

MILESAGO - Features

Lake Pedder

The Snowy Mountains Scheme was perhaps the most potent symbol of Australian postwar development, a key indicator of its progress towards becoming an advanced industrial nation. Like the damming of the Colorado with the construction of the famous Hoover Dam in Nevada, USA, the Snowy scheme was hailed as an engineering triumph, a technological realisation of the age-old dream of taming the awesome power of nature and turning it to the service of humanity. But in the rush to achieve these feats, and to reap the obvious benefits that flowed from them, their often devastating ecological side-effects were ignored. In the case of the Snowy Mountains Scheme, downstream from the great dams and hydroelectric stations a formerly thriving river system was crippled and just like the Colorado, the once mighty Snowy has been reduced to a polluted trickle.

For Tasmania, Australia's smallest and least populous state, such enterprises were seen as critical to its economic future. The dream was to transform Tasmania from a sleepy rural economy, reliant on apples, hops and fish, into a modern industrial dynamo, pumping out cheap, clean, and supposedly inexhaustible power that would attract major industry to the state.

It was a grand and optimistic vision, but there were already ominous signals of the downside of such developments -- most notably, the **Mount Lyell** Mining and Railway Company Limited's copper mine and its associated smelters in **Queenstown**, in the west of the state. The west of Tasmania is mostly covered by dense forest, but driving into Queenstown reveals a dramatic change in the landscape -- for miles in all directions around the mine and the town, the hills are totally bare of all vegetation. Incredibly, the area was promoted vigorously by the Tasmanian tourist board in the 60s and 70s, its "famous lunar landscape" touted as a major attraction, and the people of Queenstown claimed to be proud of their bare hills. When they opened, the mine and its pyritic smelters won international acclaim in the industry and brought the Mt Lyell company vast financial rewards,

but the environmental damage they caused was massive and sustained.

During more than 100 years of operation, the MT Lyell operation dumped over 100 million cubic metres of toxic mine tailings, smelter slag and polluted topsoil into the Queen River, which flows into the King River and Macquarie Harbour. Heavy metal pollution in these waters is still many times above acceptable levels. From the time they began operation in 1897, day and night, year after year, the towering chimneystacks of the smelters spewed a pall of toxic smoke over the mountain, the valley and the town. On still days the noxious sulphur fumes blanketed the town in a thick, reeking fog; horses hauling coaches from Queenstown to Gormanston panted and bled at the nose, and new miners would get lost between the mine and their shacks. The health effects on workers and residents can only be guessed at.

Although there is still some controversy as to the exact cause/s, it is probable that deforestation and pollution were the main reasons for this eco-disaster -- and the two ends of the smelting process caused catastrophic environmental degradation in this once lush forest region. Trees were cut down in vast numbers to feed the furnaces, which operated 24 hours a day. The combination of the toxic sulphur fumes and the "acid rain" fallout killed off new growth that might have arisen to protect the thin layer of peaty soil. As the forest canopy was removed, the area dried out and huge wildfires swept through the hills each summer, destroying most of what little plant life survived, then the heavy rains typical of the region washed away all the remaining soil, leaving nothing to support plant life. The hills became a literal wasteland and as the sulphur saturated the earth it imparted eerie pastel hues to the ground, which now resembled a lunar landscape. Since the smelters closed in 1969 there has been remarkably rapid regrowth on the lower slopes, but it's estimated that the damage done by the Mt Lyell mine will last some four or five hundred years.

The tremendous damage done by the Mt Lyell mine could scarcely have been more obvious, yet the government's bizarre 'reinterpretation' of this ecological catastrophe and their promotion of it as a tourist attraction was a clear indication of the complete lack of comprehension in political and business circles about environmental and conservation issues. It would take another

equally terrible act of destruction before public opinion began to change.

Before the 1950s, the south-west corner of Tasmania, an area covering some 3,500 square miles was known as "the empty quarter". It was a pristine wilderness area, with Lake Pedder and its shining sands at its heart. Bushwalkers who knew and loved the region assumed that the lake was safe when the area was proclaimed a National Park in 1955 but what they did not know was that Tasmania's **Hydro-Electric Commission** had the empty quarter squarely in its sights. Publicly, the Commissioner, **Sir Alan Knight**, maintained that the possibility of development in this area was remote, but what he did not reveal was that flow recorders were already being installed on the south-west rivers.

"... the bulk of the area, of course, was just a bog hole. You couldn't get around there, it was very flat. They called it the Serpentine River because it winds about in the valley there."
Sir Alan Knight

In 1963, only eight years after Pedder had been declared a National Park, the Hobart *Mercury* declared:
"The imagination of thinking Tasmanians will be excited by the fact that the Commonwealth Government will bear the cost of constructing an access road ... towards the remote and almost inaccessible south-west ... With a high element of romance, the hydro-electric potential has a significance equal to the mammoth and costly Snowy Mountains scheme."

"In the 1930s, Labor came to power here with the belief and the propaganda that we would become the Ruhr Valley of Australia, and that the hydro-engineers would be the modern Moses, who would lead us out of the wilderness. And central to that was the idea of the natural world being entirely subservient to man and being transformed into these heavy industrial forms . . . the dams were as much as anything else . . . symbols, before they were of any economic use. They were symbols of what we might be if we'd only dream large."

Richard Flanagan (novelist and environmental historian)

For most of the 20th century this paradigm of the positive value of technological progress reigned unchallenged in the public consciousness, and it was not until the late '60s and early '70s that

environmental concerns began to chip away at the facade and gain wider attention in Australia.

Certainly, from the early 19th century there had been a consistent if low-level interest in conservation and the protection of wilderness areas, as evidenced by our excellent National Park network, but there were complex issues involved, and where wilderness and development met, public and media opinions were slow to change. Nature was seen primarily as a resource to be used for the benefit of humanity.

Nevertheless, during the 1960s a major shift in public perception began, one which coincided with and was informed by the radicalising influences of the anti-Vietnam War movement. In this emerging "conservation vs. development" discourse, probably the single most important catalyst for change was the 1962 publication of [*Silent Spring*](#), Rachel Carson's epoch-making study into the devastating ecological effects of the pesticide DDT.

The growth of the conservation movement in Australia in this period was brought into sharp focus by campaigns to save two important areas, both of which led to significant innovations in Australian society. One focal point was an urban issue -- the fight to save [*Kelly's Bush*](#) in the posh Sydney harbourside suburb of Hunters Hill, which led to the imposition of the world's first trade union [*Green Bans*](#). The other focus was on a remote area in the south-western corner of Tasmania, the fight to save **Lake Pedder**, which led to the formation of the world's first "Green" political party.

The wild beauty of Lake Pedder and its surroundings formed 10,000 years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age. An enclosing wall of mountains guarded what is known as a "glacial outwash lake" 9.7 square kilometres in area, surrounded by high sand dunes and framed by a spectacular beach with unique patterns of 'megaripples'. Long, wide, and very flat, it was said that you could walk almost hundreds of metres out into the lake before getting out of your depth. The lake was famous for its exquisite beauty and the pink quartzite sand of its beach, and it was the centrepiece of Lake Pedder National Park, established in 1955. The Serpentine River meandered through the park, eventually feeding into the mighty Gordon River, the main waterway of the Gordon-Franklin river system.

"Had it still existed, it would have the same sort of status in Australian mythology as other landscape icons like Uluru and Kakadu and the Great Barrier Reef. So it was a place of immense symbolic importance."

Dr Peter Hay, environmental movement analyst

In the late 60s the lake became Australia's first major environmental battleground, and the campaign to save it was crucial in establishing broad public awareness of the concept and value of "wilderness". It was also the first serious public clash between the entrenched pro-development forces in government and business, and the disparate groups of citizens who came to be labelled as "the conservation movement", the oft-reviled "Greenies".

The fight for Lake Pedder began in early 1967, when the Tasmanian government announced the **Gordon River Power Development Scheme**. Within a few days they had introduced enabling legislation into Parliament, which passed through the Lower House in Hobart in record time. The Scheme, devised by the HEC, was to build a series of dams on the Gordon River to tap the vast potential of this wild river for hydro-electricity generation, in the same way that the Snowy River in NSW had been 'harnessed'.

Those who knew and loved the Lake Pedder area were aghast -- the dams would create a huge reservoir, and two dams on the Serpentine River, which flowed into the Gordon would create a vast supplementary water impoundment that would engulf Lake Pedder and about 200 square kilometres of the surrounding area. Tasmanian Labor premier [Eric Reece](#) (or 'Electric Eric', as he became known) euphemistically commented that the plan would make "some modification to the Lake Pedder National Park.

An action group calling itself the **South-West Committee** was formed and they sought assurances from Premier Reece that the area would not be damaged. He dismissed their concerns.

"People now say, 'Well, it wouldn't happen today' . . . you have to think about the climate of thought that attended the South West and the Hydro-Electric Commission. The Hydro-Electric Commission was the great white knight of Tasmania. [The authorities] would not commit themselves for quite some time, then, quite suddenly, Eric Reece ... announced that Lake Pedder

would be 'modified' -- 'modified' being the operative word, in that it was modified to the extent that a lake two miles square was now under, I think, about 90 square miles of water. That's some modification!"

Max Angus, Tasmanian artist

"There was a National Park out there, but I can't remember exactly where it was . . . at least, it wasn't of substantial significance in the scheme of things. The thing that was significant was that we had to double the output of power in this state in ten years in order [to] supply the demands of industry and the community. And this was the scheme that looked as though it could do a greater part of [the] job for us."

Eric Reece

Dr Peter Hay observed that, at that time "an overwhelming majority of Tasmanians were right behind the Hydro-Electric Commission." But there was a small but committed group of conservationists who opposed the Scheme, and their fightback began in earnest with a petition of 10,000 signatures, the biggest in Tasmania's history -- the total population of Hobart was just over 100,000 at this time, so this was a very significant number.

As a result, the Upper House announced a Select Committee of Enquiry prior to its debate on the Gordon River Power Development Bill. Towards the end of its hearings, the Committee was shown an alternative scheme which would avoid the flooding of Pedder, but it would have cost \$11 million -- a huge sum in the Sixties. The Upper House passed the Bill. Within a short time the HEC began building Strathgordon, the construction town for its workers.

As the conservation movement organised Lithuanian-born photographer, explorer (and temporary HEC employee) **Olegas Truchanas** emerged as one of its leading figures. With a friend, hydro-engineer **Ralph Hope-Johnstone**, he assembled his photographs and films of the area, and they took the fight up to the Government and the people. To raise public awareness, they called public meetings in the Hobart Town Hall and in their now-famous audio-visual displays they showed capacity audiences what was about to disappear forever.

Academic and environmental activist Kevin Kiernan described how the Pedder protest movement developed:

"The construction of the middle Gordon scheme had become something much more than simply building some dams. It had become an issue about how Tasmania should progress in future ... the directions of its economic development, and, to some extent, also a justification of the way things had always happened in the past."

In 1969, Labor lost government in Tasmania for the first time since the depression of the 1930s. Liberals leader, Angus Bethune, had once called Pedder "a scenic gem", but as Premier he aligned himself with the powerful HEC, and claimed that there would be power shortages if the scheme did not go ahead.

"There was a sort of conflated political entity that was the Liberal and Labor parties ... there was really no point of ideological division ..."

Richard Flanagan

Despite solid bipartisan support for the scheme at the political level, the Save Lake Pedder campaign was by now having a significant impact and by 1971 opinion polls were showing that the majority of Tasmanians did not want the lake flooded.

Conservationists took heart and formed the Lake Pedder Action Committee. Kevin Kiernan was still at school when he became its youngest founding member. He recalls that by this stage, "there was a very strong feeling that the hope for preventing the flooding of Lake Pedder lay in Canberra."

As media interest increased, the rest of Australia started to become aware of the issue. Questions were asked in Federal Parliament and demonstrations were held in mainland capitals, but time was running out and the waters were rising fast. By December 1971, the flood was now only a few miles from Lake Pedder Beach.

Then, on 6 January 1972, the Save Lake Pedder movement was dealt a shocking blow -- Olegas Truchanas drowned while kayaking down the Gordon River on a photographic expedition. It was a tragedy, but the campaign continued, and Olegas is today hailed as one of the founding fathers of the Australian conservation movement and a world leader in wilderness photography.

The anti-dam campaigners now decided to take on the pollies at their own game, and in March 1972, the **United Tasmania Group**

-- the first 'green' political party in the world -- was formed at a meeting at the Hobart Town Hall in 1972, to campaign against the flooding of Lake Pedder. In the April state elections, it came close to winning a seat, but Eric Reece and Labor were returned to power. While the UTG did not achieve its short-term aim, it had far more important long-term outcomes, and this first political grouping laid the foundation for the Green Party.

Undaunted, the Pedder campaigners dug in, setting up Australia's first ever shop-front for conservation, in Hobart's main street. It was opened by Dr Bob Walker, who recalled the public support that flowed in:

"... we received a lot of intelligence over the telephone. The most dramatic piece was the night when the phone rang and a message was given to take ... certain acts of Parliament to a certain lawyer in a certain law firm and ask their opinion about the validity of the Lake Pedder scheme. And we did exactly that. We didn't really know what it all meant, but we took those documents along ... and within a couple of hours, we had a case against the government on their illegal flooding of Lake Pedder.

The basis of the case was that the HEC was contravening the National Parks and Wildlife Act. One can only wonder what the outcome might have been, but the case never got to court. Premier Reece reacted swiftly, retrospectively legalising the flooding by pushing the oddly-named 'Gordon River Doubts Removal Bill' through Parliament in the early hours of the morning. By mid-1972, the rising waters had begun to flow into Lake Pedder. The last serious hope of stopping the scheme lay with the 1972 Federal election campaign, but here again the campaigners' political inexperience led them astray. While Labor in Hobart wanted the dams, Labor in Canberra saw votes in the conservation issue. After the election, the new Environment Minister **Dr Moss Cass** formed a Committee of Enquiry and flew to Tasmania to see the situation for himself.

"The Federal Enquiry demonstrated quite clearly that the flooding of Lake Pedder had been a mistake, and, more importantly, it came up with some options and offered a moratorium. So it was very much a justification for all the work that so many people had done for the last ten years for Pedder."

Bob Walker

Unfortunately, the anti-dam faction's attempt to solicit Canberra's interest played right into Eric Reece's hands, arming him with a venerable Aussie political weapon with which to counter-attack. He reacted angrily to federal involvement, characterising it as an attempt to interfere with states' rights and condemning it as a cynical response to politicians' fears that demonstrations in their electorates would lose them votes.

The new Whitlam Government had recently signed the World Heritage Treaty at the United Nations, and they toyed with the idea of using this external power to stop the flooding of Pedder, but in the event this came to nothing, and the Reece government remained immovable in their commitment to the scheme.

Comments from both sides illustrate the yawning gulf between the philosophies of the pro- and anti-dam factions:

"I'm not entitled to be made a bloody goat on this and I don't propose to be kicked all over the footpath. As far as Lake Pedder is concerned, the sooner they fill it up the better."

Eric Reece

"Going back 30,000 years, it was said to have been a lake over the whole area, but the water cut a channel out of it and the bulk of that flat area which is now the enlarged Lake Pedder, was in fact a lake years ago. What we've done is to restore what was there many years ago."

Sir Alan Knight

". . . in large measure, it was the pride of old men that led to the final demise of Lake Pedder beneath the temporary dam that's there at the moment."

Kevin Kiernan

"We were trodden under foot ... because we were idealistic. And it's very difficult to . . . make a case for the beauty of something when there are facts and figures standing against you, because economic rationalists and engineers have got scant regard for what artists or architects might call beauty. They simply say that beauty is in the balance sheet."

Max Angus

By 1973 it was all over for Lake Pedder. The scheme went ahead as planned and in 1979 the largest arch dam in the southern

hemisphere opened, marking the completion of the first stage of the Gordon Power Scheme. The battle to save Lake Pedder had been lost and this jewel of the Tasmanian wilderness now lies submerged under metres of water. But the campaign had certainly not been for nothing, and it had important and lasting outcomes, which became obvious when the HEC began planning the next phase of the scheme -- damming the pristine **Franklin River**.

"The Franklin River was saved because there was in place by the time of the Franklin campaign, a highly sophisticated, tactically skilled environment movement which hadn't come out of a vacuum. It had come from the Lake Pedder campaign."

Peter Hay

In 1983, the fight for the Franklin began and drawing on the skills and experience gained in the Lake Pedder campaign, Tasmanian conservationists won support across the nation. This time, the Federal Government did intervene successfully, declaring the Franklin a World Heritage area and placing it off limits from any future development.

Interviewed in 1997, Eric Reece (who died in 1999) never doubted that he had made the right choice:

"As far as I'm concerned, if I had to make a decision about the building of the Lake Pedder scheme and the whole of the Gordon River scheme associated with it, I'd go ahead today. I wouldn't hesitate."

The HEC called its dam 'the new Lake Pedder', but it never became the tourist attraction hoped for. Tasmania now has more power than it knows what to do with, with a surplus capacity of some 130 megawatts, and the hoped-for industrialisation has largely failed to materialise. So far no new dams have been built, but what was constructed and came at an enormous environmental price, and the ultimate irony is that Lake Pedder would have been far more valuable to Tasmania if it had been left intact for tourism, than as a source of power.

"What we did was lose our most saleable assets, which were essentially tourist assets. In pursuit of this dream, this heroic dream . . . This was human beings conquering the forces of nature . . . It was Promethean, and it was completely wrong-headed."

Peter Hay

But all hope is not lost, and in fact many still believe that Lake Pedder will again see the light of day. In 1992, leading environmental scientist and advocate **Dr David Suzuki** received a letter asking for support to examine the feasibility of removing two of the dams and allowing Lake Pedder to return. His David Suzuki Foundation funded a study that demonstrated that economically, geologically and biologically, it was indeed feasible to try to restore the lake. Divers confirmed that, apart from a thin layer of silt, the major features of the Lake lie intact below the surface, preserved by the rapid filling of the impoundment, which prevented any significant damage. In 1996, a Federal Enquiry confirmed the findings of the Suzuki report.

The hope remains that in the future the Huon-Serpentine impoundment can be drained and Lake Pedder restored to something like its former glory -- although the Tasmanian government remains strongly opposed to the idea.

"When the present HEC stations have become as defunct as the water wheel and we're on perhaps solar energy and other forms of energy, then the lake can be drained . . . And it'll be there . . . I've never succumbed to the feeling that it's gone forever."

Max Angus

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