



Original research article

A town divided: Community values and attitudes towards coal seam gas development in Gloucester, Australia

Emily Grubert^{a,*}, Whitney Skinner^b^a Emmett Interdisciplinary Program in Environment and Resources, Stanford University, 473 Via Ortega, Y2E2 Building, Suite 226, Stanford, CA 94305, USA^b Graduate School of Business and Emmett Interdisciplinary Program in Environment and Resources, Stanford University, 473 Via Ortega, Y2E2 Building, Suite 226, Stanford, CA 94305, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Coal seam gas
Australia
Social impact
Unconventional gas

ABSTRACT

The 2300-person community of Gloucester, New South Wales in Australia anticipated the prospect of coal seam gas (CSG) development, a form of unconventional natural gas, for nearly a decade before a 2016 decision to cancel the project. Gloucester has become well known for its extreme level of community division focused on coal seam gas development: residents report conflicts ranging from blocked access to services through death threats and active boycotts of businesses. We conducted open-ended interviews, participant observation, and mail surveys in Gloucester in late 2015 with the goal of understanding the deeper issues associated with CSG-related conflict in Gloucester. We argue that the long period of stagnant uncertainty associated with the potential development was a major contributor to the amplitude of the community divide. The major conflict focused on whether a coal seam gas development would threaten or accelerate progress toward shared goals of securing Gloucester's future and maintaining residents' quality of life. We posit that exacerbating factors include the existence of highly concrete visions of what Gloucester would be like in futures with or without gas and the sense that the community was not empowered to choose whether or not to pursue local gas development.

1. Introduction

Gloucester is a small town in New South Wales, Australia (Fig. 1) with a resource-based history founded on dairy and timber. More recently, the region has produced coal and beef cattle, with industrial transitions partly attributed to dairy deregulation and forest conservation efforts in the 1990s. Residents describe the town as “country,” with good access to major coastal hubs like Sydney and Newcastle but a strong local identity due to cultural isolation from these hubs. Some residents' families have been in Gloucester for generations, while others are more recent arrivals attracted by the natural beauty of the area and the opportunity to retreat from urban life. Unemployment and wages relative to cost of living are similar to rates in Australia as a whole [1].

In 1992, Petroleum Exploration License (PEL) 285 was granted to Pacific Power, allowing for exploration of the region for natural gas found in the extensive coal seams in the valley. After limited activity, PEL 285 was sold to Lucas Energy and Molopo Australia in 2002, again with limited activity or impact in the Gloucester region. Amidst interest in natural gas resources due to rising oil prices and other market forces, the New South Wales Department of Planning declared the PEL 285 lease a ‘Major Project’ [2] in May 2008, requiring an Environmental

Assessment “to ensure community views were considered in the development of the project.” Soon after, in December 2008, PEL 285 changed hands again and was sold to AGL Energy (a successor to the Australian Gas Light Company). AGL began community consultations in early 2009 [3–5]. The proposed Gloucester Gas Project potentially comprised hundreds of coal seam gas wells that would provide large portions of New South Wales' natural gas after hydraulic fracturing. After four wells were drilled in 2012 (the Waukivory Pilot), AGL announced in February 2016 that the proposed project would not proceed [6,7]. Between consultations and cancellation, Gloucester residents engaged the possibility of transitioning from an identity as a non-gas producing to a major gas producing community and became well known for extreme levels of community division over the project. This division, and the ethics of the processes that led to it, is the subject of this paper.

Against the backdrop of anti-gas activism in Queensland and other parts of New South Wales [8] and across the world in the eastern United States [9,10], the town of Gloucester became noteworthy for the degree to which project proposals were creating community tension. Between 2013 and 2016, competing community groups espousing different visions for the town's future with or without gas became prominent.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: gruberte@stanford.edu (E. Grubert), wdskinne@alumni.gsb.stanford.edu (W. Skinner).

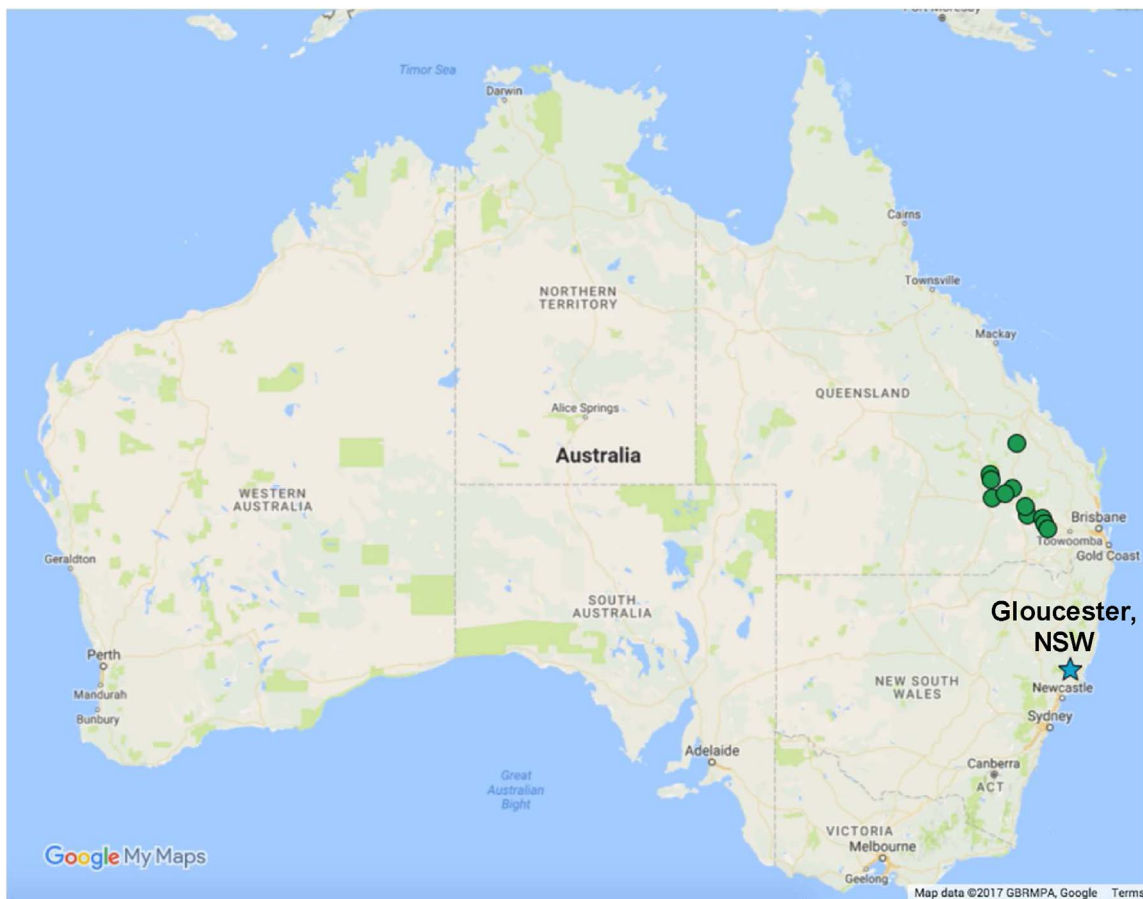


Fig. 1. Gloucester, NSW (blue star) and active CSG fields (green circles). Map data (c) 2017 GBRMPA, Google. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

Meanwhile, very little activity proceeded on the CSG project itself, contributing to the challenging mixture of long periods of stagnant uncertainty, competing visions for the future, and limited local control over the fate of a project subject to major market shifts.

This work describes the results of research undertaken in Gloucester in late 2015, several months before the project was canceled. We add to the growing literature on anthropological approaches to analyzing transitions to fossil energy extraction (e.g. [11–15]) with this case study of Gloucester, as well as to the social science literature on coal seam gas development in Australia (e.g. [16–25]). Our work uses interviews, observation, and survey data to construct an explanation for the extreme community division caused by Gloucester residents' reactions to a proposed CSG project, positing that the timing, long duration, and pre-existing competing discourses in the community led to a situation where positions could easily harden and visions for the future could become highly tangible.

Even though CSG was not actually developed at scale in Gloucester, we observe many of the same concerns identified among residents of developed areas. For example, prior work on the social setting of Australian CSG in regions that already have development, primarily in Queensland, has indicated that residents are concerned about water, community effects, and their ability to plan for the future under uncertain conditions [26]. Earlier work conducted in Gloucester in 2012 [23] emphasizes the emergence of competing discourses about Gloucester's future that threaten its community, something we observe at extreme levels in our work three years later.

Overall, we observe that residents have many of the same goals for their community, and most feel a very strong sense of connection to the place as their home. Residents' opinions about what to do are grounded in personal ethical practice, evidenced in particular by descriptions of

their desire to protect and provide social and environmental well-being for the future. This ethical grounding both uncovers and intensifies conflict, as the potential for CSG in Gloucester forces individuals and groups to explicitly state and argue for different sociotechnical imaginaries, or senses of how to achieve success in securing a “good” future for the town (see e.g. [27,28]). A competing opinion is not seen simply as an alternative, but as an unethical desire for something harmful. That is, highly personal and tangible expectations for Gloucester's future—with gas for some and without gas for others—contribute to residents' perception that the opposing perspective is actively harming them by destroying their futures and those of their families and community. This perception is amplified by a general sense among residents that they personally have no control over the result and thus cannot actively protect themselves. This conflation of the gas project with high stakes visions for the future are the root of Gloucester's high conflict situation. We suggest that the potential for serious social harm even absent project implementation creates an ethical imperative for companies to consider the potential for such conflict carefully before a project is built, especially if the time between proposal and implementation is long.

2. Methods

This in-depth qualitative case study is part of a larger mixed methods project investigating social and environmental priorities in communities experiencing energy development in the United States and Australia (including the Powder River Basin, a coal- and coalbed methane region in Wyoming, US). Our goal in focusing attention on Gloucester is to reveal the extent to which energy can become embedded into community culture, then to explore the ethical implications

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6463730>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6463730>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)