

Nature of the beast

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IT might be comforting to some people to know that the NSW coal industry is turning over a new leaf.

According to King Coal's mouthpiece, the Minerals Council, the industry has recognised the hurt and anger some of its activities are causing in some communities.

Apparently we are going to see a new approach. The King is going to listen to the voices of the people and is going to think more carefully about the cumulative effects of his activities.

I've been keeping that in mind whenever I read or hear news about the coal industry, hoping to see some sign of this new friendly face of big coal.

Not much evidence yet, I'm afraid.

This week, for example, the Newcastle Herald reported that Wambo Coal had applied to remove historic Wambo Homestead from the state heritage register.

Human heritage, black and white, has taken a lot of heavy hits from coalmining in the Upper **Hunter** over the past couple of decades, and one might have thought that the new kindly King would want to show us that he's sensitive to this and keen to leave our irreplaceable historic landmarks alone.

Wambo Homestead has been there since 1830, but with coal prices as high as they are it seems like the King just can't help himself. He wants the homestead gone so he can dig up the coal that lies beneath it.

But it's not a fait accompli, of course. He has to get permission from the NSW government, to whom he pays about a billion dollars a year in royalties. Like I said, it's not a fait accompli. Ahem.

I had an email this week from Ian and Robyn Moore, of Apple Tree Flat, near Jerrys Plains.

That's in the area where former coal minister Ian "Sir Lunchalot" Macdonald granted an exploration licence for a "training **mine**" to a company associated with former coal union boss John Maitland. The grant is controversial, since it has been reported that the minister was advised against it by his department.

The former minister has denied this, but it seems clear that the area had previously been considered sacrosanct because of its scenic qualities and proximity to Wollemi National Park.

The Moores say the **mine**, when it is rubber-stamped by King Coal's government, will wreck their property, which relies on underground water, and damage the community of Jerrys Plains.

If that turned out to be true then it wouldn't be very kindly of the King.

Meanwhile, at Warkworth, Rio Tinto has reportedly applied to strip-**mine** land that it allegedly promised in 2003 to protect.

Writing in the Newcastle Herald last month, environmentalist Jan Davis accused the mining company of wanting to renege on a legal agreement with the planning minister. Davis is worried that the proposed **mine** expansion will destroy a swathe of endangered Warkworth sands woodland.

New friendly face? Maybe not.

Last month the Minerals Council handed out a "highly commended" award to one of its star members, Rio Tinto, for its efforts in trying to rehabilitate **mined**-out alluvial land in the **Hunter**. The land was returned to productive farming - a first in NSW - and agricultural productivity was proven over a three-year trial, the council stated in its press release.

Wybong Action Group member Graham Brown, who told me he recently toured the land in question as part of Muswellbrook Shire Council's environment committee, wasn't so excited.

"Basically, they have ripped out the alluvium, built a huge clay wall to attempt to contain the river water - with what success I'm not quite sure - taken the coal, then back-filled the void with rocks and dirt before capping it with topsoil" the former coalminer-turned-greenie asserted.

"The coal industry considers this a showpiece. I'm sorry, but what I saw was a weedy plot that reminded me of South American savannah," Brown said.

Rio Tinto maintains the rehabilitation has been successful, asserting that lucerne yields were comparable to other nearby unmined properties.

The land has lain fallow since the trial ended in 2007 but now a local grazier has been contracted to grow another commercial crop of lucerne.

King Coal believes this case is a reason why he should be permitted to **mine** other alluvial land in the **Hunter**. Applications are with the government already.

No doubt the government will be persuaded, but I think the King has still some way to go to win his community "hearts and **mines**" campaign.

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