

## WHO PAYS THE PRICE FOR NEW GAS RESOURCES?

Mon 17 March 2014



In the first week of March, an unusual alliance of farmers, traditional owners, tourism operators, conservationists and a vigneron from around Australia came together at Parliament House under the auspices of the **Lock The Gate Alliance**, to meet with 35 MPs and ministers.

Their purpose was to highlight the health, social, cultural and environmental threats posed by coal and unconventional gas mining. I was asked to join the delegation as a representative of the **Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC)**, a multi-faith network taking action on the most pressing issue of our time.

Many people were surprised to see someone in a clerical shirt as part of such a delegation. The members of the delegation were delighted that the faith community was represented.

My message was simple. In the face of ecological damage and social injustices, people of faith must affirm our love for this planet and its inhabitants which God loves and declared good, and express our love of its Creator by our deep respect for all life and our commitment to fair and sustainable use of the Earth's bounty.

Unconventional gas mining was a term new to me. It covers coal seam gas, shale gas and tight gas extracted from limestone. These differ from natural gas because they are more difficult to extract.

Unconventional gas production is a highly invasive above and below ground extraction technique that requires massive numbers of wells and intrusive extraction methods such as horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing or fracking.



Photo: Tara gas field, Queensland.

Fracking involves high pressure injection of large volumes of water, proppants (e.g. sand), radioactive tracers and chemical additives into the ground to fracture the source rock and stimulate gas flow. Many of the chemicals are toxic and have not been assessed for environmental and health impacts.

In coal seam gas extraction large volumes of ground water must also be extracted to facilitate gas flow. This wastewater is generally salty and may contain toxic chemicals, radioactive compounds and heavy metals. There is no proven safe method to properly dispose of this waste. These processes have many impacts including ground and surface water contamination, loss of prime agricultural land, depletion of vital groundwater, even increased seismic activity.

The messages brought by the Alliance delegates were generally new to me, and deeply alarming. Phil Laird, the Alliance's national coordinator, pointed out that titles for gas and coal exploration currently covered more than 54% of Australia's land mass, or 437 million hectares, and communities nationwide were worried at the potential impacts from mining on their land, water and country.

Mr Laird said "Australians have supported the mining industry for generations but current plans for a vast unconventional gas industry and a massive expansion in coal mining are threatening our land and water like never before and putting communities at risk.

"Some of Australia's most valuable agricultural land and much of its precious groundwater is under threat from unconventional gas mining, a short term destructive industry that has the potential to contaminate land and water for generations.

"Rural Australians are locking their gates to the unconventional gas industry in ever growing numbers and, as a last resort, have been forced to use their bodies as barriers to drilling rigs.

"It is time our MPs listened to the community and moved to protect land and water from the ravages of fracking and other destructive coal and gas mining on private and public lands.

"But instead our government is poised to sign away decades of environmental protection, health safeguards and human rights through provisions in the Trans-Pacific Partnership, known as the Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) provisions. These provisions in the trade treaty could result in corporations suing the nation for hundreds of millions of dollars if foreign owned extractive industries are held up for environmental, cultural, health or safety reasons.

"We call on Tony Abbott to stop this madness and protect the rights of landholders and traditional owners."

Some of our most valuable national resources are under serious threat, including food-bowls like the Darling Downs, Gippsland, the Liverpool Plains, the Gunnedah Basin and the rich farmlands of South Australia.

Water resources such as the Great Artesian Basin and the Sydney water catchment are also under threat, along with iconic tourism areas and coastlands. In the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park there are plans for up to 17 coal and gas port developments, which will result in a huge increase in shipping there. Indigenous cultural heritage is also being lost.

Earlier this month, faith leaders travelled to Maules Creek in north-west NSW this month to support local protesters who are trying to stop Whitehaven's controversial open-cut coal mine being developed in the Leard State Forest.

Whilst holding a prayer vigil at the blockade on 12<sup>th</sup> March, Mr Bryron Smith, an Anglican minister from Paddington, Jill Burrows, a Catholic parishioner from North Sydney and grandmother of ten, and Thea Ormerod, president of ARRCC, were arrested.

Spokesperson for the group, Rev. John Brentnall from Gunnedah, said the people blockading should be seen as "protectors rather than protesters".

"They are trying to protect our water for agriculture, our air, the Leard Forest with its critically endangered wildlife and a safe climate for our children, as well as the Gomerai people's sacred sites.

"Those who are destroying the forest for an open-cut coal mine are interested only in short-term profits. While profit has its place, all the great religious traditions place it well below other values we hold dear," continued Brentnall.

Ms Ormerod wrote of her concerns in the [Sydney Morning Herald](#).

For me, the challenge is expressed well by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, an outstanding church leader of integrity and courage.

*"We are called to understand that climate change is a moral challenge, not simply an economic or technological problem. We are called to honor our duties of justice, to prevent the enormities of climate change, as the price of the lifestyles of the privileged is paid by millions of poor people, in the loss of their livelihoods and their lives. We are called to honor our duties of compassion, to prevent the suffering of millions of innocent people, especially the hungry children.*

*If we act on the side of justice, we have the power to turn tides. Industry, government, civil society, and you and I – we can all make a difference. Raise your voice. I urge you, brothers and sisters, to work together with campaigners in the global south and call for strong climate change laws. In matters of climate change, as in all our lives, our obligation is to clear: we must do unto others as we would wish them to do unto us.”*

From the foreword to **Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril** edited by Kathleen Dean Moore & Michael P Nelson (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2010).

Errata: When initially published, the article incorrectly misspelt Mr Byron Smith's name and identified him as ordained.

By **Pamela Phillips**