



**RYLSTONE REGION
COAL FREE
COMMUNITY**



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Rylstone Region Coal Free Community
*Hawkins Rumker PRIA Submission:
Aboriginal Cultural Heritage*



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Hawkins Rumker PRIA Submission: Aboriginal cultural heritage

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Acknowledgement of Country

The RRCFC acknowledges that we live and work on Wiradjuri Country.

We acknowledge the Wiradjuri peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the land, and pay our respects to Elders past, present and future.

Executive Summary

2020 Strategic Statement and the PRIA process

The NSW Government's June 2020 Strategic Statement on Coal Exploration and Mining outlines the NSW Government's approach to transitioning to renewable energy and supporting the economy, and aims to improve certainty about where mining should not occur. Following the release of the Strategic Statement, the NSW Government Advisory Body for Strategic Release has requested the Hawkins and Rumker areas be put through the Preliminary Regional Issues Assessment (PRIA) process.

The PRIA process, also set out in the Strategic Release Framework, is an initial assessment of social, environmental and economic matters relating to areas that could be released for exploration. In theory, it involves engaging with interested and potentially impacted stakeholders to identify issues for consideration.

RRCFC's Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Submission

This report is the Rylstone Region Coal Free Community's (RRCFC's) submission to the PRIA process on *Aboriginal Cultural Heritage*. Separate submissions for a range of other issues are also being submitted by the RRCFC. The RRCFC recognises that coal exploration is a precursor to coal mining, and therefore it is predominantly the mining phase that is considered in this submission. The RRCFC strongly opposes the release of Hawkins and Rumker areas as coal exploration areas.

Documented Aboriginal heritage sites in the Hawkins and Rumker areas

There are currently 28 publicly listed Aboriginal cultural sites in the proposed Hawkins and Rumker release areas. This is a gross underestimation of the actual number of sites in the area: the Traditional Custodians have for some time been connecting with residents and landowners in the Hawkins Rumker and surrounding areas to be able to visit sites and Country that has previously locked off due to it being privately owned, and to help prevent any further destruction to Aboriginal cultural heritage sites.

Negative impact on culture and wellbeing and continued intergenerational trauma

Aboriginal Australians are the oldest living continuous culture in the world. Country is of great significance to Aboriginal peoples. Disrespect, damage or destruction of land leads to significant negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples, impacting their identity, sense of belonging, culture and spirituality, and results in continued intergenerational trauma. Small buffer zones around individual sites do nothing to protect the sites from disruption, nor do they protect Country from being transformed and/or destroyed, or culture being destroyed.

Conclusion

The level of community opposition to the Hawkins Rumker potential proposed release area with concerns raised regarding the impacts Aboriginal Cultural Heritage and negative impact to wellbeing due to damage or destruction of Country, clearly indicate that a social license to operate for this project has not been achieved.

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1 | Introduction

1.1 Preliminary Regional Issues Assessment (PRIA) Process

The NSW Government's Advisory Body for Strategic Release has asked the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE) to prepare a Preliminary Regional Issues Assessment (PRIA)¹ to consider the benefits, opportunities, risks and constraints of releasing two adjacent areas located near Rylstone in the Mid-Western Regional local government area.

These areas are shown in Figure 1 and include:

- Hawkins - an area of 14,900 ha located directly north of Rylstone, and
- Rumker - an area of 17,800 ha located directly north east of Rylstone.

An initial assessment of resource potential undertaken by the Division of Mining, Exploration and Geoscience within the Department of Regional NSW has identified coal resources within the Hawkins and Rumker areas that could be mined by underground mining methods². It is noted that these areas could just as well be mined using aboveground methods.

In June 2020, the NSW Government released the Strategic Statement on Coal Exploration and Mining, which, "outlines the NSW Government's approach to transitioning to renewable energy and supporting the economy and aims to improve certainty about where mining should not occur"³. It identified 14 potential future coal exploration release areas, including Hawkins and Rumker. Adjacent to Hawkins and Rumker is the area of Ganguddy – Kelgoola, which is slated to go through the PRIA process once further exploration is completed⁴.

1.2 PRIA Preparation

The PRIA process is also set out in the Strategic Release Framework⁴. It is an initial assessment of social, environmental and economic matters relating to areas that could be released for exploration. In theory, it involves engaging with interested and potentially impacted stakeholders to identify issues for consideration.

The DPIE undertakes the PRIA and submits this to the Advisory Body for Strategic Release, which considers potential release areas, reviews reports and recommends assessment of the release of an area for resource exploration. The Advisory Body for Strategic Release makes recommendations to the Minister for Regional NSW and these are considered by Cabinet and, if approved, the Minister for Regional NSW releases an area for exploration and invites companies to apply for a prospecting title¹.

1.3 Rylstone Region Coal Free Community

1.3.1 RRCFC

The Rylstone Region Coal Free Community (RRCFC) is a group of self-funded, like-minded local residents and supporters of the Rylstone Region, committed to stopping further exploration of coal and approval of mines in our region. Our aim is to protect the land, heritage, culture and community for now and future generations. The RRCFC is self-funded and not affiliated with any political party.



1.3.2 Purpose of this report

This report is the RRCFC's submission to the PRIA process for Aboriginal Cultural Heritage. Separate submissions for a range of other issues are also being submitted by the RRCFC.

While “the granting of an exploration licence does not give any right to mine, nor does it guarantee a mining lease will be granted with the exploration licence area”⁵(p1), granting an exploration permit, however, is part of a larger process. “The exploration phase is aimed at proving the technical, economic, and environmental feasibility of a new mining operation...coal exploration is the first part of a continuous process, that if successful leads to the establishment of a new coal mine or the extension of an existing mine into a previously unexplored area”⁶(p3).

The RRCFC recognises that coal exploration is a precursor to coal mining, and therefore it is predominantly the mining phase that is considered in this submission. The RRCFC recommend that the PRIA should find that the proposed exploration areas should not be opened for exploration under the Strategic Framework and that the Advisory Board recommend against release of the proposed areas.

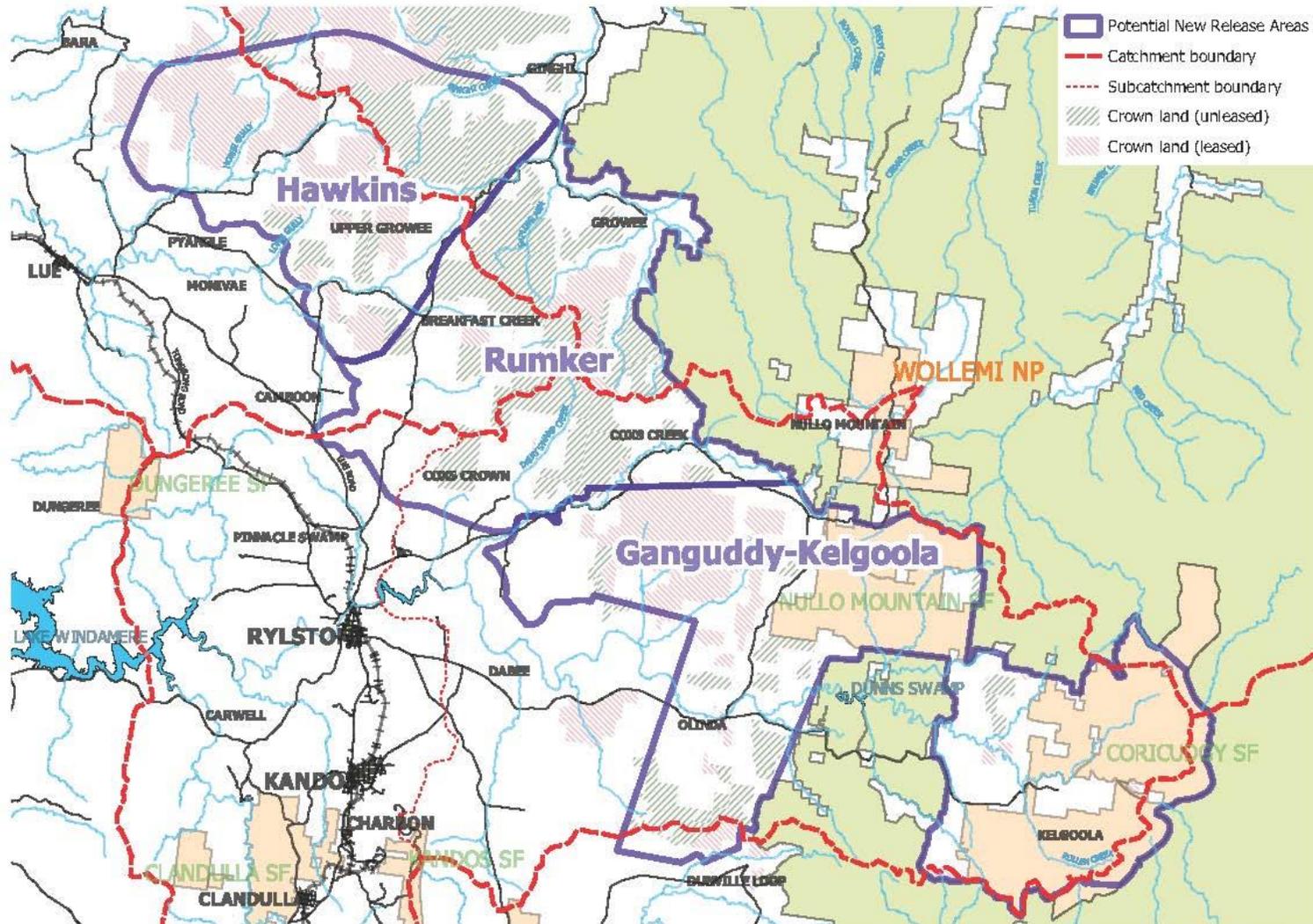


Figure 1. Water catchments within proposed exploration areas

2 | Documented Aboriginal heritage sites in the Hawkins Rumker area

The RRCFC opposes the Hawkins Rumker proposal due to the potential risks of destroying or harming the many Aboriginal heritage sites already known in the area.

There are currently 28 publicly listed Aboriginal cultural sites in the proposed Hawkins and Rumker release areas⁷, six in the Hawkins area and 22 in the Rumker area (see Table 1). It should be noted that this is a gross underestimation of the number of sites in the area: the Traditional Custodians have for some time been connecting with residents and landowners in the Hawkins Rumker and surrounding areas to be able to visit sites and Country that has previously locked off due to it being privately owned, and to help prevent any further destruction to Aboriginal cultural heritage sites⁸.

Table 1. Documented Aboriginal heritage sites in the Hawkins Rumker area

Proposed Coal Release Area	Site Name/Area	Site Types	Site Feature
Hawkins	BC2		Potential Archaeological Deposit (PAD)
Hawkins	BC1		Artefact
Hawkins	Green Hills Swamp; Kay Jay Property	Open Camp Site	Artefact
Hawkins	IB 5		Artefact; Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Hawkins	Growee Gulf; Gulf Creek	Shelter with Art, Shelter with Deposit	Artefact; Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Hawkins	Lue	Shelter with Art, Shelter with Deposit	Artefact; Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Rumker	Cox's Creek	Shelter with Art	Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Rumker	Cox Creek DP11326 46		Artefact; Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Rumker	Coxs Creek IF1		Artefact
Rumker	BR1	Open Camp Site	Artefact
Rumker	Cox's Creek Cox's Creek 1	Shelter with Art	Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Rumker	Cox's Creek 3 Cox's Creek	Shelter with Art	Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Rumker	Cox's Creek	Shelter with Art	Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Rumker	IB 3		Artefact; Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Rumker	Reedy Creek	Shelter with Deposit	Artefact
Rumker	Bylong The Straight Arm	Axe Grinding Groove	Grinding Groove

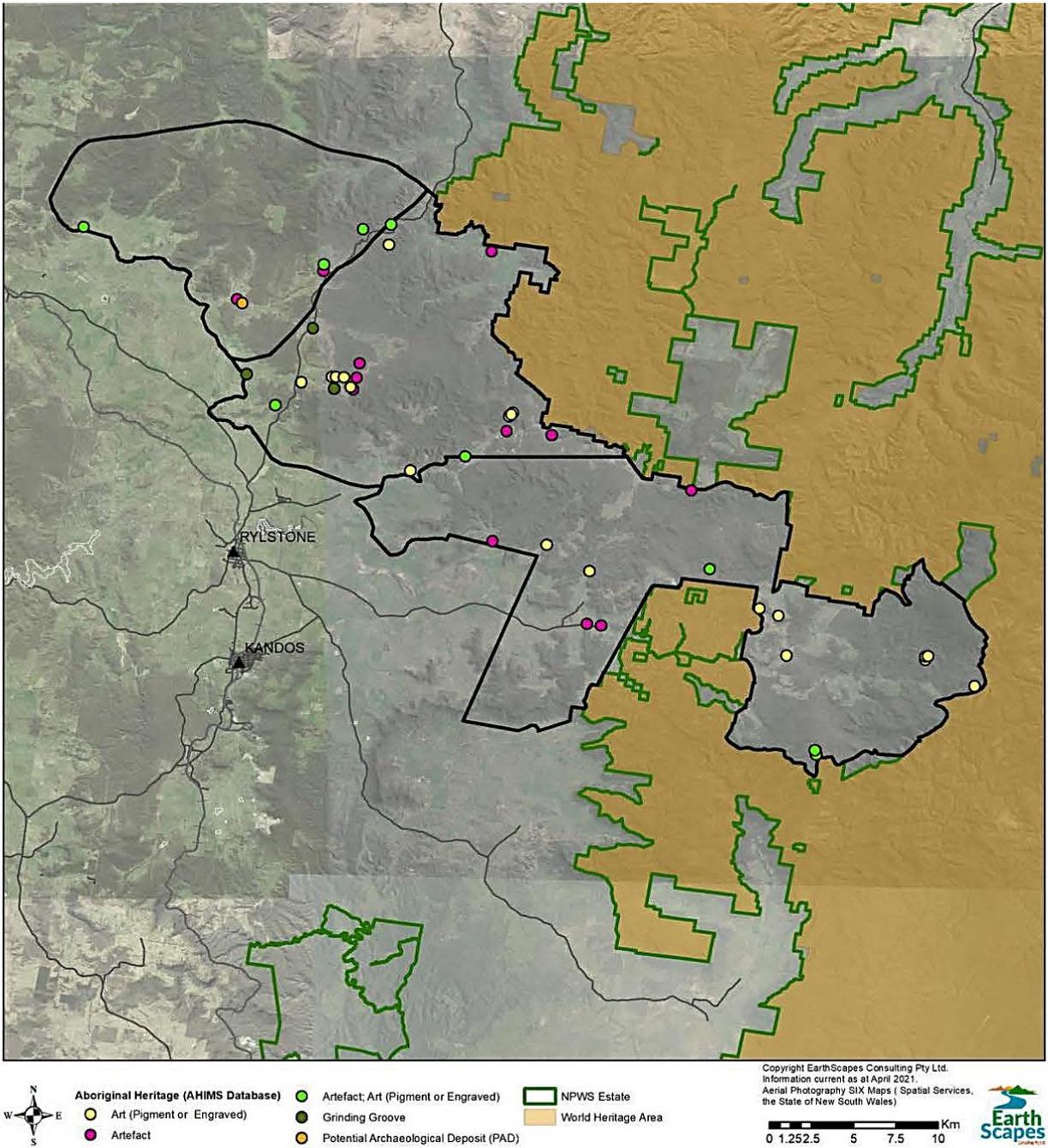


Proposed Coal Release Area	Site Name/Area	Site Types	Site Feature
Rumker	Reedy Creek	Shelter with Art	Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Rumker	Brookside	Shelter with Art	Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Rumker	Reedy Creek	Shelter with Deposit	Artefact
Rumker	Reedy Creek	Shelter with Art	Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Rumker	Reedy Creek	Shelter with Art	Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Rumker	Reedy Creek	Shelter with Art	Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Rumker	Reedy Creek Camboon	Axe Grinding Groove	Grinding Groove
Rumker	Braebeen	Shelter with Deposit	Artefact
Rumker	IB 4		Grinding Groove
Rumker	Growee Coxs Creek Artefact Site 1		Artefact
Rumker	Gulf Creek The Wombat Hole	Shelter with Art	Art (Pigment or Engraved)
Rumker	Gulf Creek; Gulf Creek 1	Shelter with Art; Shelter with Deposit	Artefact; Art (Pigment or Engraved)

[Source: EarthScapes Consulting Pty Ltd⁷]

Figure 2 shows the location of the documented Aboriginal heritage sites in the Hawkins and Rumker areas.





[Source: EarthScapes Consulting Pty Ltd⁷]

Figure 2. Location of documented Aboriginal heritage sites in the Hawkins Rumker area

3 | Negative impact on health and well-being; continued intergenerational trauma

Aboriginal Australians are the oldest continuous living culture in the world⁹. Country is of great significance to Aboriginal peoples and the living environment goes beyond physical elements and is fundamental to identity¹⁰. Aboriginal people are owned by the land and have a deep responsibility to protect the land. ***Yindyamarra is a key way of being for the Wiradjuri peoples, to respect and honour everything. Yindyamarra is interconnected with identity, belonging, culture, spirituality, language, law and kinship¹⁰.***

“My DNA is Country. Because we have lived here for so long, the air, the dirt, the water is our DNA. There is no difference between us and Country:

I am Country, Country is me

I am Gugubarra, Gugubarra is me

I am the rock, the plants and the trees

I am Country, Country is me.” Craig

Aboriginal peoples relationship with the land is based on respect: the land has cared for Aboriginal peoples; Aboriginal peoples have cared for land in return¹⁰. Each Aboriginal person is entrusted with the knowledge and responsibility to care for their Country. **The deep relationship with Country means that disrespect, damage or destruction of Country leads to negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples¹¹.**

The RRCFC have spoken to the Traditional Custodians and Aboriginal community members who have helped unpack these concepts in a way that non-Aboriginal people may understand. The RRCFC have been given permission to share their words to describe the connection to Country and resultant impacts of those connections being lost. The RRCFC feel that this is of vital importance considering that the Traditional Custodians of the land in the Hawkins and Rumker areas are not represented on the DPIE team or Advisory Board.

3.1 Continued intergenerational trauma with loss of culture

Over centuries, Australian colonists have eroded Aboriginal culture and identity with Australia’s various abhorrent laws, including the 1901 Constitution, which did not recognize our First Nations peoples as human beings until the 1967 Referendum, and the forced removal of children under the Assimilation Policy:

“In my family, there were only two survivors from the massacres, and one is my great-great-great grandmother. Then we were forced to work for the people who conducted



the massacres, so we were forced labour, free labour to work for the people. The children were the product of rape from the same people who committed the massacres and then we were removed from land and not able to access our sites, we weren't allowed to conduct ceremonies, we were arrested for speaking language, and then people left because they couldn't cope with the racism anymore... Until the referendum we weren't part of the society of the land that we came from, we weren't even part of the nation, we had no rights and this is a continuation of the intergenerational trauma." Peter

The Traditional Custodians explained how **the Hawkins Rumker proposal contributed to the ongoing cycle of intergenerational trauma:**

"My heart started to ache... It was just like another thing. It's that cumulative impact of the trauma since colonization and now the government want more. I laid awake with my heart aching." Josie

3.1.1 Interconnectedness of cultural sites

The Traditional Custodians and Aboriginal Community members explained how **sites are interconnected and not isolated entities. Each site represents only one part of a bigger picture.** If you find an artefact, for example, the shard of a knife, it is not just an artefact. By looking at the surrounding landscape (reading Country), and looking at the food sources, water sources and surrounding landscape, one can connect that artefact to the larger story of who was there and what they did:

"Each site is interconnected to the other sites and to everything around it and tells the overall story – one site may be the lounge room, one may be the kitchen, one may be the workshop." Peter

Mining operations of any kind, risk disturbing sites:

"... if they go underground or opencut, there is no getting around the fact that they are going to split the sites." Emma

Moving, damaging, or destroying one site, destroys the meaning of the sites and their interconnectedness:

"If you think of the land as a human, your elbow is one site, if you take out the elbow, then your hand is gone too. This site (your hip), if you take the hip out, then there goes your leg. This site (your heart), you take your heart out, and you are gone; you take the blood out (the waters), then you can't survive." Josie

You cannot simply move an artefact for safe keeping during mining operations and then put it back afterwards in the altered landscape; **the meaning of sites are lost in altered landscapes:**



*“That artefact is not the story, it is an artefact. It’s like this pen on the table doesn’t tell you much. But if you look at that it’s on a table, in a place where people come, then you start to get a story about what **is** that pen, it’s meaning [people working together in a building]. If you just come back years later and put the pen on the ground and there’s no table, no building and no people, then no one is going to know what that artefact is or what it means. It means nothing.” Jo*

Destroying sites or Country has an enormous negative impact at the individual and community level:

“We’ve lost so many of the stories through all the colonisation process... If you dig up that over there, it affects everyone. Everyone in the community will be affected by it.” Jo

3.1.2 Continued erosion of culture

Songlines are an important part of Aboriginal culture and have been passed down from generation to generation for tens of thousands of years. They not only map travel routes, but talk of the Creation events, the connectedness between places, and the ceremonies associated with those places¹². **When land routes are blocked or changed, the Songlines are broken.** Songlines show that the Wiradjuri peoples in the Hawkins and Rumker area were connected to the people in the Liverpool Plains:

“The government attacked the Liverpool Plains, they did Bylong Valley....Our Songline is through to the Liverpool Plains; we connected to them through Songlines. They came all the way through here to Nullo Mountain for ceremonies, yet we can’t connect with them.” Peter

Mining operations have already significantly impacted the Wiradjuri people’s culture:

“These kinds of developments are an assault on every aspect of identity and wellbeing...I have watched the destruction and damage to Country in the region and the trauma it has caused our people and I don’t want to see that damage here. It’s enough. Enough is enough.” Emma

“This is going to be the next big apology, all the destruction that has been done to sites by this government and the mines. But an apology is too late. It is just not Aboriginal culture, it is Australian culture, Australian history and it wouldn’t happen anywhere else. They wouldn’t destroy cathedrals or the pyramids, so why is it okay to destroy our culture?” Gail

Irreversible damage to Country through altered landscapes has also resulted in devastating loss to cultural sites:



“They first off locked off a lot of the land through National Parks, then when they defunded National Parks they tried to open it up again, all that caused was the major fires. We watched all our sites burn down”. Peter

3.1.3 Desecration of ancestral resting grounds

The Traditional Custodians explained that there have been approximately seven to eight non-Aboriginal generations in Australia since colonization. Yet **there are thought to be approximately 3000 generations of Aboriginal peoples in Australia. A new mine would add to the already countless individuals that have already been disturbed:**

“Non-Aboriginal people when they die, they go somewhere else, they go off to Heaven or they go off to Hell, but they don’t stay here. Aboriginal people when they pass, they stay here, they live with us, they live amongst us, there is no separation. The old people are all there, whether it is 3000 generations ago or this year, they are all there, exactly the same. They don’t go away to another place; they all stay here.” Peter

*“When we disturb the earth, we disturb the old people and the spirituality of the land.”
Emma*

The following verse from Wiradjuri man, Peter Swain, captures this connection of past to present to future:

*The heartbeat of the land is the rhythm of my heart
The heartbeat of my ancestors is beating in my heart
The heartbeat of my children is the reason for my heartbeat.*

3.2 Psychological impacts already felt by the Hawkins Rumker proposal announcement

Even though there have been assaults on the land in this region, it still holds its intrinsic energy to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The loss of this is at great risk:

“The one thing that we haven’t lost here yet is the magic of this land – I have been to a lot of places, and because of trauma, the magic has been lost – here it’s very noticeable, even after everything that’s been done to the land it still has its inner-magic - do we want to risk losing that?” Peter

The news of the proposed Hawkins Rumker land release areas for coal mining had far reaching effects on the local Wiradjuri people:

“I had phone calls from other people who were speechless, they were dumbfounded. One of them said she was gutted, and she couldn’t imagine how I was feeling at the moment. Everyone is worried.” Emma



Ingrained in Aboriginal culture is the responsibility to care for Country for future generations. **Needing to protect Country and culture from the impacts of the Hawkins Rumer proposal placed a heavy burden on people** to take action:

“In the future do you really want to tell your child that you said yes to committing cultural genocide?...Will you be the reason that Wiradjuri people don’t have a culture in the future?” Josie

The impact on the Wiradjuri people if they were to suffer even more disruption or destruction to Country was too painful to contemplate:

“This can’t happen.” Emma

“Let’s not contemplate that one otherwise we might as well shoot ourselves now. If we start contemplating that we will become too overwhelmed.” Peter

4 | Conclusion

The RRCFC strongly opposes the proposed Hawkins Rumker potential release areas for the following reasons:

- Disproportionate impacts on the Wiradjuri peoples through the disruption and or destruction of cultural sites;
- Negative impact on Wiradjuri peoples' culture and wellbeing seeing more Songlines broken;
- Negative impact on wellbeing to the Wiradjuri peoples seeing Country altered or destroyed;
- Reinforcement of the exclusion of Aboriginal peoples from accessing their cultural heritage;
- Continued intergenerational trauma.

The level of community opposition to the Hawkins Rumker potential proposed release area with concerns raised regarding the impacts Aboriginal Cultural Heritage and negative impact to wellbeing due to damage or destruction of Country and culture, clearly indicate that a social license to operate for this project has not been achieved.

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