

CHAPTER 8

Threats to the World Heritage Area

The Colong, Boyd, Cob, Nattai and Gardens of Stone campaigns prevented many major threats to the natural environment of the Blue Mountains. Any of these could have been disastrous to the campaign for World Heritage listing had they not been stopped. Today other threats continue to endanger the integrity of the area.

Resort Development

A continuing threat to the wilderness quality of the mountains has been the construction of tourist resorts on or above cliff edges. Such resorts enable guests to enjoy wilderness views in comfort, but for park visitors looking in the opposite direction they are an invasion of the natural environment. The first such resort was the 'Hydro Majestic' at Medlow Bath, constructed in 1904. In 1960, the developer Oswald Ziegler proposed an inappropriate, multi-million dollar resort on public land at Govetts Leap. In the words of Peter Meredith, in his book *Myles and Milo*:

...the project 'involved the creation of a 3 million pound tourist village complex (perhaps \$100 million in today's money) to be named 'Pioneer Village' on the cliff edge at Govetts Leap, overlooking the Grose Gorge and Blue Gum forest in the Blue Mountains. The complex would include: a hotel, with swimming pool, skating ring and squash courts; a village reminiscent of 1840s Sydney; a lift to the floor of the Govett Gorge immediately below the hotel; a music shell and amphitheatre; the faces of explorers carved into the cliffs; a fauna sanctuary that would house native Australian creatures; car parks; a golf course; a miniature railway; a heliport; a residential village; and a Cobb and Co. coach that would be ambushed by 'bushrangers' as it conveyed tourists along a scenic track. A later inclusion was a 'prehistoric land' that would have large models of extinct creatures, none known to have inhabited Australia.

The project was referred by Professor Ashworth of the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Sydney to the fledgling Loder and Dunphy architectural partnership. The partnership desperately needed the money and did not immediately turn down the job though the project was directly opposed to their conservation ideals. Instead, they suggested considerable modifications. The Minister for Lands and the Blue Mountains City Council supported a much greater scheme, including a hotel with accommodation for 600 and a 75 metre high observation tower. By the end of the year, Milo Dunphy had completely rejected any support for the proposal, saying that 'the process of ecological and scenic decay' it would initiate 'would mean the end of the natural beauty of the mountain valley'. He later claimed that 'we saved the site just by the delay we caused'. In view of the abandonment of the Govetts Leap resort project it was very appropriate that the site was the venue of the World Heritage celebration and dedication ceremony, held on 12 May 2001, even if most of the participants in the function were unaware of the resort proposal.

In 1983, the Fairmont Resort, a \$25 million convention centre was proposed to be located on the 6th and 7th holes of Leura Golf Course, a hill site near the cliff edge overlooking the Kedumba Valley. The Blue Mountains City Council had rezoned the site for development. The Department of Environment and Planning could have required a detailed local environmental study, but merely requested the Council to prepare an environmental report. The report was completed by Nexus Environmental Studies Pty Ltd in three weeks. Nexus stated that 'in this very short time it has not been possible to explore all the issues which concern the community'. Council accepted the report before the detailed advice of the Department was available. All the Blue Mountains conservation bodies opposed the proposal. In its submission to a Commission of Inquiry the Colong Foundation stated that 'there is no way of concealing, screening, or otherwise disguising the environmental impact of a six to seven storey building, 20 metres high and 300 metres long, a parking area for 798 cars, a retirement village for 87 people, 18 holiday cabins and sundry other buildings, together with access, dams, etc. positioned on a headland'.

The development gained the approval of the Wran Government in 1985. The Opposition spokesman on the environment, Tim Moore MP, was 'appalled by the Government's decision... It is bad enough that the rights of local residents and environmentalists are being ignored, but the very process of law is being threatened by the legislation'.

Following the passage of special legislation by the NSW Government to overcome a series of court challenges against the development by local conservationists, construction started at the end of 1985 and was finished in mid 1987.

Probably encouraged by Fairmont's success, two more proposals were made for resorts overlooking Blue Mountains wilderness. One of these was the proposal by the World Plan Executive Council for a 415 bed educational and recreational facility for transcendental meditation on the edge of Radiata Plateau, overlooking Megalong Creek. Like the Fairmont Resort, the proposal violated the specific objectives of the Blue Mountains Environmental Management Plan adopted in 1985 to protect the Blue Mountains' unique landscape. The most relevant of these objectives were: to conserve natural ecological elements; to maintain and enhance the natural bushland buffer between towns; to ensure that new developments are located and managed so as to reduce the threat from bushfires (the site was on the top of a ridge); and to discourage development on the urban fringe. The proposal was strongly opposed by Pam Allan in the Legislative Assembly, by the Blue Mountains Conservation Society and other conservation organisations, and by local residents. This time the opposition was successful.

The other proposal was Earth Sanctuaries' plan for a \$20 million resort on the Canyon Colliery lease at the source of the Grose River. Like the Oswald Zeigler 1960 proposal for a resort at Govetts Leap, this 1998 proposal would have overlooked the Grose Wilderness. The lease was previously part of the Blue Mountains National Park and conservationists strongly advocated its return to the park now that the mining was completed. They did not oppose the siting of the resort outside parklands. The Member for Blue Mountains, Bob Debus, accepted the conservationists' case and the majority of the colliery lease was returned to the Blue Mountains National Park in March 1999.

Urban Sprawl

Urban expansion in the Blue Mountains has created many environmental problems which successive planning schemes have sought to redress. The 1991 local environmental plan, produced by Blue Mountains City Council, emphasised the importance of preserving the natural features of the mountains from development. Accordingly, Mr Mike Eades, a Council officer engaged to work on the plan, identified: erosion—prone areas, sensitive vegetation regions such as rainforests, heathlands and alluvial forests, hanging swamps which feed the waterfalls, environmentally sensitive escarpment lines, the large natural areas between towns, bushfire hazard areas, and water catchment areas which feed creeks and waterfalls. The plan, however, facilitated low density urban sprawl along narrow ridgelines (using euphemistically titled Residential Bushland Conservation and Residential Bushland development zones), this sprawl being the main factor degrading the Mountains landscape.

The plan failed to prevent environmentally degrading projects such as development at Echo Point, the rezoning of Bodington Hill and a subdivision of a Linden Creek tributary which breached 20 principles of the plan. An amendment to the plan, passed in March 2001, gave better protection to the most environmentally sensitive urban fringe areas that were very vulnerable to fire and not connected to sewerage. Environmental abuses within existing towns, such as damage to stream—side vegetation, were not curtailed. The new law recognised the fringe area problems of steeply sloping land, and it limited land clearing and subdivision.

(The chapter continues)

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