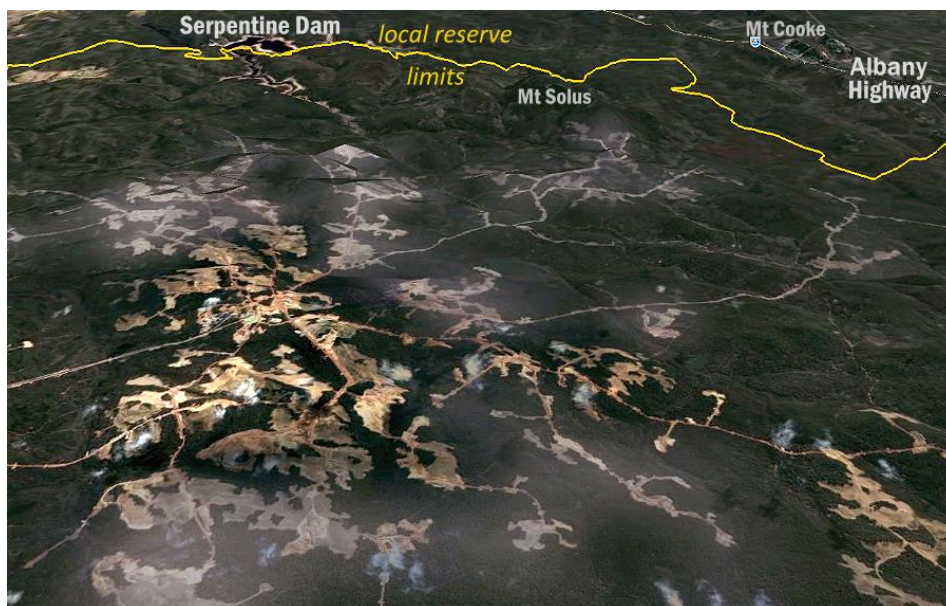
Wandoo woodland on the slopes of a laterite 'breakaway' at Bannister Hill (photo: Dave Osborne)

About 35 years ago, conservationists (with the support of some of the bushwalking community) led a strong but unsuccessful campaign and Class Action challenge to a major expansion of the bauxite mining which had commenced in 1963 at Jarrahdale. It seems unlikely in today's more conservation conscious society that such vast tracts of breakaway landscapes and mature forest close to Perth would be given up by Government to mining. But the Agreements with the miners, signed in that previous era have had to be honoured by subsequent State Governments. Meanwhile the conservationists - having fought a very hard battle against the mining, and lost - have since been silent; there were other battles to move onto, including the fight against continued logging in old growth forests.



Map of mining areas (compilation: Dave Osborne; GoogleEarth imagery)

So, as mining operations expand further over coming years, walkers will get used to seeing mining expand into new areas. Parts of many walk areas such as Bannister Hill will be mined. Access to some walk areas will be lost during, and for years after, the mining operations and 'rehabilitation' work is completed, while new forest is established on the new landscape.



Mining spreading onto the flanks of Mount Solus (compilation: Dave Osborne; GoogleEarth imagery)]

As bushwalkers, most of us resent worldly intrusions and distractions from the wonderful escape that bushwalking provides from life's stresses; But can we, and should we, as bushwalkers be doing more, knowing that large areas of our local walking environment are to be changed forever?

There's no benefit to us now in attacking Government or the miners. Current and future Governments will never walk away from the old, binding State Agreements (though there have been amendments), and the miners themselves not only have a right - they are obliged - to mine on their extensive leases if they wish to keep them. The mining will continue for as long as alumina is profitable, and possibly for at least another 50 years (to 2066 under ALCOA's lease terms).

ALCOA is a much-respected corporate citizen and major W.A. employer; it is a sponsor of many worthy community projects and of environmental research; and it has built considerable expertise in restoring the landscape and establishing new young jarrah forest on the mined areas. Worsley will also no doubt build new expertise for their own special challenge of re-establishing wandoo woodlands as its operations expand along the eastern area of the Darling Range.



From old forest to new: The mining cycle (compilation: Dave Osborne; Nearmap imagery)]

Today the conservationists have their other priorities, the general public is disinterested, and the Environmental Protection Authority ('EPA'), set up in 1971 to express environmental viewpoints and sympathies, is extremely under-resourced for the task of facilitating public accountability and disclosure by the miners.

Perhaps in this situation the important things the local bushwalking community **must** do are:

- i. **Be aware and knowledgeable** – We must aim for the best possible understanding of what and where the impacts on walking areas have been, and will be. We need to document and articulate the impacts as no one else will do that for us. We cannot hope to improve outcomes for bushwalking if impacts remain vague and under-recognised.
- ii. **Be attentive and responsive** - We must respond to any Plans affecting our walk areas whenever they come available for public comment via the EPA or others. Prior examples include the major Worsley Expansion Plan approved in 2008; and the Forest Management Plans of 2004-2013 and 2014-2023, through which proposed National Park, Nature Reserves and Conservation Park boundaries, including the proposed Gyngoorda Reserve at Bannister Hill, were adjusted partly to accommodate evolving mining plans.
- iii. **Educate** – We must try to communicate directly with those who can most influence outcomes, particularly the miners themselves, and the [Mining and Management Program Liaison Group](#) (MMPLG; and its sub-committees) so they are aware of the specific effects on specific bushwalking areas. In turn we need to be aware of the potential of their site rehabilitation efforts to lessen some of the impacts.
- iv. **Monitor and liaise** - Beyond educating, we must also monitor the spreading impacts of the mining on our activities, so we can try to liaise with the miners and the MMPLG in an ongoing, constructive (if not a 'collaborative') way to encourage them to take account of the impacts of mining operations and to do their best to minimise them. That may include, for example:
 - seeking to keep open some road access to areas where operations will likely otherwise block access for years (e.g. along Metro Road, as Worsley operations expand along a 55 km corridor northward of Albany Highway to beyond Brookton Highway;

- modifying mining plans to retain attractive breakaway landscape and pockets of original, mature forest wherever possible;
- the preservation of vegetation buffers to screen operations wherever possible from nearby walking areas;
- the minimisation (and/or timing) of blasting, other noise, and dust emissions from sites close to walk areas.

As Perth's population continues to grow, there will be growing community pressure for access to the nearby Darling Range for more quality bushwalking opportunities beyond the Bibbulmun Track and the National Parks. If we are sufficiently proactive in the ways I suggest above, perhaps walkers in generations to come will be more likely to find that walking in some of the rehabilitated areas once again does become an enjoyable - albeit changed - experience.



Off-track walkers on laterite-capped Bannister Hill (photo: Dave Osborne)

Dave Osborne (August 2013)