

Radiata Plateau Talk = Blue Mountains Conservation Society - 28 Jan 05

(Also known as Elphinstone Plateau or Pulpit Plateau)

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## Introduction

Tonight I'm here to talk about an incredible landform, here in the Blue Mountains, that is under threat. Radiata Plateau lies just west of the Explorers Tree at Katoomba, at an overall elevation around 1000 metres. This magnificent escarpment, defined by Back Creek and Megalong Creek, has an aspect that is unique in the upper mountains. This creates habitat for rare and endemic plants, and threatened ecosystems. Despite earlier attempts to exploit the plateau as a pine forest, healthy native vegetation dominates all but a very small fraction of the landscape.

The 305 hectares of privately owned plateau is a significant part of the Blue Mountains Southern Escarpment, which is described in Council's Environmental Management Plan (EMP 1) as "*the city's most significant natural asset because of its value as a unique natural environment and as a recreation and tourism resource base*".

The vast majority of the plateau hosts windswept rock platforms, heathlands and open forest ecosystems. Below the cliff line are hanging swamps, moist gullies and closed forests, as well as extensive tracts of fragile, cliff face communities. Numerous Threatened Species can be found in these areas. Extensive green space serves as a wildlife corridor to the diverse fauna species living in the upper mountains area.

The undeveloped nature of the plateau reveals its magnificence when viewed from Shipley Plateau, from the Kedumba, Jamison, or Megalong Valleys, or from Kings Tableland, Kanangra and beyond. Radiata Plateau also has significant heritage values, both to the Aboriginal and European history of the region. The area provides recreational opportunities, ecological research opportunities and had an extensive network of walking tracks.

### 1. Radiata Plateau - Values

#### Ecological

Radiata Plateau hosts many rare and endemic plants, and threatened ecosystems. Native vegetation dominates all but a very small fraction of the landscape. Very small numbers of pines survive in only a few small areas. The property hosts at least seven identified significant vegetation communities -

1a - Coachwood/Sassafras Rainforest (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*/ *Doryphora sassafras*),

- 2F Mountain Grey Gum/Sydney Peppermint Tall Open forest, (*Eucalyptus cypellocarpa*, *E.piperita*)
- 2G Blue Mountain Ash Open forest/Tall open forest (*E. oreades*)
- 5A Blue Mountains Heath and scrub
- 5B Blue Mountains Swamps
- 7 Escarpment Complex

Numerous threatened species are found in these areas. The area is habitat for owls, wombats, echidnas, birds of prey, gliders, spotted tailed quolls, and various frogs, snakes and lizards as well as countless migratory and resident bird species. Extremely significant colonies of two rare plants, *Leionema lachnaeoides* and *Microstrobis fitzgeraldii* are present on the property.

There are two colonies of *Microstrobis* identified on the plateau. *Microstrobis fitzgeraldii* is an extremely rare plant, endemic to the upper Blue Mountains. It grows only at altitudes above 600metres, in the seepage or spray zones of south facing waterfalls on the Blue Mountains escarpments. The two colonies on Radiata Plateau, of only ten known populations, comprise of an estimated 86 individuals, all held on private land, and now under threat of development.

*Leionema lachnaeoides* is also an extremely rare plant, known only in around ten clifftop populations in the upper Blue Mountains, a total of about 400 individuals. These numbers are potentially much lower, as three populations burnt out on Shipley plateau in 2002 have not yet regenerated. The two colonies of *Leionema lachnaeoides* on Radiata Plateau are thought to represent a whopping 40% of known individuals, with one population hosting an estimated 108 plants, about 100 more than most other colonies.

The escarpment complex also hosts *Sprengelia monticola* and *Allania endlicheri*, (both endemic to the upper Blue Mountains) as well as various sundews and a diversity of orchid species. Banksias, Hakeas, Eucalypts, Acacias, Kunzea, Callistemon, Mellaleuca and numerous pea flowers are well represented on the ridge, along with many herbs, (Fringed violets, Patersonia, Goodenia ...) and native grasses.

### Geological Values

Radiata Plateau reaches elevations of about 1050 metres at the high points on the ridge, the cliffedges generally standing at about 900 metres above sea level. From Mount Mark, A broad series of 90 metre cliffs face north/west, for two kilometres, before swinging south, exposing almost two kilometres of cliff face directly to the west.

The southernmost end of the plateau is only a few hundred metres wide, before the escarpment weaves in a north Easterly direction for another two kilometres or so. Just a couple of hundred metres from the existing development (Pulpit Hill Road) the cliff line swings south east, undulating around to Nellies Glen. In this section the cliff reaches relative heights of 130 metres.

The upper strata of Radiata Plateau are Narrabeen Sandstone, thence a band of Mount York Claystone, beneath which lie the Permian Coal Measures. The Berry formation (marine mudstone) follows. Below this lies the unexposed carboniferous bed of Granite, revealed in the floors of the nearby Cox River and Megalong Valley. This geological makeup provides varied levels of nutrient, and moisture retention. The diversity of substance and aspect interact to provide different patterns of erosion. These variables create an array of different soils and microclimates, and give rise to the impressive biodiversity of the area.

Radiata Plateau is bounded by cliffs on all sides, except the North East where it connects to the main ridge at Pulpit Hill. These cliffs, at relative heights of 90 to 130 metres, loom above the northern end of the Megalong Valley. The south eastern side shields Nellies Glen, playing a significant role in the micro climate here and at Bonnie Doon. There are three recognised passes through the rock formations, to reach the foot of the cliffs and the valley below.

### The Passes

On the north western side of Radiata Plateau is a natural pass, Blacks Ladder, a significant travel route for Gundungurra people, and later, white settlers from the valley. This pass is considered to be of Rare Regional significance in the NSW Walking Track Heritage Study, due to the long continuity of usage by locals. There are several metal spikes (reportedly added by Ben Esgate in the 1930s) and a few formed sandstone steps. The name, Blacks Ladders, dates from the 1860s when miners in Nelly's Glen used the route to get to The Shepherd and his Flock Inn, on Cherry Tree Flat, (just near Explorers Tree.)

Ben Esgate Pass, at the southern end of the plateau, gives access, via Megalong Head to the Six Foot Track. This pass is considered to have been 'discovered' in the early 1930s by Ben Esgate, a then 16-year-old bushwalker. Esgate used to gather wild honey in the valley, and normally accessed the valley by Blackmans Ladder (now known as Devils Hole). He reportedly found the pass when returning late one evening, he was desperate enough to try and find a shortcut. Esgate is reputed to have installed the spikes and chains to enable him to get his dog, Scotty, down the pass.

A third pass, Bottle Neck Pass, on the South Eastern side of the plateau, is reputed to be extremely precarious, but some details on locating the pass can be found in Jim Smith's How to See the Blue Mountains.

## Recreational Values

Remnant forestry tracks network the plateau, intersecting with the traditional passes, the trig station and various natural features. At this time, a few main tracks, numerous cairns, and a powerline enable reasonably straightforward navigation on the plateau top. Easy access to undeveloped escarpment land, with intact natural and cultural values, together with its close proximity to Katoomba and magnificent views make Radiata Plateau a unique location for bushwalking, rockclimbing, mountain biking, photography and bird watching. The passes down the cliffs enable access to extended walks into the Cox River, Megalong Valley and beyond to the Wild Dog Mountains and southern Blue Mountain Region.

## Radiata Plateau - History

This land was the domain of Gundungurra people since the dreamtime. It would have provided countless resources for Aboriginal people including hunting, gathering and harvesting foods, resources for tools, artwork and weapons and shelter from the elements. It also provided travel routes, passing through the rocky cliffs, which enabled access between the ridgetop and the valley floor.

In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans began mining industries, based around the coal seams in the Jamison and Megalong valleys. From this time onwards, the new settlers also used Aboriginal routes to traverse the cliffs.

Aside from a few chains and spikes, added to aide passage down the cliffs, the plateau remained relatively unaltered until the 1950s. This was when the attempted Radiata forest was planted. Development was regarded as a bonus to any landscape, however the pine plantation failed. Today a few pockets of the trees, and a few relic pieces of saw mill machinery are the only evidence of Radiata Plateaus name.

During the 1980s and 90s, the Transcendental Meditation Group began to acquire the property, share by share. In the early 1990s they proposed a 415 bed development. They also built a sizable dam on the watercourse. BMCC approved the development conditionally, despite the proposal contravening a

number of regulations. This was the birth of the Save Radiata Plateau campaign. The group enlisted the support of many conservation agencies to protest the development. Supporters included many local residents, as well as The Colong Foundation, The Nature Conservation Council, The Total Environment Centre, NPWS, The Upper and Lower Blue Mountains Conservation Societies, and various bushwalking clubs. Club. 2,500 signatures and supportive local media helped to gain a meeting with Tim Moore, then the NSW Environment Minister. The issue had now captured the attention of council, who received 280 submissions regarding the site. Only two of these submissions were pro development.

Come election time Carr promised to gazette Radiata Plateau as Regional Open Space or Public Land if he won government, however Nick Greiner won the title of Premier of NSW. When Carr later became Premier, he backed down on his commitment to preserve Radiata Plateau. When Jim McClelland (Diamond Jim) attended a Heads of Government meeting at the Fairmont, he handed out Save Radiata Plateau leaflets to all the delegates, including Greiner. By this time a community attitude of Escarpment Protection was much more prevalent. The lessons of the Fairmont development had not been forgotten and recognition was building of the public responsibility toward the cliff lines. A shift toward community ownership was influencing attitudes of government. The importance of escarpment protection could no longer be under valued. After two years, the conditional approval for the DA lapsed. When the owners reapplied to extend, the Mayor of the Blue Mountains, Peter O'Toole, presented a real, impassioned opposition to any development of the plateau. The owners did not achieve an extension on the DA, and it has now been lapsed for some years. They have, however, drilled a bore into the rock strata, the result of which is that the dam has never since held water. Although the dam should never have been built, it had become a popular swimming hole, until the bore was sunk.

Later in the 1990s, the Blue Mountains saw the Formation meeting of the Interim Blue Mountains World Heritage Committee. Amongst others, Bob Debus, Wynn Jones and Glenn Humphreys were in attendance. A motion to include Radiata Plateau in the proposed World Heritage Area was put forward. This motion was 100% endorsed by the meeting. Now, in 2005, it is still at risk, in corporate hands.

### 3. Radiata Plateau - Current Threats

This exquisite Blue Mountains landform is under threat. Currently in private ownership, Radiata Plateau is at risk of being sold for development. Even very limited building would have irreversible impacts on the plateau: to the views of

and access to the plateau, as well as to the ecology and hydrogeology on the ridge and below the cliffs. One of the proposed developments would have serious implications for a population of *Microstrobis fitzgeraldii*. Development could also cause a reduction, or complete cessation of public access to places that Blue Mountains locals have been using consistently for thousands of years. The name 'Radiata Plateau' may have discouraged many conservationists from even visiting this majestic area, let alone protecting it, but the Radiatas are a truly insignificant proportion of this wild landscape. I know that Jim Smith has lobbied to return the name to Elphinstone Plateau in honour of R Elphinstone, one time Surveyor General of NSW, a great promoter of National Parks, who Died 1965.

The owners are attempting to make deals with council to develop a number of building blocks by adjusting boundaries at the end of Pulpit Hill Road, adjacent to the existing residential areas, in return for 'gifting' the rest of the land for public purposes. This proposal would still have serious impacts on the plateau, in particular the *Microstrobis* colonies. Council acknowledges that this is not its preferred option. *"Due to the environmental significance of the property, it would be preferable to have no extension of the urban/bushland interface beyond the current development in Pulpit Hill Road."*

#### 4. Radiata Plateau – Actions

By informing people of the values of Radiata Plateau and the risks facing it, we hope to gain support to permanently protect this majestic landform. We aim to have the land acquired into public ownership,(SCA-BMNP). The outstanding natural values of Radiata Plateau need to be recognised and protected, by being included Blue Mountains World Heritage Area.

Council have responded positively to our concerns and have provided a submission to the State Government requesting an Interim Protection Order and promoting the acquisition of Radiata Plateau. The submission outlines some of the critical values of the ecosystems, and acknowledges the legislative requirement of government bodies to protect these rare plants and ecosystems. The submission assesses the acquisition as a significant priority for inclusion in the public reserve system. Against councils Acquisition Criteria, an assessment was carried out on Radiata Plateau. The site scored a massive 94 out of a possible 100. This assessment included the watercourse (30 out of possible 30), Significant vegetation (20 out of possible 20), Slope, (8 out of 10), Contiguous with National Park (25/25 -this includes Cahills Lookout Reserve, East Megalong

Reserve and East Megalong Natural Area (allocated for inclusion in BMNP in early 2004).

If you have any ideas or contacts that could help preserve this amazing landform, we'd love to hear from you. At the moment we are lobbying government to purchase the property and add it to the Sydney Catchment Authority/Blue Mountains National Park. Your support in signing the form letters or adding your name to the petition will make a difference. Donations toward photocopying and postage are also welcome. Handwritten letters are especially effective, as are letters to the Gazette, or Sydney Morning Herald. The Stealth campaign was evidence of what can be done to influence government, when conservationists show how serious we are about the need to protect our natural heritage. Blue Gum Forest was a historic campaign in the conservation of the Blue Mountains. I feel like I owe it to those pioneers to keep prioritising real conservation of our special places. I also think I owe it to future generations, I want my kids to be able to take pride in what the conservation movement has done to protect our places like the plateau.

If you have never visited this beautiful piece of Blue Mountains bushland, I urge you to check it out. From the gate at Pulpit Hill Rd, you can take an easy walk out to the Trig Station or refer to 'How to See the Blue Mountains' for info on how to adventure to Blacks Ladders or Esgate Pass. I'm know that anyone who takes the time to explore this area will understand why it's so important to protect. This landform can't save itself from development, but we can. So, please, give some thought to how you personally, can help save the last undeveloped, escarpment area in the Upper Blue Mountains.

## References

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