



How wind became a four-letter word: Lessons for community engagement from a wind energy conflict in King Island, Australia



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Community engagement for a controversial wind energy proposal is analysed.
- Key factors driving local conflict are identified and discussed.
- The social identity approach provides understanding of hidden complexities.
- Implications for community engagement practice are discussed.

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ABSTRACT

Wind is recognised as a key source of renewable energy. Despite broad public support for the sector, wind energy proposals have routinely triggered social conflict and localised opposition. To promote social acceptance and avoid conflict, the wind energy sector undertakes *community engagement*. This paper interrogates the community engagement undertaken in King Island (Tasmania, Australia) for a large scale wind energy development proposal which did not proceed to implementation due to external economic factors. Despite the proponent's adoption of what was described as a 'best practice' community engagement strategy, the proposal caused significant social conflict for the community. In-depth interviews ($n=30$) were conducted with members of the King Island community and were qualitatively analysed through the social identity lens. Five key drivers of the local conflict were identified: problematic pre-feasibility engagement; the lack of a third-party facilitator of the community consultative committee; holding a vote which polarised the community; the lack of a clear place in the engagement process for local opposition, and; the significance of local context. These findings are instructive for improving community engagement practice for wind energy and other energy generation and land use change sectors.

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1. Introduction

Wind energy generation can be a politicised and complex issue with consequences ranging from local to global scales (Hindmarsh, 2014; Howard 2015; Juerges and Newig, 2015). At the local level, a stakeholder's perspective will dictate whether landscape and social impacts of proposed wind energy developments are considered beneficial or burdensome (Botterill and Cockfield, 2016). Globally, the agenda for action to address climate change (e.g. Althor et al., 2016) promotes investments in wind and other renewable energy sources (Batel et al., 2013; Curran, 2012; Deng

et al., 2015; Jami and Walsh 2014; Juerges and Newig 2015; Hindmarsh 2010; Lema and Lema 2013; Wilson and Dyke 2016). In Australia, the wind energy industry has the broad 'in principle' support of the public (Hobman and Ashworth, 2013), though large-scale, commercially owned wind energy projects have been often accompanied by conflict (Botterill and Cockfield, 2016; Hall and Jeanneret 2015; Hindmarsh, 2010, 2014; Wilson and Dyke 2016). While social conflict over land use change can contribute to improved outcomes through exploration of a range of perspectives and options, the introduction of wind energy is routinely characterised as dysfunctional conflict, which is where a satisfactory resolution is unlikely and long-term relationships are damaged (Amason 1996; Colvin et al., 2015b). In wind energy issues in Australia, conflict tends to manifest around localised opposition (e.g. Alberts, 2007; Burningham et al., 2014; Anderson, 2013; Kermagoret et al., 2016; Ogilvie and Roots, 2015), often motivated

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by concerns about health impacts, changes to the landscape, impacts on wildlife, loss of amenity, reduced property values, distributive and procedural fairness issues, and social disharmony (Botterill and Cockfield, 2016; Fast et al., 2016; Gross 2007; Groth and Vogt, 2014b; Hall et al., 2013; Hindmarsh, 2010; Howard, 2015; Jami and Walsh, 2014).

In efforts to avoid dysfunctional conflict and local opposition, proponents of wind energy projects commit time and resources to undertaking community engagement as part of their planning processes (Bell et al., 2005; Fast et al., 2016; Howard, 2015; Jami and Walsh, 2014; Soma and Hagggett, 2015). This is in response to communities and other social actors demanding involvement in decisions which affect them (Moffat et al., 2015; Quick and Feldman, 2011; Ross et al., 2016), and as a result of broader shifts toward participatory processes as a norm of land use change decision-making (Colvin et al., 2016; Reed, 2008). Additionally, community engagement is a mandated requirement of environmental and social impact assessments for wind energy development proposals (Hindmarsh, 2010). To the wind industry, community engagement can be viewed as a vehicle through which to obtain a social licence to operate (SLO); an indicator of community acceptance which can change over the course of a project (Clean Energy Council, 2013; Corvellec, 2007; Hall 2014; Hall and Jeanneret, 2015). However, Hindmarsh (2010) argues that the traditional approach to community engagement for wind energy developments in Australia has been inadequate, and as a result has contributed to the exacerbation of conflict. This inadequacy is attributed to the use of a passive approach to community engagement, where the proponent “provides no guarantee to affected communities of any decision-making power” (Hindmarsh, 2010, p. 543). Reflecting the lower levels of the ‘Spectrum of Public Participation’ (Clean Energy Council, 2013; Hindmarsh, 2010; IAP2, 2015), this approach to community engagement limits community involvement to being ‘informed’ by proponents, or providing information to proponents for possible, but not guaranteed, incorporation into decisions.

In contrast, a collaborative and participatory approach to community engagement is expected to yield better outcomes for both communities and wind energy development proponents (Hall and Jeanneret, 2015; Hindmarsh 2010). This approach reflects the higher levels of the ‘Spectrum of Public Participation’, and is an active and transparent relationship between communities and wind energy proponents which facilitates empowerment of the community to influence decision-making (Hindmarsh, 2010). Attributes of this higher-level of community involvement which differ from the traditional approach to community engagement include:

- engaging community early in the proposal (Anderson, 2013; Bell et al. 2005; Corscadden et al. 2012; Fast et al. 2016; Groth and Vogt 2014a; Hall et al., 2013, 2015; Hindmarsh, 2010; Hindmarsh and Matthews, 2008; Jami and Walsh, 2014);
- genuinely incorporating community input into project planning and design (Hindmarsh, 2010; Hindmarsh and Matthews, 2008; Jami and Walsh, 2014);
- building and maintaining trust between proponent and community (Alberts, 2007; Hall et al. 2015);
- exceeding minimum (mandated or legislated) requirements (Anderson, 2013; Fast et al., 2016; Hall and Jeanneret, 2015; Howard, 2015; Soma and Hagggett, 2015);
- establishing community consultative committees (Fast et al., 2016; Howard, 2015);
- forming a long-term commitment to and relationship with the community (Anderson, 2013; Fast et al., 2016; Hindmarsh and Matthews, 2008; Jami and Walsh, 2014; McLaren Loring, 2007);
- embedding staff locally to develop long-term relationships (Hall

et al. 2015; McLaren Loring, 2007), and;

- avoiding incendiary settings, such as town-hall meetings which can descend into a “shouting match” (Hall et al. 2015, p. 306).

Higher-level (IAP2 style) approaches to community engagement have been recognised by scholars as critical for positive relationships between communities and wind energy developments (Hindmarsh, 2010), and community engagement guidelines developed with the wind energy industry reflect this approach as ‘best practice’ (Clean Energy Council, 2013). Nevertheless, conflict accompanies many new wind energy proposals, causing social disharmony in the candidate host communities (Botterill and Cockfield, 2015; Hindmarsh, 2010, 2014).

This paper presents an examination of a wind energy proposal which, despite the proponent’s claim to have adopted a ‘best practice’ approach to community engagement (Hydro Tasmania 2013c, p. 16), caused significant social disharmony during the time of the proposal in 2012–2014 in the community of King Island, Australia (Hindmarsh, 2014; The Australian, 2013). The aim of this research is to interrogate the King Island experience to identify aspects of process and/or exogenous factors that contributed to the dysfunctional local conflict despite the approach to community engagement adopted by the proponent, and from this to inform theory and practice for community engagement.

This paper first presents a background to the King Island experience and then a description of the qualitative interview and analysis methods. An overview of the phases and events of the conflict at King Island is presented, followed by a discussion of the key findings about the conflict in King Island. Finally, concluding remarks are offered.

2. Background to King Island and the TasWind proposal

King Island is located at the meeting of the Bass Strait and the Southern Ocean, half way between mainland Australia and the southern island state of Tasmania, which is its jurisdictional state (Fig. 1). King Island lies in the path of strong winds; the ‘Roaring 40s’ (Khamis, 2007). The Island is approximately 1100 km² (Coates, 2014; Jones, 2014); 64 km at its longest point and 27 km at its widest (Khamis, 2007). The resident population in 2013 was 1605 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014), with a long-term and steady trend of population decline (Jones, 2014). The local economy is driven by primary production, with dairy, beef, kelp, and other speciality products as key export commodities (Jones, 2014), though there is a growing tourism sector in the Island (Coates, 2014).

Stabilisation of the King Island population and the related goal of economic sustainability are key challenges for the community (Coates, 2014; Jones, 2014). This follows closure of a scheelite mine for tungsten in the Island in the 1990s (Suárez Sánchez et al., 2015), and the more recent closure of the King Island abattoir in 2012 (Jones, 2014). Both significantly dimmed the economic outlook for the community. Additional perennial challenges include the high cost of living, freight, and travel, and limited telecommunications (Coates, 2014; Jones, 2014). Despite the challenges of population decline and disruption to its traditional industries, King Island is buoyed by a strong sense of community, place, and identity (i.e. King Islanders identify as King Islanders, not Tasmanians or Australians), and pride in the Island’s clean air and rugged and agrarian landscape. The laid-back and open community-centric local culture is highly valued by King Islanders. For a detailed perspective on local culture, past change, and future prospects of King Island see Coates (2014) and Jones (2014).

It was in this context of an uncertain future for the local economy and highly valued and cohesive community that a

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