

RECLAMATION PRACTICE, PERCEPTIONS AND POLICY

THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

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The tide of environmental debate has been running strongly against the Australian mining industry for some two decades, with the most obvious result being a huge increase in the area to which access for mineral exploration and development is denied or severely restricted.

An analysis of a string of increasingly important defeats for the industry indicates that it faces the following inhibitions in the battle for public opinion:

- . It lacks a political constituency, due to its capital intensive nature and consequent low number of voting employees.
- . The environmental degradation caused by historical mines and the generally unattractive nature of current operations is more evident than current reclamation practice and successes.
- . The industry lacks advocates amongst those who lead public opinion - the media, academics and community leaders.
- . The industry is a soft target, easily portrayed as a sectional, self pleading, profit driven protagonist for mining at any cost, by the 'disinterested' protectors of the environment and the rights of unborn generations.
- . The industry has been unable to establish in the public mind a direct link between individual and the industry's prosperity.
- . The industry has argued issues on a case-by-case basis without placing them in the context of the wider community interest.

The process of political decision making depends on the success of sectional interests and pressure groups in establishing their support on particular issues. Activity takes place on three levels - public opinion, as measured by polls, letters to the editor, letters to politicians and so on; the views of opinion leaders as presented by the media; and the political process itself involving the public service and parliamentarians.

As a national organisation, the Australian Mining Industry Council has largely concentrated its efforts at the political level, with a fair degree of success. But increasingly, by the time an issue reaches this level, decision making has been severely constrained by activity at the other two levels. Logical arguments about economic contributions and past environmental performance are irrelevant to a politician who fears the loss of votes.

The mining industry has therefore been gradually escalating a program directed at shifting public opinion on a long-term basis. The paper describes the various facets of this program, discusses successes (and failures) and suggests some future directions.

