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Preserving the Balance of Nature

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment and contribute on the above plan. We, The Lithgow Environment Group Inc. has brought together environmentally minded citizens of the Lithgow area for the last 10 years. Our activities have focused on protecting the local environment and engaging in educational activities, clean ups and tree planting. Below we would like to point out local issues of concern in relation to the proposed plan.

We note that the plan proposes a vision for a sustainable future and although a healthy environment is mentioned as part of this plan (p45), the main emphasis is, in our opinion, on economic development. Our position is that a healthy environment is, of necessity, the basis for a long term, sustainable and 'thriving' economy on which our regional society will depend. This is particularly important given that the region is especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change in terms of water availability and natural hazards such as drought, flooding and bushfire.

Lithgow Region: Economy

The Lithgow region has long been dependent on coal mining and associated coal fired energy generation for employment and related prosperity. Although this is currently seen as an economic strength of this area, the future energy industry will undoubtedly move away from this industry and therefore there is an urgent need for Lithgow to diversify its economic base. As noted in the Plan, health, education and tourism are the fastest growing industries and employers in the region. Opportunities also exist for the expansion of so called 'green' industries including agribusiness and associated manufacturing, new high tech industries and most importantly, the renewable energy industry.

Lithgow is well-placed as a centre where health and education facilities could be expanded. Indeed, these facilities need to be expanded for a growing population as tree changers relocate from Sydney.

In addition, the opportunity and need for expansion exist in the areas of aged-care and complementary medicine as well as outreach services for health and education activities for smaller communities in the greater Lithgow area.

The Lithgow area contains some of the most unique and spectacular landforms in Australia as well as places of historical interest and hence is an ideal location for the expansion of tourism whether nature or heritage based, ecotourism or agritourism. It is a gateway to seven National Parks, the Wolgan and Capertee Valleys and Hyde Park and Evans Crown Nature Reserves, and

- it has numerous interesting historic villages and locations within its local area – Portland, Wallerawang, Hartley, Rydal, Newnes, Capertee;
- it is close to Jenolan Caves, Mayfield Gardens and Oberon and its mushroom forests.

Since Lithgow is within a 3 hour drive or train journey from Sydney, it can cater for day tours, weekend and holiday getaways for Sydneysiders and interstate or international visitors. There is a growing overflow of people who want to experience ‘the real’ Blue Mountains rather than the Three Sisters type of ‘drivein-drive out’ experience and the Lithgow area is in a prime position to cater for this demand. In addition, the weekend crowds in Blackheath are a short drive away from Lithgow and that drive is in the process of being greatly improved – Lithgow can and should capitalise on this. One area that is increasingly attracting visitors is The Gardens of Stone. It is highly regarded and used by a growing number of bushwalkers. The potential to cater for this type of activity could revitalise some of the smaller communities in the area at risk of population decline, for example, places like Cullen Bullen and Capertee as well as providing alternative employment in Lithgow itself. The proximity to the Sydney market which is extremely well-catered to in the Upper Blue Mountains, needs to be exploited more fully in the Lithgow region.



Pantoneys Crown, Gardens of Stone National Park

Although The Blue Mountains–Lithgow–Oberon Tourist Association coordinates promotional programs encompassing the region, Lithgow does not have a current Destination Management Plan and it is noted that the NSW government in the Regional Plan will address this issue (p. 27, 1.4.3)

Green Industry

The Lithgow region up to the present time has relied more on industry (in the form of coal mining and power generation, kerosene shale extraction, iron and cement production) than it has on agriculture. However, there are large areas of good soils that have been used for pasture. Some such areas could probably be suitable for niche crops such as grapes, truffles, etc. as well as organic and free range produce. Niche manufacturing and retailing of such produce for example, wineries could take advantage of close proximity to popular Sydney farmers' markets. The Regional Plan could support an expert study of the area's potential in this direction and could also integrate such 'boutique' enterprises with the growing tourism potential of the area.

Lithgow is well placed to become a green energy hub for the renewable energy industry, the energy of the future. Indeed this is a matter of urgency as Lithgow needs to diversify and transition as coal mining in the area is already declining as an employer and supporter of the region's economy. This is in spite of the optimism in the Plan that coal will continue to be an important industry in the area (p49). Coal mining and associated power generation as well as coal seam gas extraction are also key contributors to greenhouse gas emissions and hence climate change to which this region is especially vulnerable. They also have ongoing deleterious impacts on the environment as detailed later in this submission. In contrast, none of these issues are associated with the renewable energy industry. In terms of future employment, it is highly improbable that any Lithgow school-leaver expects to enter a career in coal mining. Also Lithgow would be able to support the transfer of skills from mining to production of green technology products since it has tertiary education providers. It is unfortunate that this Plan, although it mentions the renewable energy industry (p59), does not foreground the tremendous opportunities this industry could offer for the sustainable development of our region. For example, power companies are already gearing up to offer consumers off-grid battery systems on a sale or lease basis and new group developments such as over-55's villages will likely include grouped solar/battery systems.

In terms of transport, Lithgow is in an enviable position to be able to support new industries and employment:

- is connected to Sydney by an improving highway system and the Bells Line of Road;
- is close to the junction of the Great Western Highway and the Castlereagh Highway heading north;
- has electric train access to Sydney;
- has the potential to develop extra rail capacity for freight

There is also available commercial/industrial land. Indeed, the opportunity for green industry to obtain sites is currently being offered by Energy Australia at Wallerawang and developers of the Portland Cement Works site at Portland. For example, the NSW government as part of this Plan, could support relocation of the headquarters, or at very least, the training function, of the Rural Fire Service of NSW to Wallerawang. The Wallerawang power station site has water (lakes for helicopter buckets), large flat sites for helicopters, several large buildings, rail access to the site, security fencing, ready access by two routes into any Blue Mountains hot-spots, highway access westward, northwest, southwest and northward, good roads southward. Local service industries could readily support vehicle and pump maintenance. Short-term accommodation is available next door and electric train service to Sydney 10 kilometres away.

Managing competing and conflicting interests: impact on the environment

Unfortunately there is widespread evidence in the Lithgow area that the current assessment process for mining as outlined in the Plan (3.2.2) is not adequate to protect the natural environment and its biodiversity from the effects of mining, particularly coal mining as well as inappropriate tourism activities which are not mentioned in the Plan.

Coal mining: Vegetation , Habitat and Biodiversity Loss

The coal mining industry's impact on the Lithgow area has a many-faceted deleterious effect on vegetation, habitat and biodiversity. Open cut coal mining is by definition destructive of large swathes of vegetation for the term of a project and beyond. Indeed, mines put into 'caretaker mode' remain moonscapes, as occurs, in some cases when they are awaiting approval for expansion (as at Cullen Bullen)! Rehabilitation, where it occurs, usually results in monoculture plantings, usually of acacias, which certainly does not promote biodiversity.

Habitat offset is a sleight of hand which replaces natural vegetation with token plantings or non-compatible swathes of land. The following image of a long-abandoned 'Biodiversity Offset Area' near Cullen Bullen, taken in June 2016, demonstrates this. The plantings are behind the sign and are all dead.



Biodiversity Offset Area at Cullen Bullen, June 2016

Long wall mining is also destructive of the natural environment. Currently, Springvale Colliery at Lidsdale has expanded its long wall operations and continues to threaten upland swamps on the Newnes Plateau that possess unique and irreplaceable habitats for threatened plants and wildlife species. The colliery also affects riverine habitat and wildlife due to its massive releases of contaminated mine water into the Cocks River system.

Clarence Colliery on the Newnes Plateau has recently been before the Land and Environment Court, being prosecuted for two million dollars by the EPA for a massive injection of mine water into the Wollangambe River in the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area.

Tourism: Vegetation, Habitat and Biodiversity Loss

Many of the Lithgow region's natural environments are under constant threat from uncontrolled misuse by recreational vehicles. Degradation of natural areas by recreational vehicles – four-wheel drives, trail bikes and quad bikes – occurs principally in Ben Bullen and Newnes State Forests. These forests adjoin national parks and, in the case of Ben Bullen, comprise large areas of native forest and the headwaters of the Cocks River in the sensitive Long Swamp. Uncontrolled use of recreational vehicles in native forests should be banned. There are alternative venues nearby that are solely exotic pine plantations such as Sunny Corner State Forest (where indeed, several more responsible RV organisations hold rallies) or Oberon. The illegal cutting of trail bike trails through native forest creates erosion problems, weed problems, eyesores, littering and noise pollution.

A long list of injuries and complaints exist relating to the use by (often) unlicensed users of (often) unlicensed recreational vehicles in Newnes State Forest. Some of these users are juveniles on mini bikes or quad bikes – on public roads and elsewhere. Relevant state government authorities are totally remiss in their management of these areas and thus complicit in the injuries that have occurred and will occur.

We would strongly propose the inclusion in this Plan of the protection of these sensitive areas from destruction due to coal mining and inappropriate tourism activities. In order to do so, some national park boundaries should be extended, and parts of the Newnes State Forest and Ben Bullen State Forest should be declared as conservation zones as outlined in the Gardens of Stone 2 proposal.

Thomas Ebersoll,

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