

Escarpment on the edge

— Ariane Lewis talks to June Pronk about the future of the Illawarra Escarpment. —

The Illawarra Escarpment has long been a prominent feature of the South Coast. The rolling green foothills and stunning sandstone cliff faces, so striking in colour and shape, have been something we identify with (whether it be consciously or no). The thought that such beauty may be in danger occasionally crosses some people's minds, but it occupies the minds of green activists throughout the Illawarra and people like June Pronk, constantly.

Chair of the Illawarra Escarpment Coalition (IEC), June has helped fight for protection of the Escarpment for at least the last eleven years. The IEC formed in 1990 after residents and concerned community members realised they needed to take their own action if anything was going to be done to save this green backdrop of ours. Indeed the Coalition has played a significant role in raising awareness of the environmental, ecological and geographical consequences of development along the Escarpment, and was instrumental in formulating the community's input into the recent NSW Commission of Inquiry into the Escarpment.

"The Coalition was established eleven years ago in response to resident's concern that Wollongong City Council were not doing their job properly in protecting the Escarpment," explains June. "We asked for a Working Party to look at management of the Escarpment, however the one that Council established wasn't successful because it had no studies underlining it. There were no independent studies backing up the lines drawn for rezoning and creating the Escarpment park. There were people walking over grounds, and that is all they were doing. They were uneducated in fine details, and not expert on flora or fauna. There were no experts in stability either, just people associated with developers, landowners and the odd conservation people."

Commissioner Simpson outlined these faults in his 1998 Illawarra Escarpment Commission of Inquiry. He was also critical of Wollongong City Council's past approach to planning and landuse management of Escarpment and fringe

Escarpment land. Furthermore certain planning decisions on behalf of Wollongong City Council distinctly showed a "lack of appreciation of the ecological and conservation interrelationship between 7(a) and 7(b) zones and between the Escarpment and the coastline." (Report of *Manager Planning & Development* (page 6) dated 1/2/01 for Wollongong Council Planning & Development Committee 12/2/01 (Submitted to Council on 19/2/01)

For the IEC, getting the Inquiry established proved time consuming and difficult.

"We had to lobby the Labor Party in Sydney, Wollongong City Council, we wrote to Department Urban Affairs and Planning (DUAP) and finally in March 1998 we asked the Commission Of Inquiry (COI) for a review and council accepted the idea. Though DUAP organised the COI, the terms of reference the council suggested were so narrow they were useless. Council were aware that if they put those terms forward and they got them certified, they wouldn't mean a thing and it wouldn't hurt anybody, and it certainly wouldn't protect the Escarpment."

Interestingly, Wollongong City Council's definition of the Escarpment has only been the high cliff area (those sandstone rocks you see jutting out at Mt Keira and further up between Bulli and Stanwell Tops). The IEC conducted surveys in 1998, asking residents what they thought the Escarpment encapsulated.

"It came through quite clearly that people in Wollongong thought that the Escarpment was the green backdrop: the mountains behind Wollongong, not the high cliff face," says June. "And this is where the tremendous problem has been all the time. The council states that that area is not on the Escarpment, even if it is up in Treetop Glen or Armagh parade. You know you can't build on the cliffs because they are protected. This has been a problem from the beginning and it came out in the Inquiry: from the 118 or so submissions people were fighting for land that wasn't council's idea of the Escarpment."

Development applications infringing on

Escarpment land are constantly before council. Most contentious are those on land which backs onto the foothills, both north and south of Wollongong. The idea of establishing an Illawarra Escarpment (national) park was endorsed by Minister Andrew Refshauge, and Lord Mayor George Harrison in December last year. It would see core Escarpment land being part of future environmental studies and effectively places a permanent moratorium on any further rezoning proposals on land "west of existing and approved residential development on Dam Road, Morrison Avenue and Buttenshaw Drive between Wombarra and Austinmer, and between Bulli and Mt. Pleasant" (Report of *Manager Planning & Development* (page 4) dated 1/2/01 for Wollongong Council Planning & Development Committee 12/2/01 (Submitted to Council on 19/2/01).

A very promising future for Escarpment protection, it would seem. However, even though the moratorium has been stressed by the Minister, and subsequently supported by Lord Mayor George Harrison, Wollongong City Council (led by the same Lord Mayor) are rapidly consenting with development applications which breach the very boundaries the COI expressly stress must be protected. The only lands that have a moratorium are conservation lands and others specifically mentioned in the inquiry. However, the Inquiry recommends that Council take into account the findings of the COI when assessing development applications in the 7(a) and 7(b) zones.

"There is a lot of area along the Escarpment that is still undecided that has no protective zonings on it and its going against the philosophy of the Inquiry which required major studies to be done," June explains. "Of concern to us now is the number of developments pending that are not protected by the moratorium. This is essentially on any land that is not 7(a) or 7(b).

"It worries me that proposals still going to council are 7(b) land and they aren't facing any objection. Council should not even be accepting these proposals nor advertising that they have been received."

One particular concern for the IEC

is the DA at Excelsior Colliery. The land is both 7(a) and 7(b) and there is application for one house. Explains June:

“You can no longer put a house on 7(a) land. However, the zoning consent is if you have 40 hectares on 7(b) land you can put a house on. Excelsior Colliery only has 3ha, yet an application has recently gone to council for this house on 3ha of 7B land.”

Naturally this then asks what the moratorium on 7(b) land is achieving. “Once you water down a 7(b) zoning, what is the point of having it? There is a lot area along the Escarpment that is still undecided that has no protective zonings on it and its going against the philosophy of the commission inquiry which required major studies to be done.”

The COI recommended a series of landuse constraints be undertaken to address flora and fauna, native vegetation, riparian and green corridor and land stability. Recommendations made by these studies will be later used to prepare a management plan for the Escarpment.

“The State Government and Wollongong City Council put aside \$650 000 for these studies. The council should, in effect, be holding off developments until these studies are completed but

they are doing the exact opposite. As they continue with the studies, they are accepting development applications in places like TreeTop Glen, Armagh Parade and Ribbenwood Crescent. These are just going through and there are tremendous downstream problems with these sites. The people below have been washed out of houses, they’ve been flooded, there has been instability on the sites themselves and yet they are still being accepted and passed for development.”

The question is why are council rushing these developments through? Why are they contravening recommendations from the COI, endorsed by Minister Refshauge and going against their own ratification of the Inquiry? The IEC believes council want to get as much through before the realisation from the studies that no more can be developed. As June points out “the Commissioner in part of his statement said that he felt [the Escarpment] was probably already over developed”.

June Pronk sees the need for WCC’s Environmental Sustainable Development committee to become enforceable before effective protective changes can be made. It’s a matter, she

says, of putting theory into practice.

“Wollongong City Council’s policies are excellent, they truly are. They are beautifully written, winning awards on wonderful theory. The reality is though they do not act on these policies, and on the issue of development they do not even act on state government policies.

“The Escarpment runs from Cape York to Victoria and this is what we must look at: the whole thing. We have always said zonings are no protection as they can be rezoned to what people want. What we really have to do is go to state legislation and change a lot of the local government practices. People need to be able to look at environment, state and local government law and see where the loop holes are, and get those revoked. We need experts help, we need people really involved in environmental law and involved in legislation.”

The future of the Illawarra Escarpment seems to hang in the balance. Local council is not so much divided on protecting it, as they are on preventing further development. Protecting the Escarpment is proving to be a difficult task for those who respect and want to preserve it. Indeed it sounds nice to speak highly of this “backbone” of the Illawarra but ensuring its sustainability is something else altogether.

