

# DRAWING A FINE LINE IN THE TARKINE

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Can conservation, tourism and industry coexist in Tasmania's Tarkine wilderness? *Kimberley Croxford* looks at the current controversy and the contending pressures

Right:

The Tarkine wilderness from Whyte lookout.  
Kimberley Croxford



ON THE slopes of Mt Lindsay in Tasmania's Tarkine wilderness, Ruth Groom runs her hand over a myrtle tree's huge trunk, soaking in the magnificent rainforest. Below her feet, buried deep, is one of the largest undeveloped tin resources in the world.

Groom, who works for the [Wilderness Society](#), is one of many environmental campaigners arguing against further mining in this part of Tasmania's northwest. Meanwhile, exploration company Venture Minerals plans to develop a world-class tin and tungsten mine on the site where she is standing. Venture has applied for a total lease area of 1029 hectares (about 515 times the size of the Melbourne Cricket Ground) to develop the Mt Lindsay mine, which would contain a 40-hectare open-cut pit 220 metres in depth. "The impact is massive. The area will never have the same biodiversity," says Groom.

Mt Lindsay is one of multiple new mines of various sizes proposed for the Tarkine region, leaving Tasmania with a choice to be made. The state is faced with potentially sacrificing a unique wilderness area to entrench its mining industry, or ensuring the Tarkine's preservation, possibly at the expense of significant investment in Tasmania during the current mineral boom.

The decision comes at a particularly sensitive time. Tasmania's economy is the weakest in Australia and its unemployment rates are the highest in the country, particularly in the northwest. The Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry's chief economist, Phil Bayley, cites a number of contributors to Tasmania's struggles – including job losses in manufacturing and forestry, and long-term issues such as an underperforming education system at both school and tertiary level.

“Money won’t necessarily fix it,” he says. “There are no silver bullets. But there are opportunities and the mining sector is one of them.”

**T**HE Tarkine is an expansive wilderness region renowned for its contrasting, connected landscapes. It contains the largest cool temperate rainforest in Australia – the second-largest in the southern hemisphere. The rainforest’s flora is of ancient descent and can be traced to the continent of Gondwana, which existed hundreds of millions of years ago. Similar rainforest once dominated the southern hemisphere, but now only small tracts remain in southern parts of Australia, as well as New Zealand, Siberia and North America.

The Tarkine showcases rarities of geological significance, such as magnesite karst caves. Its tall eucalypt forests are home to the endangered wedge-tailed eagle and threatened owls. Its commanding coastline supports white-bellied sea eagles and significant Aboriginal relics; and the abundant waterways are home to the giant freshwater crayfish, the largest freshwater invertebrate in the world. Its vast buttongrass plains are home to diverse ecosystems, and the Tarkine is also the last area where the state’s endemic Tasmanian devil survives free from the devil facial tumour disease.

The wilderness area between the Arthur River and the Pieman River was nominated for permanent national heritage listing last year. The Australian Heritage Council recommended 433,000 hectares of the Tarkine be recognised for outstanding heritage values. Former federal environment minister Tony Burke rejected the full recommendation, but listed a strip of 21,000 hectares along the coast, to protect Aboriginal heritage.

The chair of the Australian Heritage Council, Carmen Lawrence, has publicly voiced her disappointment with Burke’s decision. She says those who deny the Tarkine’s value misjudge the diligent nature of heritage assessments. “They must have their eyes closed and ears plugged. The evidence is there too, it’s not just a matter of sentiment.”

The extensive area recommended for heritage listing is largely untouched by human activity, besides the extremely small-scale mining and selective logging of early prospectors. “We were very careful not to include areas of degradation,” Lawrence says.

Lawrence warns that by refusing to acknowledge the Tarkine’s heritage values, Australia risks losing a rare gem. She says the Tarkine is of international significance and to damage it would be a global tragedy. “It has unique biodiversity and a history that is global in its import. That’s why people have suggested that it should be World Heritage listed. The Kimberley has similar character.”

Some opponents of the heritage recommendation were concerned that a listing would exclude mining from the area and threaten the 581 employees at Grange Resources’ Savage River mine, located at the centre of the Tarkine. But Lawrence clarifies that existing mining operations were omitted from the heritage recommendation. She says views that mining would be excluded are

incorrect. “When people talk about locking things up they are misreading the legislation. These listings are not a barrier to other activity.”

Instead, a national heritage listing requires that an area’s values be duly considered when proposals are brought to the table. Lawrence says the Tarkine’s irrefutable values should be properly recognised. “If you wanted to mine under the Opera House you would be told to go away.”

But the state government argued in a submission to minister Tony Burke that heritage listing the Tarkine would have a significant impact on investment in the state. Interest in northwest Tasmania’s mineral resources has increased considerably with a rise in metal prices. The government said “increased approval times” resulting from heritage listing would complicate access to resources and encourage companies and investors to source minerals overseas instead. The government’s submission cited multiple expressions of concern from existing and interested mining companies, including established miners worried that a listing would prevent them expanding or adapting their operations.

The largest of the new mining proposals currently on the table are Shree Minerals’ recently reapproved iron ore project at Nelson Bay River (its original approval was challenged and overthrown in the Federal Court because of concern for the Tasmanian devil) and Venture Minerals’ Mt Lindsay tin/tungsten mine.

Shree estimates that its iron ore mine would employ 125 full-time workers, including contractors, and return about \$80 million a year. Venture Minerals predicts that its Mt Lindsay mine would employ 1000 people for eighteen months, then sixty employees from then on, and claims that the project would produce about \$100 million a year for the Tasmanian economy.

The Tasmanian Minerals Council chief executive officer, Terry Long, says that if new mining projects don’t come to fruition the northwest would lose a substantial opportunity. He stresses that indirect benefit should also be considered. Long says that a survey commissioned by the Tasmanian Minerals Council found that mining and mineral processing operations spent \$800 million on goods and services in Tasmania in 2010–11. “If mines want electrical material, pipes, design and construct engineers, freight, someone to clean the offices – they contract that out. That is why [mines] are important to a regional economy.”

Of Venture Minerals’ three projects currently proposed – Mt Lindsay plus the Riley Creek iron ore mine and the Mt Livingstone hematite mine – two will be totally exhausted in two years and are intended to fund the major Mt Lindsay project. The company’s bankable feasibility study of the proposed Mt Lindsay mine identifies a nine-year mine life based on presently known resources at current mineral prices. But Long emphasises that the Mt Lindsay mine’s predicted lifespan is not necessarily a maximum. He says because mineral exploration is an expensive undertaking, it is standard for companies to lock in a shorter period, then expand.

A director of the Tasmanian Minerals Council, geologist Kim Denwer, says that there is no way of

determining for sure a mine's longevity, as the operations are dependent on a finite resource. But he says the impressive lifespans of existing mines on the west coast are indicative. "One of the things Tasmania is very spoilt with is tremendous ore bodies. In the mid 1980s, the Rosebery deposit was known to have twenty million tonnes, but in the last thirty years an additional thirty-four million tonnes of ore has been discovered."

Denwer acknowledges that a mine's endurance is also dependent on fluctuations in metal prices. "The Renison mine on the west coast has opened and closed in the last ten years with the major fluctuations in the tin price," he says. But Denwer believes that the currently high tin price will be sustained for a considerable period, now that Europe has banned lead solder in its electrical products. "The only alternative to lead solder is tin solder," Denwer says.

The Tasmanian Minerals Council believes that the resource base in northwest Tasmania is one of the most promising in the world for its size. Denwer says the northwest has a rare opportunity to benefit from the new demand for metals such as tin and tungsten, because of its diverse selection of minerals. "The iron ore deposits of Western Australia are probably worth more, but here we have so many different elements enriched in the crust," he says.

The state government's submission to the federal environment minister stated that if a heritage listing prohibited new mines there would be an eventual decline in the mining industry. Denwer agrees that despite the typically long life of Tasmania's existing mines, new mining is essential for the industry's advancement. "Growing the business and replacing old resources – that's where the Venture and Shree projects are the future of the mining industry."

Seventy-three per cent of the state's mining industry operates on the west coast, and largely supports mining towns such as Queenstown, Waratah, Tullah, Rosebery and Zeehan. According to economist Phil Bayley, the total mining sector added \$402 million to the Tasmanian economy in 2011–12. Tasmanian resources minister Bryan Green told the *Mercury* that mining royalties are now ten times more valuable to Tasmania than they were a decade ago.

Open-cut mine at Savage River.

*Brent Melton*

**T**HE Australian Workers' Union, or AWU, has held two rallies in the northwest in support of mining – rallies explicitly supported by the state government. The first assembly saw people gather in Burnie, the west coast's port and urban centre, in November last year. Pro-mining supporters congregated again on 25 May in Tullah, a small community of 250 nestled amid rocky mountains on the fringe of the Tarkine.

The AWU, through its campaign Our Tarkine, Our Future, has accused those fighting for the protection of the Tarkine of trying to shut down the mining industry. Signs reading "Unlock Tasmania, lock up the Greens," "Get rid of Green parasites before they destroy Tasmania" and "Save the Tassie miner from extinction" were raised at Tullah. Rosebery miner Kim McDermott

told the crowd that protection of the area would render the region an “economic wasteland.”

Conservationists have stated repeatedly that they are not opposed to existing mines like Savage River. Winding her car through the mountains towards Tullah, the Wilderness Society’s Ruth Groom emphasises that her desire to protect Tasmania’s natural assets does not signal a disregard for the people of the northwest. “I’m from the northwest. I’m a Burnie girl who grew up here and I certainly feel very deeply for the people of the west coast,” she says, “People are desperate for economic opportunities.”

Passionate about Tasmania, Groom accepts that mining is part of the west coast’s future, but she hopes for a transition towards renewables on a broader scale. “The Tarkine is just a completely inappropriate place for mining. At some point we are going to have to find alternatives anyway, because we are relying on finite resources.”

**A**T THE abandoned Mt Cleveland tin mine, near the ghost town of Luina in the Tarkine, the gurgling, polluted streams stink of sulphur. The underground mine, closed in 1986, is currently leaching acid from its former tailings dam into the Whyte River, causing a six-kilometre dead spot that supports no aquatic life. Bright Phase Resources – an Australian mineral resource development company – has proposed a new project to extract additional tin from the Mt Cleveland mine and rehabilitate it. Mancala, another mining company, is looking to re-mine and rehabilitate a legacy site at [Burns Peak](#).

Scott Jordan, of [Save the Tarkine](#), supports proposals to re-mine and remediate previous mining sites in the area. He says the projects would deliver economic benefit and a substantial number of jobs, without affecting undisturbed areas. “Where we draw the line is new mines in wilderness areas creating entirely new legacy issues.”

But Tasmanian economist Bruce Felmingham, in a [report](#) commissioned by the Tasmanian Minerals Council, argues that if the mining industry does not grow as predicted – a growth dependent on new prospects – it may not have the same capacity to replace existing mines. Felmingham believes significant growth in mining could also absorb some of the impact of the eventual closure of the state’s existing mineral processors, which have [acknowledged a decline](#). “I don’t know of any economy in the world that is not making some kind of transition right now – it’s not unique to Tasmania. Tasmania’s transition probably means the phasing out of the current mineral processors. But it also means we need to replace that loss in production.”

Environmental campaigners have proposed developing tourism as an economic alternative to mining in the Tarkine. The [Tourism and Transport Forum](#) – an industry group – [says](#) that tourism is an important industry in Tasmania, directly employing about 15,000 people. The forum’s director of research and strategy, Adele Labine-Romain, says tourism contributes about \$2 billion annually to the state’s economy, driven by Tasmania’s nature-based product, which differentiates it from other states. There is an increasing sphere of tourism dedicated to the preservation of the environment.

Tourism in the northwest is underdeveloped compared with other regions. In 2008, the [Cradle Coast Authority](#) – an organisation created by the northwest’s nine councils – identified a huge potential for tourism in the Tarkine. It developed the [Tarkine Tourism Development Strategy](#) based on market research and investigations of latent demand. It found that the Tarkine had an “unrivalled opportunity to ‘raise the bar’ in responsible, ecologically sustainable tourism.” The study recognised that “the primary attributes of the Tarkine... are increasingly scarce in the modern world,” and argued that, if developed correctly, the area had the potential to attract international attention.

Modelling found that if “a menu of meaningful, high quality visitor experiences,” were created, tourism in the Tarkine could generate \$58.2 million per year and provide 1100 jobs, as long as the required infrastructure was developed. The study recommended that nature tourism be complemented by local produce, to provide food and wine experiences, and predicted that flow-on effects could considerably boost local communities. Cradle Coast Authority executive chairman Roger Jaensch says the 2008 assessment of the Tarkine’s potential is still applicable, as results were based on long-term projections.

Jaensch is confident that the Tarkine could complement established destinations on the west coast, like Cradle Mountain, the Gordon River and Macquarie Harbour. He says the Tarkine’s unique immensity and diversity distinguishes it from existing nature-based tourism developments in Tasmania. “The Tarkine has a juxtaposing range of appeals. That assemblage of things doesn’t happen in too many other places.” He also believes that the Tarkine’s variety of landscapes has the potential to provide attractions year-round in a traditionally seasonal industry. “On the coast when it’s wild, there is a whole different raw, powerful experience associated with winter that we haven’t tapped into yet,” he says.

**T** [ARKINE Trails](#) is a long-running tourism business operating in the Tarkine. Current owner Greg Irons bought the business after his first encounter with the Tarkine’s ancient beauty and majesty changed his life. “You leave there after a few days and it just feels wrong that you are wearing clothes,” he says, “You drive around the streets thinking, ‘What the hell have we done?’ This is a place that native Australians lived in for 40,000 years without leaving a footprint and look what we’ve done to Australia in 200 years.” Irons says he is yet to meet anyone who didn’t feel wonderment on experiencing the Tarkine. “I think everyone would appreciate the world a lot more should they get a taste of the Tarkine.”

So with this unique opportunity in plain sight, why hasn’t tourism been developed to its full potential? Irons cites tenure and investment security as critical factors. He says that previous owners had to relocate Tarkine Trails’ six-day walk because of mineral exploration tenures, a move that cost them thousands of dollars. Since then, Irons has invested around \$250,000 in a Tarkine camp.

Irons already owned a successful wildlife shelter, Bonorong, when he decided to invest in Tarkine Trails in order to expose people to the Tarkine’s conservation value. He believes no one pursuing a

tourism business for commercial purposes would have taken such a risk. “No one in their right mind would do what I have done – put that much money into a camp that is under mining tenure. I could be told to leave in two weeks and I wouldn’t have a leg to stand on,” he says.

Irons says uncertainty surrounding whether nature tourism’s product – the natural environment – was being properly managed could also cause reluctance to invest. He says eco-tourists are equally discouraged by the perception that the environment is being degraded. “It can become a very sad experience.”

In its submission to the federal environment minister, the state government stated that tourism investors would be deterred by further environmental regulations in a similar way to mining companies. But the owner-operator of the Tarkine Wilderness Lodge, Maree Jenkins, argues that most nature-based tourism businesses would be willing to jump through some initial hoops to ensure that their long-term product, the natural environment, was being preserved. “I’m more worried about mining activities than I am about it being made national heritage,” she says. “Without the forest we’d just have a lodge stuck up on top of a hill.”

But the state government says “it is highly unlikely that [tourism] would be able to replace the value of the existing industry, especially mining, in the short to medium term.” Economist Bruce Felmingham agrees. He says mining also provides opportunities for high-salary-earning knowledge workers, like engineers, whereas tourism does not. Felmingham suggests that knowledge workers migrating to Western Australia and Queensland in pursuit of major mining operations may be drawn back to Tasmania. He says attracting high-salary earners could help the state transition to support a “managerial class.”

“The thing we miss here in Tasmania is that head office culture,” Felmingham says. “Getting those higher incomes involved is an essential issue for our future.” But he insists that tourism and industry must coexist in a healthy economy. “It’s got to be a co-tenant. Diversity of industry is the argument here.” He also says that the pursuit of economic benefit shouldn’t eclipse environmental consideration. “I support mining in the Tarkine and I don’t agree with a blanket ban. But I’m not going to support a massive open-cut mine that is going to destroy the wilderness.”

Felmingham believes that the Tasmanian forestry peace deal – the result of a long-running war – was a positive outcome, but he hopes to avoid a conflict of that scale over mining. “People are just going to have to find a new way of looking at these issues. Another war like the forestry war is beyond us.” He says new land-management agreements could help strike a much-needed balance between tourism, industry and conservation. “This is an opportunity to revisit an area and designate it down to areas used by industry and areas that are not.”

The Cradle Coast Authority’s Roger Jaensch echoes this sentiment. “We should be smart enough in this day and age to manage a range of different land uses without them compromising each other unduly,” he says. “It does rely on there being specific, unique, vulnerable things being protected. We don’t believe there needs to be a blanket exclusion of other land uses, but we need to ensure

that we don't compromise values that have already been identified. If mining can be done without damaging irreparably things that can't be replaced, good on it."

**T**HE state government maintains that a balance has already been struck within the Tarkine region. Premier Lara Giddings told the ABC and the AWU rally at Tullah that a balance had been realised in that only one per cent of the Tarkine was open to mining.

Venture's three project leases (Mt Lindsay, Riley Creek and Mt Livingstone, occupying 1,824 hectares combined), Shree Minerals' assigned 778-hectare lease at Nelson Bay River, and Grange Resources' existing mining leases do equal about 1.8 per cent of the 433,000-hectare area recommended for heritage listing.

But Save the Tarkine says that Mineral Resources Tasmania's records show that there are currently fifty-eight mineral exploration licences across the heritage-nominated area, leaving about 70 per cent of the Tarkine under mining tenure. According to Mineral Resources Tasmania – a division of the Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources – Venture Minerals' total tenure alone equals nearly 300 square kilometres, or 30,000 hectares – about 7 per cent of the recommended heritage listing.

Venture – which is listed on the stock exchange – has already identified several other prospects in ASX reports to investors, suggesting the area is a "province of tin." Last year Venture discovered significant resource potential at a new location dubbed Big Wilson, six kilometres from Mt Lindsay. In March this year the company found another potential hotspot called North Cashbolt a few kilometres north. It has also identified potential at Contact Creek, much further north of Mt Lindsay (which is situated in the south of the region). This prospective resource lies almost adjacent to the Savage River mine – located in the middle of the Tarkine.

Resources minister Bryan Green told a budget estimates hearing on 5 June that he was confident the mines would go ahead. He said he hoped Venture's proposed projects, including Big Wilson, would be approved – suggesting that expansion beyond Venture's original three projects' footprint would be encouraged.

*Map: WikiMedia*

Premier Lara Giddings told the ABC that "most of the area is already under some form of reserve." The Tarkine contains a variety of reserves, predominantly regional and multiple-use reserves, as delegated by the Tasmanian Regional Forest Agreement of the 1990s. Much of the area is protected from forestry, but mineral exploration is technically permitted across 96 per cent of the heritage-recommended 433,000 hectares. Only Savage River National Park, a contiguous tract of 18,000 hectares of rainforest, is strictly protected from mining. This means only about 4 per cent of the Tarkine recommended for heritage listing is formally protected from mining and mineral exploration. Unlike other national parks such as Cradle Mountain, Savage River National Park does not facilitate access for tourists.

SAVE the Tarkine's Scott Jordan says he attempted to negotiate a balance between conservation and mining before launching his campaign for the Tarkine's protection. Save the Tarkine approached prospective mining companies, the state government and the Tasmanian Minerals Council, hoping for a round-table discussion in order to allocate particular areas of the Tarkine for protection and others for mining.

"We received some support from some of the mining companies – they were keen to test whether it was possible to come to an agreement. But the state government and the Minerals Council weren't prepared to look at it," Jordan says.

Tasmanian Minerals Council CEO Terry Long confirms that he refused to negotiate, because he believes land use in the area is already balanced. Long says that when both the Savage River National Park and multiple use reserves were established in the 1990s, the distribution of land was fair. "I told [Save the Tarkine] that I wasn't interested because a compromise had been made in the nineties. Their idea of compromise is simply to preclude mineral exploration and mining from more of the compromised area," he says. "The parliament made a judgement that we had a heavy area of mineralisation and it's reasonable to expect that the community can take advantage of that."

Long argues that mining's extensive tenure across the region does not guarantee the development of mines. "There might be nine proposals, but only a handful of those will come to pass. Lots of people want to start a mine, but not many actually get round to it."

Long believes the current share of the land is particularly justified considering Tasmania's reserve base. "I'm not aware of any other state that has 52 per cent of its land in reserves. Just to the south of the dreaded Tarkine, you've got a quarter of the state in a World Heritage area. It's not as though we are short," he says.

But Heritage Council chair Carmen Lawrence says the Tarkine's unique values cannot be cancelled out by the quantity of Tasmania's reserves. "Heritage criteria are comparative, so any site that is recommended for listing has to have characteristics which are not listed in other properties. It means the Tarkine's unique characteristics are peerless."

Long says the area's reserve category demands a stringent process be followed before mines are developed. "If you have found an ore body, it's not a matter of an automatic right to mine." But environmentalists are concerned that the state government's explicit determination to see new mining projects come to fruition may compromise processes. Resources minister Bryan Green signed a mining lease for Venture Minerals' Mt Livingstone mine in May last year, but then answered questions about the project incorrectly at a budget estimates meeting, denying that the lease resided in the Meredith Range reserve.

"He made an apology for making an incorrect statement, but he never addressed the issue of whether or not he knew which lease he signed," Jordan says. "It's clear that the minister hadn't

even extended the courtesy of actually checking which lease he was signing.”

**A** COMMON misperception is that most new mines would only affect “plain old buttongrass,” as one mining supporter put it. But Venture’s [Mt Lindsay proposal](#) is entirely positioned within rainforest; its [Mt Livingstone](#) lease covers a varied terrain of diverse habitat including myrtle rainforest, eucalypt forest and buttongrass plains; and the [Riley Creek](#) strip mine, while causing a smaller footprint than the aforementioned open-cut proposals, will require clearing of both old growth and regrowth forest.

Terry Long argues that any natural values onsite will be carefully managed and assessed by the company’s environmental scientists. “The quality of science these days is quite remarkable,” he says.

Environmentalists contend, however, that the area’s heritage values cannot be sufficiently identified or protected because government has failed to recognise them. Scott Jordan says existing regulatory authorities are not required to consider the values identified by the Heritage Council. He cites Tony Burke’s decision against heritage listing, and the state government’s [submission](#), as examples of the government’s refusal to acknowledge the Tarkine’s values.

Conservationists are also concerned about the government’s commitment to mitigating long-term legacy risks. Bryan Green recently [told](#) a budget estimates hearing that past mining activity had polluted about forty Tasmanian rivers.

“Those longer-term issues are like time bombs – it might be twenty or thirty years before their impact,” Jordan says.

Each of the proposed new mining leases contains multiple waterways. But Long says the science of rehabilitation has progressed dramatically and is designed to manage these risks. “People used to drive down the highway and throw their tinnies out the window, now you wouldn’t dream of doing that. It’s the same in mining.”

Long admits that open-cut operations obviously change the topography of the affected area, but he says they can also be rehabilitated acceptably. “When you dig the ore out you have a hole, you are not going to have a hill. But the plan for Savage River, for example, is to have it as a series of lakes open for tourism development.” He is confident that mining companies will be adequately held to account by the EPA during both the approval process and the mining operation. “Your environmental case has to be particularly rigorous and of very high quality or it’s going to be knocked back,” he says.

The Wilderness Society’s Jon Sumbly – an expert adviser on environmental policy and science who has been looking into Venture’s mining proposals – acknowledges that the EPA made some positive recommendations for water management in its approval of the Riley Creek project. But he says its consideration of the Tasmanian devil was worryingly insufficient. Concern for the devil has skyrocketed as fast-spreading facial cancer threatens to see the animal follow in the footsteps of

the state's iconic Tasmanian tiger, now extinct. A serious hazard for the fragile species is roadkill. Sumbly says regular trucking, along with the cumulative effect of Venture's three projects, and the fact that the Riley Creek and Mt Livingstone mines will run twenty-four hours a day, puts devils at risk. "There will be 148 trucks per day running from Riley Creek alone. Add in Mt Livingstone and Mt Lindsay and that goes up to 528 vehicles."

Sumbly believes that while it may issue conditions, the EPA is unlikely to deny mining proposals, even if the environmental impact is too great, as it is only required to assess material presented to it by companies. "You will never find a person who is hired to do an environmental assessment for a company who will come back and say 'it can't be done,'" he says.

**S**O IT SEEMS that true balance to satisfy all stakeholders is still in doubt. Tarkine Trails' Greg Irons says people fear that a desirable outcome may be jeopardised by what has become a highly political feud. "Governments," he adds, "are looking to be able to say 'look what we did for the economy.'"

He hopes all parties will strive to find a middle ground for conservation, tourism and industry. "We have a whole lot of people who don't want to see a leaf touched and a whole lot of people who don't want to see a leaf. Sustainability is where the world needs to be," he says.

The Cradle Coast Authority's Roger Jaensch says that the only way to go is forward. "This is going to be a bit messy, but it's got to be a rolling process," he says. "The alternative is to go backwards, to say we have no hope of possibly managing people and conservation in this environment and therefore we should close it down to everything. That would be defeat."

Jaensch believes agencies responsible for the land must communicate more effectively and that no one should get first bite of the cherry. "I don't think we can reserve the whole region hoping tourism operators come up with great things, just as we can't reserve the whole region to exclude tourism because miners might find a nice bit of ore. Tourism and mining each bring their own impacts into these environments – we've got to manage them and we've got to do it smarter. And we have to get people in, whether they be mining companies or tourism operators, who are up to that challenge."

Looking out over the rainforest, Ruth Groom says decisions ought to be made with long-term consequences in mind. "When the industrial and technological revolutions were changing the world, we really didn't know what the consequences would be. We can't pretend we don't know any more."

Groom hopes that decision-makers will consider the wider repercussions of failing to protect rare environments like the Tarkine. "Forests are actually working for us. They are protecting our soil, our water and our air," she says. "By compromising these environments we are compromising our water, our endangered species, and ultimately ourselves."

*Venture Minerals declined an interview. Resources minister Bryan Green was unavailable for comment.*

*The AWU and premier Lara Giddings did not return calls.*

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