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Nuclear Power - the indigenous story

Thought you'd heard it all before? In the 1980s protest against nuclear weapons and nuclear power stations was highly visible and relatively effective. Most of the public knew the environmental and health risks that accompany nuclear technology. We even had the Chernobyl nuclear reactor explosion in 1986 to ram the point home. Twenty years later, our illustrious Prime Minister, Tony, in response to the realisation of climate change is looking to yellowcake uranium once again. There are even a few Green activists citing nuclear as our only hope in curtailing the effects of global warming. But there is more to the question of nuclear technology than the perhaps obvious issue of murderously radioactive pollution hanging around mine sites, reactors and waste dumps for literally thousands of years. The issue also dovetails into a much older form of exploitation where the rights of some people preclude the basic human rights of others.

Forty percent of the world's uranium is located in Australia and nearly all of this is on, or under, Aboriginal Land. Finally in 1992 after a long campaign building up pressure since the mid-1980s, the Government finally recognised *in law* that Australia was not in fact empty (a terra nullius) when it was founded in 1788\*. Aboriginal people were, and are, the traditional owners. As a consequence of this legal recognition, Aboriginal people were legally entitled to their own heritage and artefacts and those lands not sufficiently useful to the non-Aboriginal population - in other words, lots of desert and almost no coastal, temperate or arable bits of land. The 1980s and early 90s saw a sluggish market for uranium - the only possible useful thing in the desert. But all this has changed now and the Australian government, with the predominately US market in mind, has passed legislation that abrogates the Aboriginal Heritage Act thereby attempting to force mines and waste dump sites on communities who explicitly don't want them. Aside from the health and environmental risks, these communities know of the inevitable destruction of their way of life that comes with this type of 'progress'. In the 1970s, the Mirrar people of the northern part of the Northern Territory in Australia (Kakadu National Park) protested against a mine site on their traditional land; elders foreseeing the problems that would ensue for a community who had survived the almost genocidal impact of colonialism with dignity and tradition intact. Both despite and because of the mining royalties, the traditionally non-material, non-fiscal Aboriginal culture has seen only the negative effects of money and none of its benefits. Benefits could be seen as health and housing, both of which are so sub-standard for Aboriginal people, UN representatives have taken the Australian government to task over its very partial provision of services. In fact, one desert community, Kintore, was refused the government funding necessary to buy a kidney dialysis machine for their remote community thousands of miles from the nearest renal clinic. The community sold artworks to raise the funds necessary to cover the

cost of the dialysis machine. No other community in Australia has had to go to such lengths to acquire such vital, life-saving and yet still over-subscribed equipment.

In addition to the negative influences on the community, both mining and nuclear dump sites threaten to destroy sacred sites. Sacred sites are a difficult concept for Europeans, both secular and religious. We often find it too pantheistic to respect, to quaintly naïve, too far from what we understand. We don't understand why there has to be so many - nearly every significant outcrop or distinguishing feature in Australia is a sacred site. We imagine they work like churches where more or less the same thing happens in each, repeated across the various locations. In fact, each sacred site is different with different knowledge encoded there. Aboriginal cultures, though vastly different across the whole continent, have a few things in common. One is the way in which knowledge is held. Each person is like a website URL and each site is like a node point where a set of individual knowledges comes together. No one person or place contains all knowledge. Knowledge is shared across all peoples, all individuals and both genders equally. If a sacred site is destroyed, a hub point of knowledge is destroyed, like burning a library of books not held in other libraries. The sites are under threat because of mines and dumping, not directly, but because communities are coerced into signing contracts against their best wishes. Either communities allow a given project to take place on their land and elders retain a say in the precise location, or the excavations and spoils happen anyway, consequent of Aboriginal "non-compliance".

In 1998, the lands of the Antakirinja, Barngala and Kokotha peoples in remote South Australia were threatened with a nuclear dump site. Years, many awards, and much publicity later, elders won the right to their traditional lands unpolluted by others. In 2006, the proposal has moved northwards to the Northern Territory, an area with less formal regional government, being a 'territory' and not a 'state'. The problem of nuclear waste is an on-going one and exponentially increasing with the nuclear solution to global warming. Already there are over 30 million tonnes of radioactive tailings from one mine in the Northern Territory and 60 million tonnes from another that need appropriate disposal. The track record for levels of environmental and public health safety already fall far below Australian, not to mention European or other western, standards as the cleanup of the Maralinga 1950s British nuclear test site in South Australia testifies, as well as the issue of leakage at the various contemporary mine sites.

Talk has it that remote Australia has the dubious luck of having caught the imagination of the US government as a global dumping ground for nuclear waste. Rumour has it, they'll even thrown in the infra-structure to sweeten the deal. At the moment this is mere speculation but if the Australian government's present form is anything to go by, those communities living in some of the world's harshest environments against a backdrop of both interference and

neglect, will find themselves up against a toxicity that goes well beyond the murderous arrogance of colonialism witnessed to this moment.

Our insatiable need for electricity can be fed with little consequence to our own lives. We now have a solution which impacts solely on the lives of people we will never meet, speaking languages we have never heard of. Already we know that global warming effects those poorest in the world: rising tides leading to flooding, erratic rainfall leading to mudslides, raised sea temperatures which create more ferocious and destructive hurricanes and desertification. Some of the people effected will come to our attention making artworks which we prize, others will be actors or athletes to entertain us, but most will have their lands and artefacts taken, their desert knowledge and traditional medicine analysed and filed, their DNA registered. In return we will throw them the money to drink and to gamble. We will even helpfully provide the outlets to do so. And then we will turn to these people and demand, what are you doing about the Aboriginal problem?

Endnote:

\* The Mabo decision, consequent of the High Court decision, *Mabo v Queensland*. In 1982 Eddie Mabo and four other Meriam people challenged the annexation by Queensland of the Murray Islands in 1897. "Generations of Resistance: Mabo and justice" Lorna Lippmann 1991

\*Information for this article comes from pamphlet, 'Yellowcake Country: Australia's uranium industry', BNI publication (2006), Friends of the Earth article, 'Radioactive Racism in Australia' by Jim Green, 2006, Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement newsletters, 1999-2002, 'Blacks veto cash for N-dump site rights', Rebecca DiGiralamo, *The Australian*, Feb 27, 2003, the Institute for Aboriginal Development, NTGPE (Northern Territory General Practice Education ltd), ABC Northern Territory local news, 18 July 2005 [www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200507/s1424105.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200507/s1424105.htm) and [www.abc.net.au/am/content/s1415444.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/s1415444.htm), Environmental News Service February 28, 2005 [www.ens-newswire.com/ens/feb2005/2005-02-28-03.asp](http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/feb2005/2005-02-28-03.asp), *the Adelaide Advertiser*, Editorial, April 15 2003, [www.goldmanprize.org](http://www.goldmanprize.org) on the international environmental prize for Kungka Tjuta elders, Eileen Kampakuta Brown and Eileen Wani Wingfield.