



Above: An aerial view of the Leard State Forest and existing Boggabri mine. Below: protesting the Maules Creek Mine in March 2014. Photos courtesy of Leard State Forest - flickr.com/leardstateforest

Why I feel called to protest

Rev John Brentnall

For three years, until March this year, I was the Uniting Church minister working in Gunnedah, Quirindi and Werris Creek in north-western New South Wales. During this time, I have seen the impact of drought and witnessed the destruction of parts of Leard State Forest. The latter came as the result of mining developments within the forest, including the Whitehaven Coal mine. Located near Gunnedah, the Whitehaven Maules Creek mine has been operating commercially since July 2015 and will be one of the largest open cut coal mines in Australia.

Mining has been opposed by environmental groups and farmers, who are concerned about the ecological impacts of coal mining in the area, particularly in the case of the new Whitehaven mine. I have taken part in three protests against this mine's development. On one occasion I was even arrested. It is a cause I believe in strongly, knowing the local and global impact of coal mining, and feeling it is my Christian responsibility to care for the environment.

The new mine development and current mine expansion involve the destruction of approximately 70% of Leard State Forest – tearing down the last remnant of White Box-Gum woodland and destroying the habitat of nearly 500 species of flora and fauna, including approximately 28 endangered species.

In addition, the mines potentially impact on local agriculture and water supply. Thousands of tonnes of toxic dust created by coal mine activity will be blown over the surrounding countryside, contaminating farmland and homes alike. It threatens to destroy or contaminate underground aquifers, and the water used by the mines will lower the water table by two to seven metres. The mine is also drawing huge amounts of water from the Namoi River.

On the global environmental level, I am opposed to the development of any new coal mines because of the contribution that burning fossil fuels makes to global warming and climate change.

Another reason for my support is the affect the mines have on local Indigenous communities. The Whitehaven mine involves the destruction of scores of Indigenous sacred sites. Local Gomeroi elders claim that 10 of 11 sites have already been bulldozed by Whitehaven, and they have been denied access to land over which they have a native title claim in order to conduct traditional ceremonies.

Underlying my stance is my Christian faith. I believe that all Christians are called to be environmentalists – I base this on precepts from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

Passages in Genesis highlight the role of humans within nature, and call Christians to be gardeners and tillers of the land, tasked with keeping it fertile and productive. Later verses emphasise this.

However, I'd like to bring your attention to a commandment that is not often drawn upon as a directive to care for the environment but is one that I have found particularly applicable – “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

Like many other Christians, I interpret the word “neighbour” to include not just the people who live next door, but all of humanity. Not just the ones who are alive now, but the ones in the generations to follow. I also include all living creatures, and the environments in which they live, including the oceans and the forests.

By protesting about what is happening to Leard State Forest, I believe I am loving my neighbours.

Coal mining in this area is a social justice issue, as well as an ecological one. It is a matter of justice for my neighbours – the people of Kiribati and Tuvalu who are affected by climate change, the farmers and residents of Maules Creek, the Indigenous communities affected by the developments, and all creatures and ecological communities living in Leard State Forest.

As a Christian minister, a father and grandfather, I have a responsibility to “do my bit” to ensure that the environment future generations have to live in is bearable and sustainable.



The Uniting Church in Australia has taken its role as an agent of care for creation very seriously. At the June 2015 meeting of the Uniting Church SA Presbytery and Synod, the gathered members made the decision to divest the Uniting Church SA investment portfolio from

companies involved in the extraction or exploration of thermal coal. The decision was also made to seek ways to further decarbonise the Church's investment portfolio, and to commit to reducing its carbon footprint.

*This article is one in a series submitted by the Uniting Church SA Environment Action Group. Feedback about articles in this series should be sent to **justice@sa.uca.org.au***

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