



Psychoterratic geographies of the Upper Hunter region, Australia



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ABSTRACT

In May 2010 the proposed Bickham coal mine near the Pages River in the Upper Hunter region of Australia was formally rejected because of its potentially deleterious impacts on hydrology and the likely negative impacts on a valuable thoroughbred breeding region. In this paper we focus on the 'psychoterratic' mental states of topophilia and solastalgia and highlight how people's intimate personal relationships with the river and "the environment" were concealed through the formal assessment process. We argue that these relationships and the emotional states they sustain are critical, are at present little understood by geographers, that geography is well placed to develop and incorporate these understandings, and that the formal impact assessment system could be greatly improved by the incorporation of psychoterratic geographies.

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1. Introduction

Anderson and Smith lamented in 2001 that "neither the vocabulary nor the concept of emotional geographies appear to have a place in the return to 'relevance'", despite their preceding observation that there is a "glaring obvious, yet intractable silencing, of emotion in both social research and public life" (Anderson and Smith, 2001, p. 7). Despite substantial geographical research in emotional geographies since 2001 (see Pile, 2010), there has also been continued recognition of the lack of integration of emotions within social research and public life (Clark and Clark, 2012). While there has been work undertaken in geography (Stratford, 2009) and outside of geography (Tschakert and Tutu, 2010; McNamara and Westoby, 2011; Cordial et al., 2012), there is still inadequate integration of emotions and environmental understandings. A recent article by Kearns and Collins (2012) investigating emotional attachment to the Ngunguru coast in Northland, New Zealand resonates with our work in the Upper Hunter region of New South Wales (NSW). Kearns and Collins (2012) focus on the positive emotional bond between people and familiar localities, particularly noting the influence of length of residence and the likelihood of intense emotional responses when a familiar place is threatened by unwanted change.

Unwanted change has been both a threat and a material reality for many residents of the Upper Hunter region of Australia. There have been a number of conflicts between various industries competing for space, air quality, water, identity and labour in the re-

gion, most notably in the 1990s between the coal mining industry and viticulture over the establishment of the Bengalla coal mine near Muswellbrook, which commenced operations in 1999 (McManus, 2008a). The growth of the thoroughbred breeding industry and the coal mining industry meant that, inevitably, there would come a time when they would be in direct conflict with each other. That time came in 2002, with the proposed establishment of a coal mine in what is now the Upper Hunter Shire. The local conflict around the proposed Bickham coal mine was part of a larger conflict about the biophysical and cultural construction and identity of the local government area and a region that includes viticulture, coal mining, horse studs, power stations and competing identity discourses such as the adjacent Muswellbrook Shire's former motto, 'bursting with energy', as a 'moonscape' or as nature nurturing a crop of thoroughbred champions.

The proposed site for the Bickham Coal Mine was located approximately 12 km south-east of Murrurundi and 25 km north of Scone. It is about 150 m from the Pages River and upstream of some of the most famous thoroughbred studs in Australia. The coal mine proposal was formally rejected because of its potentially deleterious impacts on the river's hydrology. While this is the official reason, we suggest that the Bickham coal mine proposal was stopped because it was a relatively small, isolated and environmentally risky operation located upstream from thoroughbred breeding farms that are owned by some of the most powerful and wealthy people in Australia.

Formal environmental assessment mechanisms generate formal scientific responses, because these are legally required and are considered by many people in society to be the most acceptable form of evaluative discourse. The Bickham conflict generated an

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enormous amount of scientifically-based impact assessment work. The mine proponents noted, correctly, that they were required to undertake far more stringent environmental studies, particularly hydrological studies, than any other coal mining proposal had done up until that time. Over the next eight years, the conflict meandered through various phases and processes, until on 14 May 2010 the then Premier of New South Wales (NSW), Kristina Kennally, announced: “The [Bickham] mine is simply not compatible with the unique rural characteristics of this locality, including the horse-breeding industry” (Kirkwood and Smee, 2010, pp. 1 and 4). A key aspect of the final decision was that opponents of the mine were able to fund scientific hydrological studies that fundamentally questioned the soundness of the science submitted by the consultants hired by the mine proponent (Connor et al., 2008).

In addition to the water science issues, it can be argued that the proposed Bickham coal mine conflict was not simply a scientific debate about the impact of a development proposal on a receiving environment, and the subsequent impacts downstream. We argue, as did the Premier of NSW (above), that it was also about personal and collective relationships with “the environment” – understood as topophilia (Tuan, 1974) and solastalgia (Albrecht, 2005, 2006, 2010, 2012; Albrecht et al., 2007). Both solastalgia and topophilia are concepts that we see as examples of ‘psychoterratic’ or earth-related mental health states (Albrecht et al., 2007; Albrecht, 2012).

In the following section we explore the theoretical psychoterratic concepts employed in this paper; topophilia and solastalgia and their relationship to the field of impact assessment. The third part of the paper introduces the Upper Hunter region, with a focus on the two main industries of coal mining and thoroughbred breeding. We explore, in particular, conflicts between these industries as they compete for limited space, resources such as water, the creation and evolution of the region’s image, the public perception of their industries and for political influence. In the fourth part of this paper we introduce a specific conflict – the proposed Bickham coal mine. In the fifth section of this paper we highlight the limitations of relying on formal impact assessment methods in environmental conflicts as they emphasise scientific information, economic and demographic social data into a formal process that presents a limited interpretation of a landscape. In doing so, certain discourses are favoured while others are marginalized. This situation results in alternative tactics being employed in the debate, such as the provision of high expense, specialist, empirically derived data used to describe the issue, while more qualitative aspects of the issue remain concealed and ignored. The paper concludes with a call for considering the inclusion of concepts such as solastalgia and topophilia both within and alongside improved approaches to formal environmental assessment processes and specifically, the social impact assessment (SIA) component of systematically integrated impact assessment. We acknowledge the challenges in attempting to do so, but believe this endeavour is important because otherwise the impact narratives that are told will become, increasingly, channelled into the formal, scientific language that distances people from the very environments with which they currently feel both connected and disconnected. If the level of international social protest concerning environmental impacts on people such as extreme weather events (drought and hurricanes), mountain top removal for coal, large open cuts and the fracking of coal seams to extract gas, is any indication, public pressure to include the psychoterratic in SIA will become compelling in the near future.

2. Psychoterratic geographies: topophilia, solastalgia and impact assessment

Psychoterratic geographies refer to mental health (psyche) states that are related to place and the condition of the earth

(terra). Broadly speaking, we can define both positive and negative psychoterratic states within the psychoterratic typology (Albrecht, 2012). The concept is based on the two-way connections between human health and environmental conditions. Solastalgia and topophilia, as demonstrated below in the review, have been in the literature now for some time. What is new in this paper, however, is the application of these ideas in relation to each other, and to other forms of assessment such as formal impact assessment processes that tend to ignore or marginalize emotive and qualitative information, but particularly psychoterratic states.

2.1. Topophilia

The concept of topophilia was first used by the poet W.H. Auden in 1947 to describe the attention given to the love of particular and peculiar places within the built environment as revealed in the poetry of John Betjeman (Hauser, 2007). In a much more widely understood and used interpretation of topophilia, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1974, p. 4) defined topophilia as “the affective bond between people and place or setting”. This bond, for Tuan (1974, 4) was “diffuse as concept; vivid and concrete as personal experience”. Tuan argued that:

Topophilia takes many forms and varies greatly in emotional range and intensity. It is a start to describe what they are: fleeting visual pleasure; the sensual delight of physical contact; the fondness for place because it is familiar, because it is home and incarnates the past, because it evokes pride of ownership or of creation; joy in things because of animal health and vitality. (Tuan, 1974, p. 247)

Topophilia, as a love of environment, expresses in one concept, a collection of vague terms such as “joy”, “at home” and “fondness” that were previously used to connote positive connections to place. However, the positive love of landscape and place is typically a more intense feeling/emotion for Indigenous people and people such as rural and remote folk who live closely to the land/soil. No doubt, many traditional peoples have in their own languages powerful expressions that connect positive emotions to place. When a much loved landscape is desolated, an equally powerful negative feeling/emotion is likely to be experienced. It is this precise experience that solastalgia in the English language describes.

2.2. Solastalgia

The concept of solastalgia was developed to give greater conceptual clarity to a feeling of desolation or melancholia about the emplaced and lived experience of the chronic deterioration of a loved home environment (Albrecht, 2005, 2006, 2010, 2012). Solastalgia is experienced as an existential melancholia at the negatively perceived transformation (desolation) of a loved ‘home’ environment. It is a form of ‘homesickness’ like that experienced with traditionally defined nostalgia, except that the victim has not left their home or home environment. In this sense, solastalgia generates an emplaced melancholia similar to that produced by disemplaced traditionally defined nostalgia.

The concept of solastalgia was applied initially to the lived experience of the negative transformation of the biophysical environment, both natural and constructed. Open pit coal mining, other forms of mining, urbanization, gentrification, toxic pollution of places and, now, global warming and attendant climate extremes such as drought, have been identified as factors that potentially drive people into solastalgic despair (Albrecht, 2005; Albrecht et al., 2007). It is typically the distress manifest at the chronic change to the external, physical environment that is the focus of solastalgia. In a study of a coal mining impact community

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