

Countering Consultation Fatigue in Regional Approaches to Just Transition

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Abstract

Mine closure has a significant impact on people. Leading engagement with affected communities is complex and nuanced. Meaningful community engagement becomes especially important in a social environment where end-of-life mining issues are overlapping and the community is already over-consulted and cynical about engagement. The Latrobe Valley mining industry finds itself rehabilitating three of Australia's largest open cut lignite mines, within a 30-kilometre radius which also encompasses three major regional towns and a population of around 70,000 people. In current conversations about mine rehabilitation, ESG (Environment, Social and Governance) is a topical acronym. The social portion of the ESG program includes First Nations partnerships, labour practices, human rights, diversity and inclusion, worker/community health & safety and security. Through community engagement programs significant feedback in the Latrobe Valley relates to consultation fatigue about mine rehabilitation and just transition. This feedback needs to be heard when considering the social impacts of mine closure in the Latrobe Valley. This paper looks at ways used to counter consultation fatigue in the Latrobe Valley, Victoria, Australia where mine closure is having an impact on communities.

Introduction

The Latrobe Valley in Gippsland Victoria is often identified as one of the most over consulted communities in Australia. Situated around 150 kms east of the state's capital of Melbourne, it is home to three of the southern hemisphere's largest open cut brown coal mines which have powered the state's electricity industry for the last 100 years. The region has seen enormous change over time, including privatisation of industry and significant recent changes as we move away from a carbon economy, including the move away from timber and coal industries. As a result significant consultation has taken place with the community on a number of social, economic and environmental issues. So how do you engage with an over consulted community?

The Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority is based in the Latrobe Valley and works with community, industry and government to facilitate the rehabilitation of the Latrobe Valley mine sites for the beneficial use of future generations. What we knew quite early on when the authority was established was that, over the years, the community has been consulted significantly about their vision and views for the rehabilitation of these mines. But we knew from verbatim conversations with industry and community that there was a lot of cynicism and mistrust about the consultation that had taken place. Our community includes the spectrum from highly-engaged activists to people who are very difficult to engage.

People told us that consultation initiatives often didn't factor in what the community had said before. That there were perceptions of corporate knowledge being lost with the turnover of people in government and industry. And that levels of consultation fatigue were high. So we decided to conduct a literature review, to pull together the key consultations about mine rehabilitation that had taken place in the last decade, see if we could identify any key themes and share what we had learnt with key stakeholders.

There are three terms which are useful to be familiar with in order to understand the study well. The three terms are declared mines, the Hazelwood Mine Fire and consultation fatigue.

Declared mines in the Victorian context

In Victoria Australia, legislation identifies the concept of a declared mine. A declared mine is defined in Victorian legislation as a mine that has geotechnical, hydrogeological, water quality or hydrological factors that may be deemed to pose significant risk of harm to the community, environment and infrastructure. The Minister for Resources may at any time choose to declare a mine according to these criteria.

There have only been three declared mines in Victoria. They are Hazelwood, Yallourn and Loy Yang in the Latrobe Valley. Three large open-cut brown coal mines. They are large, close together, and close to communities and infrastructure. All three mines are closing in a short space of time.

These mines are very large. The total area of the three open cut mines is over 50 square kilometres. Combined the voids would hold about 4 times the volume of Sydney harbour, and they have a surrounding land area of 130 square kilometres.

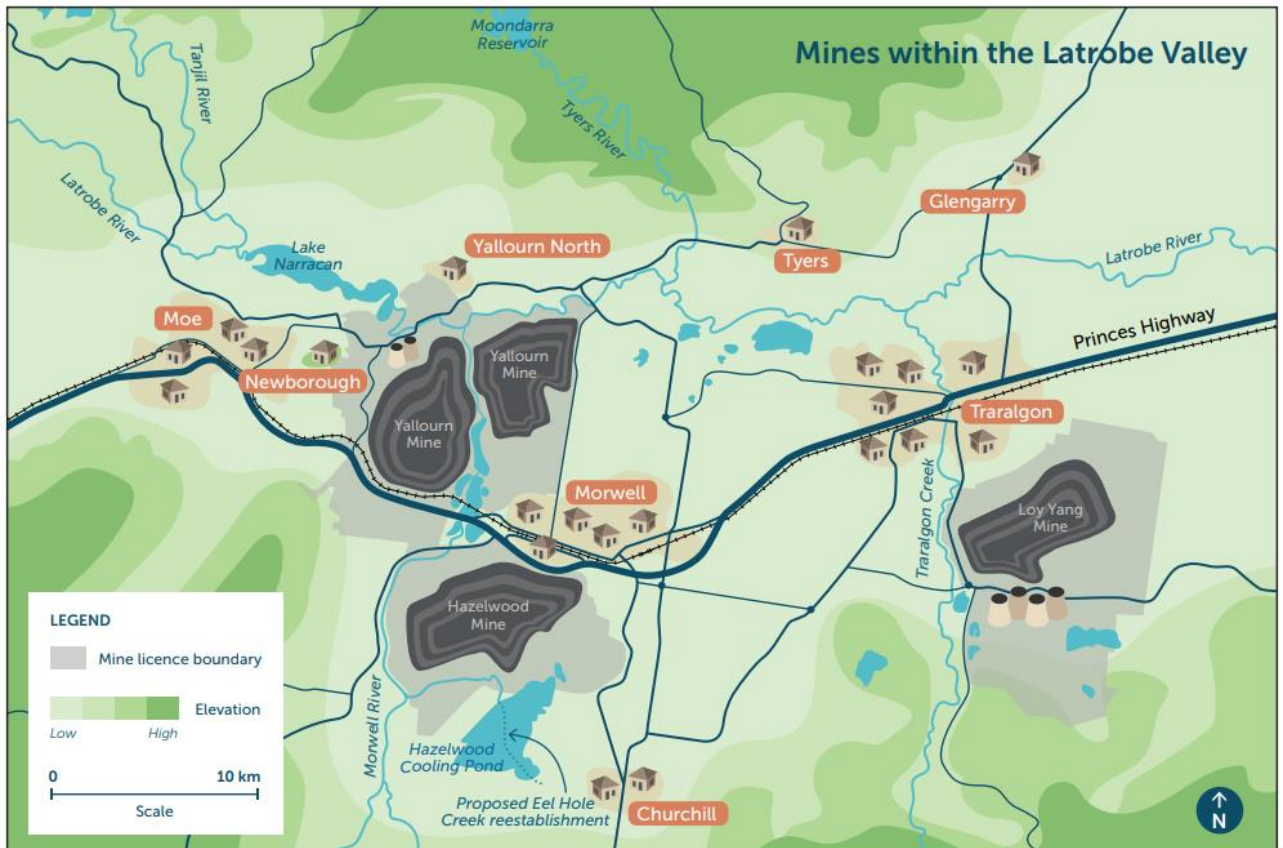


Figure 1: Mines within the Latrobe Valley, Victoria

The declared mines are very close to the Latrobe Valley townships. The population of Latrobe City (which includes the major towns of Moe, Morwell and Traralgon and nearby townships) is around 77,000. Between 2016 and 2021, the population in Latrobe City Council has grown by 5.5%.

While legislation says the mine operators must deliver a rehabilitated mine that is “safe, stable, and sustainable”, the community has told us that they want something beyond the legislative requirement, something attractive for the region that is usable and enjoyable (MLRA, 2021).

The Hazelwood mine fire

On 9 February 2014, embers from a nearby bushfire ignited a fire in the Hazelwood mine. The Hazelwood Mine Fire burned in the Hazelwood coal mine for 45 days in February and March 2014. The fire sent smoke and ash over the town of Morwell and surrounding areas for much of that time and had significant impacts on the Latrobe Valley communities (Gao, 2022). It also was the catalyst that led to the creation of a number of community advocacy groups. Among other things, these groups advocated for an independent inquiry into the Hazelwood mine fire, which did come to pass. The Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry Report was published in 2016 and stated that the community had experienced adverse health effects and may be affected for an indeterminate period into the future. The inquiry found that 11 premature deaths were most likely caused by the mine fire. The Board estimated the total cost borne by the Victorian Government, the local community and the operator of the Hazelwood mine, GDF Suez, to exceed \$100 million.

Consultation fatigue

Consultation fatigue arises as people are approached more and more often to participate but perceive little response, or action, from this participation. Consultation fatigue has been defined as a combination of an excess of consultation activities and a failure to deliver on projects that have been consulted on previously (Richards, C., Blackstock, K.L. & Carter, C.E, 2004).

In short, Consultation fatigue doesn't just mean people are tired of being consulted. It means that people have perceptions of being over consulted, without it bringing about meaningful change. People also want to understand how decisions are being made, even if the outcomes don't align with their desires.

When addressing consultation fatigue, there is an argument for recognising that not all processes are amenable to participation and that the wider public do not expect to take part in all decisions (Richards, C., Blackstock, K.L. & Carter, C.E, 2004). When undertaking consultation work, there is an argument for first asking what the community has already said on the topic and acting on that data.

Academic studies indicate that consultation fatigue can be minimised by meaningful sharing of information between community, industry and government stakeholders so that there is an understood field of knowledge on community views on key topics.

A review of literature

Based on this information, a need was identified to conduct a literature review so as to:

- identify and examine the existing body of knowledge
- provide a baseline for future consultation
- identify common themes
- counter consultation fatigue

In total, twelve papers were reviewed. The scope of the review encompassed reports, submissions and relevant publications specifically addressing community consultation in the context of the rehabilitation of Victoria's declared mines. The review focuses on understanding the nature and content of these consultation processes and the outcomes of these interactions. So we explored questions asked and responses given. The timeframe covered was 2014 – 2023. This timeframe encompassed the Hazelwood Mine Fire inquiry as this inquiry was open for public submissions.

Recurring themes

Five recurring themes were identified in the review, and they were:

- water is precious,
- First Nations views are vital,
- a need for a just transition,
- community conversations should continue, and
- the region's future should prosper.

Water is precious

Mine rehabilitation usually involves filling the mine voids with a stabilising material. All three Latrobe Valley mines include water as the stabilising material in their rehabilitation plans. Concerns have been raised about where the water for these pit lakes would come from. Australia is the driest inhabited continent in the world. Against a backdrop of a changing climate, water in mine rehabilitation is an issue of focus in the community. Also, as with everywhere in the world, multiple users compete for water.

First Nations views are vital

Communities continue to express that the views and values of the Gunaikurnai people have a pivotal role to play in guiding the rehabilitation of mined areas. In this review, people were found to express a desire to see First Nations people as part of the conversation.

A just transition

A just transition is defined as ensuring no one is left behind in the transition to low-carbon and environmentally sustainable economies and societies*. (United Nations, 2023). Community consultations raise issues of justice. Latrobe Valley community members feel that the Latrobe Valley brown coal mines have “kept the lights on” for Victoria (including nearby Melbourne, a city of 5 million people) for many decades. Now that it’s time for rehabilitation, they do not want to see communities left behind.

Community conversations should continue

Community members want to be actively involved in the decisions and actions that shape the future of the region’s natural assets. Consultation fatigue doesn’t mean people are tired of being part of the conversation. It more often refers to a community’s desire to be engaged in conversations that are meaningful and to see outcomes from those conversations which are meaningful.

The region’s future should prosper

The community continues to express a desire for economic opportunities arising from mine rehabilitation and transition.

Recommendations

In addition to sharing the literature review and its themes, we also made a number of recommendations for consideration by community, industry and government stakeholders largely around using the information in the review to inform future engagement work and ensure future engagement work is meaningful.

Conclusion

When engaging with an over consulted community, there is a strong argument for first asking what the community has already said on the topic, identifying and collating that data and sharing that information between stakeholders so that it can be used well and acted on. An established and understood field of knowledge on community views on key topics can help us to engage with an over consulted community, and with all communities.

References

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