

Briefing: Gardens of Stone once again threatened by Centennial's coal mines



Gardens of Stone, photo by Ian Brown

Centennial Coal's plans to expand mining under the Gardens of Stone puts threatened species, cultural heritage and Sydney's drinking water at risk.

Ninety years ago, in 1932, Myles Dunphy proposed the Gardens of Stone, a spectacular area of Wiradjuri Country, should be protected as part of his vision for the Greater Blue Mountains National Park.

Since then, the Blue Mountains National Park and World Heritage Area have been declared, but significant areas in the Gardens of Stone remain unprotected from coal mining.

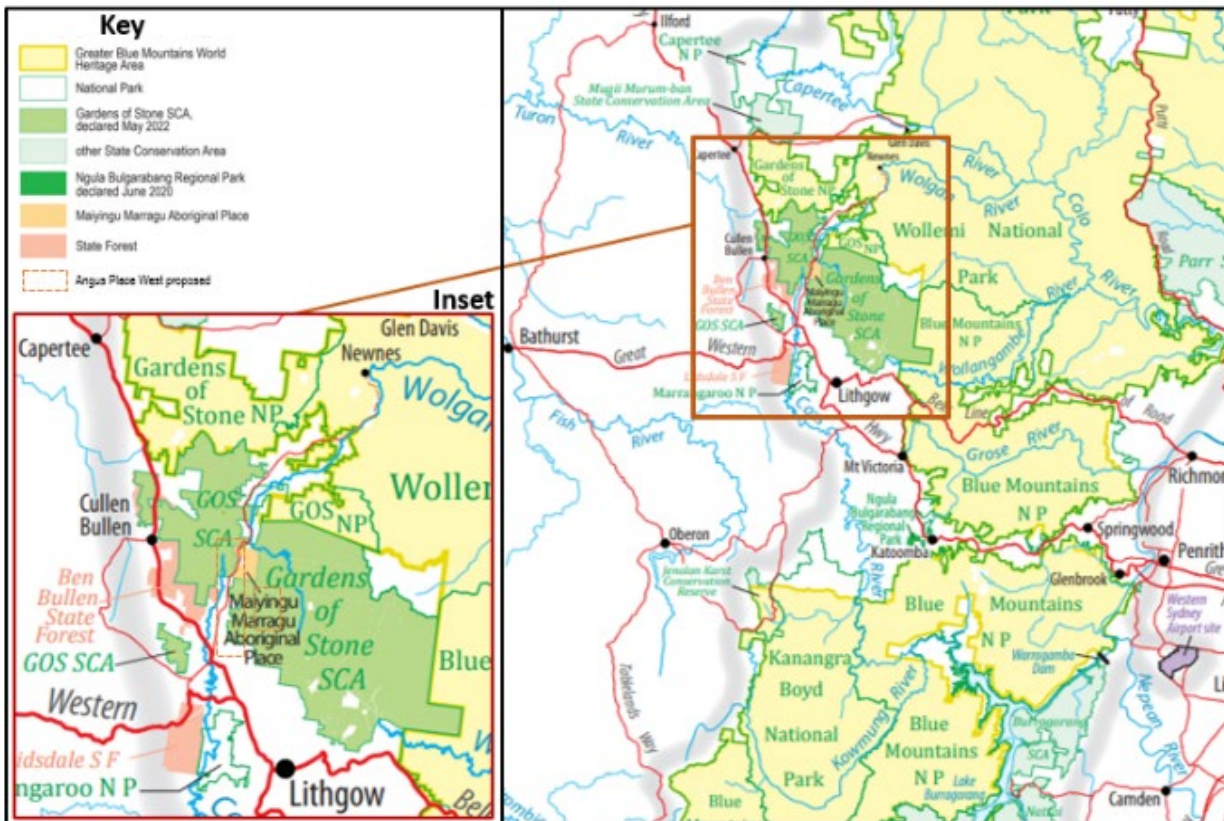
Over those ninety years groups like Colong Foundation for Wilderness, the Blue Mountains Conservation Society, Lithgow Environment Group, Bushwalking NSW, the Colo Committee, National Parks Association of NSW, and the National Trust have kept the Gardens of Stone vision alive, and documented and resisted the irreversible damage that underground coal mining has done to the rare ecosystems, cultural heritage and spectacular cliffs and pagodas.

Now, NSW's conservation movement and local groups are again preparing to fight to protect the Gardens of Stone from Centennial's latest mining proposal – Angus Place West.

Gardens of Stone – worth protecting

The Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area lies 150km west of Sydney, near Lithgow. It is nestled between the world-heritage listed Wollemi National Park to the north and Blue Mountains National Park to the south, and adjacent to the Gardens of Stone National Park. It comprises 28,322ha of stunning sandstone cliffs, ancient rock pagodas and canyons, significant Aboriginal cultural landscapes and sites, at least 16 threatened ecological communities including woodlands and hanging swamps, more than 80 rare and threatened species including the regent honeyeater, Blue Mountains water skink and the giant dragonfly, and the headwaters of the Coxs River, which forms part of the Sydney Drinking Water Catchment.

Devastatingly, its conservation status does not protect the Gardens of Stone from mining, and it is once again under threat from Centennial's mine expansion plans.



Map: Centennial's Angus Place West Proposal

Angus Place West coal mine proposal

Centennial's proposed Angus Place West would involve taking the Angus Place mine, approximately 5km north of Lidsdale and approximately 20 minutes from Lithgow, out of care and maintenance and expanding underground mining in two new mining areas (APW1 and APW2) until 31 December 2040. The mine would allow for up to 2 million tonnes of coal to be extracted each year.

Coal mined at Angus Place would be transported by truck to Mount Piper Power Station to be burned, generating scope-3 greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. It would also be able to be transported to the Lidsdale Siding rail facility for transfer into the coal export market to produce climate pollution elsewhere.

Angus Place is part of the Sydney Drinking Water Catchment. The pit top is in the Kangaroo Creek catchment, in the upper reaches of the Coxs River and from there, the Coxs flows downstream through Blue Mountains wilderness areas into Warragamba Dam – Sydney's main drinking water supply.

Table: Significant action against Centennial for environmental damage

An audit of Centennial's mining licences for the past five years has found at least 134 licence non-compliances across its sites in the Gardens of Stone region.

2022	Centennial breached its development consent for Airly mine causing major irreversible fractures to million-year-old sandstone pagoda formations in the Muggi Murum-ban State Conservation Area. The Department of Planning and Environment imposed a \$150,000 enforceable undertaking on Centennial
2017	The EPA prosecuted Centennial after its waste water dam at Clarence mine spilt 2330 tonnes of toxic coal slurry into the Wollangambe River and caused damage within the Blue Mountains National Park, Centennial was fined over \$1 million and clean-up operations took 12 months
2015	Centennial was fined \$15,000 when toxic coal sludge was illegally discharged from Springvale mine sediment storage ponds into downstream wetlands
2011	Centennial acknowledged that the Federal Environment Minister considered its mining activities had had a significant impact on Temperate Highland Peat Swamps on Sandstone, namely Narrow Swamp, East Wolgan Swamp and Junction Swamp and entered a \$1.45 million enforceable undertaking with the Commonwealth under s 486DA of the EPBC Act. These swamps have not recovered and are expected to be permanently lost.

APW1 would mine under ridgelines, dense woodlands and some cleared valley flats. It contains private property, Centennial-owned property and the Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area. Lambs and Kangaroo Creek flow through APW1. APW2 is entirely in the Gardens of Stone State Conservation area on the Newnes Plateau and it comprises sandstone cliffs, gorges and pagodas and is covered by bushland and nationally endangered wetlands.

The new mining areas would involve mining directly beneath Lambs and Kangaroo Creeks at concerning shallow depths of between 43m and 270m. The health and integrity of these creeks are critical for supporting the endangered 'Newnes Plateau Shrub Swamp' and a number of nationally threatened species and endangered ecological communities (EEC), including Temperate Highland Peat Swamps on Sandstone which are located along the creek line.

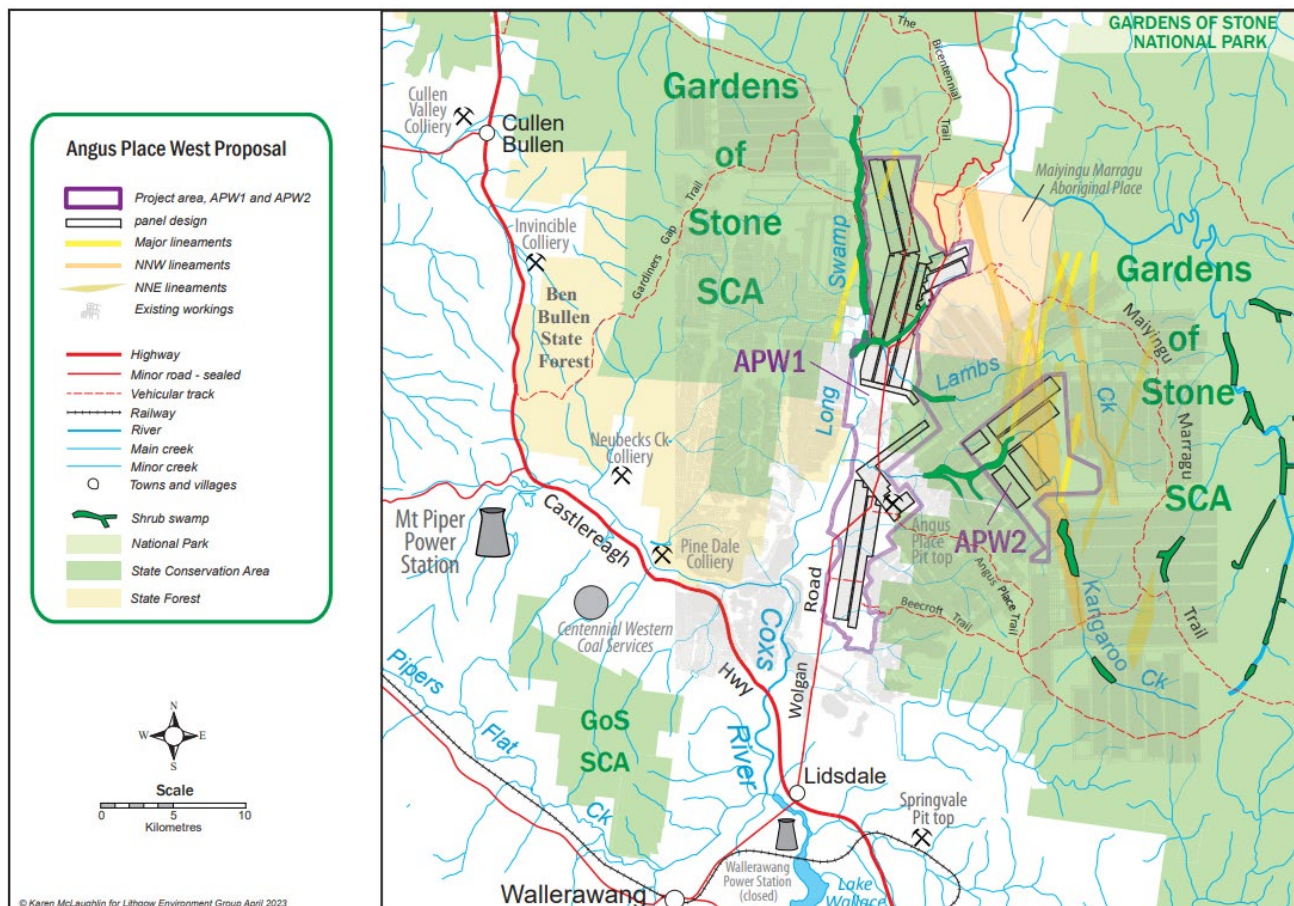
Another significant sensitive site which adjoins the project area is the culturally significant Maiyingu Marragu Aboriginal Place.



Cliff collapse, Kangaroo Creek 2023



Chris Jonkers of Lithgow Environment Group at the dried-out Carne West Swamp in the Gardens of Stone after mining by Centennial Coal



Direct and cumulative impacts of project

Subsidence and the resulting damage to wetlands and rock formations are a major risk of the latest proposal – especially given Centennial's record of destroying endangered wetlands in the past, and its recorded history of failing to properly assess and predict the subsidence impacts of its mining operations. The damaging consequences of land subsidence associated with underground coal mining in the region includes hundreds of cliff falls, the draining of headwater streams, harmful changes to the chemistry of surface water, the deterioration of nationally significant and endangered upland swamps and widespread surface cracking.

At Angus Place West, groundwater drawdown from subsidence could cause irreversible damage to Long Swamp and other endangered wetlands located along Lambs and Kangaroo Creek. These wetlands support dozens of threatened species. In total, the project area contains at least 10 federally listed threatened species and ecological communities and 17 NSW-listed threatened species. Subsidence from the project may also threaten 13,000 year-old Aboriginal cultural sites and internationally significant geological rock formations.

Runoff of dirty water from the coal processing area and discharges from sediment ponds could also pollute surface water. Failure of the pipelines that will transfer toxic mine water to Mount Piper Power Station and from the mine's ventilation facilities would also have significant impacts on the environment. In combination with impacts from mining in the catchment at Springvale mine, the proposal will likely continue to degrade the water quality of the Coxs River and Sydney's drinking water supply.

With a proposed extraction rate of 2 million tonnes per year, Centennial is seeking consent to potentially mine up to a total of 38 million tonnes of coal. When burned, this will supercharge climate change, exacerbating the impacts already being felt by the Gardens of Stone region due to the legacy of mining and combined with climate-fuelled disasters like the Black Summer Bushfires, which will only increase in intensity.



Maximum damage cliff fall, Baal Bone Colliery. Photo by D. Burgess, 2007.

Solution

Centennial has failed to demonstrate that it can operate responsibly in the Gardens of Stone region without causing impacts to the environment. Countless instances of environmental incidents and harm, consent and licence non-compliances and inaccurate predictions of environmental impacts from its operations indicates that Angus Place West may be no different. This necessitates that the Angus Place West mine be refused consent and the myriad of other precious values of the Gardens of Stone region should be prioritised over coal mining.

In its consideration of the project, we call on governments and agencies to:

1. ensure the project is subjected to rigorous scrutiny by all relevant agencies;
2. carefully compile and consider Centennial Coal's track record of environmental harm;
3. consider the track record of inaccurate predictions of subsidence and impacts by Centennial and its consultants and take steps to mitigate against repeating these errors;
4. consider the multiple instances where Centennial has hoodwinked consent authorities into approving operations which ultimately caused irreversible impacts that consent authorities explicitly were trying to avoid.
5. refer the project to the Independent Advisory Panel on Underground Mining for its independent expert review and assessment;
6. ensure that appropriate biodiversity offsets be required for all endangered swamps that may be impacted by the project.

30 years of community action to protect the Gardens of Stone

1932	Ninety years ago, Myles Dunphy proposes that this spectacular part of Wiradjuri Country, the Gardens of Stone, be protected as part of his vision for the Greater Blue Mountains National Park.
Early 1980s	Local environmental group, the Colo Committee, documents cliff collapses associated with coal mining and works to protect Maiyingu Marragu Aboriginal Place from being undermined.
1985	Colo Committee, Federation of Bushwalking Clubs and the Colong Foundation publish proposal to give the Gardens of Stone region National Park protection status.
1992	Colo Committee takes Novacoal to Mining Wardens Court for erroneous EIS for Airly mine and wins.
1993	The Airly Commission of Inquiry advises that Angus Place has caused over 50 cliff collapses, with hundreds more collapses associated with other mines in area.
1994	A revised Gardens of Stone National Park proposal by Colong Foundation that omits mining leases is reserved by NSW Government in run up to state election.
1997	Centennial Coal buys Airly mine.
2000	Gardens of Stone National Park becomes part of Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area – but 39,000 hectares of interest to mining companies left unprotected.
2002	Centennial Coal buys the Angus Place and Springvale mines.
2005	Community conservation groups form the Gardens of Stone Alliance to fight for protection of the remaining unprotected areas. The unique wetland ecosystems within the Gardens of Stone are listed as endangered under the federal <i>Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act</i> .
2006	The Alliance meets with the Federal Environment Department about the damage to endangered wetland ecosystems, including East Wolgan Swamp, caused by underground coal mining by Centennial.
2007	The NSW Government establishes 'Newnes Plateau Shrub Swamp in the Sydney Basin Bioregion' as an ecologically endangered community.
2007-2011	The Alliance continues its work finding and publishing irrefutable evidence of the damage done by coal mines and achieving recognition of the unique ecology of the area.
2011	The NSW Government agrees to protect rock pagodas near Centennial's Airly mine by creating the Mugii Murum-ban State Conservation Area. Centennial's irreversible damage to endangered wetlands by underground mining at Springvale results in an \$1.45 million 'enforceable undertaking' with the Commonwealth.
2012	Proposal for a new open cut coal mine in the area is rejected by Planning Assessment Commission (PAC) following opposition from the Alliance and its supporters.
2015	Mining at Centennial's Angus Place stops. Large areas of endangered wetlands die as a result of subsidence from underground mining at Springvale mine. Despite this, PAC approves mining extensions at Centennial's Springvale and Airly mines. A dam at Centennial's Clarence mine collapses, polluting 10km of Wollangambe River.
2016	Centennial proposes underground mining of new areas at Angus Place.
2017	NSW Government makes changes to laws to retrospectively approve expansion of Springvale mine after environment groups win a court case challenging the approval. The changes weaken laws protecting the Sydney Drinking Water Catchment.
2018	The Combined Retired Union Members Association join the campaign to protect the Gardens of Stone.
2019	The Alliance launches 'Destination Pagoda' highlighting the potential for tourism if the rare ecosystems, cultural heritage and spectacular cliffs and pagodas of Gardens of Stone are protected.
2020	Vulnerable and threatened species are found within areas leased to Centennial at Angus Place and Springvale mines, these species had not previously been identified when the mines were assessed for approval and expansions. Following the Black Summer fires, wetlands where underground mining has occurred fail to recover. The Alliance publish economic analysis showing that protecting and investing in the area's natural heritage could bring hundreds of thousands of visitors to the region.
2021	Journalists and members of Parliament including the Hon. Rose Jackson, now Minister for Water, visit to see the incredible Gardens of Stone for themselves. Local artists, the NSW National Trust, and Lithgow Environment Group run a 6-week series of events with thousands of attendees calling for protection of the region. After more than 3000 objections, Centennial withdraws its application to expand mining at Angus Place. The community celebrates saving five threatened wetlands in the Gardens of Stone. Centennial announces a new proposal to expand mining under the Gardens of Stone, called the Angus Place West project.
2022	The Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area is established, but endangered wetlands, towering rock pagodas and threatened species remain unprotected from mining in areas where Centennial holds leases – including at Angus Place.