



POSITION PAPER

Mining impacts on hiking in the Darling Range



KEY POINTS

- Continuing population growth is increasing demand for community access to natural environments near the city.
- Hiking is a popular and accessible exercise activity. It has the potential to sustain the health and wellbeing of the community and reduce escalating health costs to the state.
- Extensive bauxite mining in the Darling Range, near Perth, is impacting current and future bushwalking areas and new trails opportunities.
- Current policies fail to protect and facilitate multiple-use forest management values and activities such as bushwalking and new trails development.
- A full, lease-wide cost-benefit assessment is needed, which considers the projected life of current mining leases in the Darling Range and their projected natural and social environmental impacts. This will provide a sound, holistic context when considering incremental mining expansion proposals.

CONTEXT

One of HikeWest's core objects is to "promote and actively work for the conservation and effective management of the natural environment, including National Parks, wilderness, coastal and other public land areas to enhance their bushwalking value to the community."

Long-term bauxite mining leases held cover almost 10,000 sq km of the Darling Range and the majority of forested walk areas close to Perth, outside of the national parks (Figure 1). The targeted bauxite resource covers the uplands across much of that area.

Those mining leases straddle unique northern jarrah forest and wandoo woodlands in the Darling Range which have long been the go-to destinations for locals seeking traditional bushwalking opportunities within easy distance of Perth.

Bushwalkers value walking in high-quality, undisturbed natural or near-natural environments which extensive rehabilitated mined sites cannot provide. Through their activities across much of the state forests and reserves over the past half century, they have a unique insight into the impacts that bauxite mining and mine site rehabilitation are having on the forests and landscapes of the Darling Range near Perth.

Mining is today expanding across the leases at an unprecedented rate and is expected to continue until 2070. More than 60,000 ha (600 sq km) of mature forest will have been cleared and over 60% of the northern jarrah forest and wandoo woodlands close to Perth will have been directly impacted or fragmented by mining, greatly reducing quality bushwalking opportunities in the region.

The Huntly mining operation alone now has an approved gross mining envelope of over 600 sq km. The mining mosaic within that envelope is now expanding at over 30 sq km per year. A current proposal to expand mining around the Huntly area - if approved following a Public Environmental Review (PER) – will increase the overall mined envelope between Jarrahdale and Dwellingup to over 800 sq km. An Environmental Review Document (ERD) in support of that acceleration and expansion of mining is required to address Social Surroundings which includes impacts on recreation and traditional bushwalking areas.

Although some of the land area within the largest 7000 sq km lease is partly protected within existing or proposed national parks, most of the tall, high-quality jarrah forest areas remain unprotected as state forest.

One of the miners has previously claimed that "over an expected 100-year or so life of the viable bauxite reserves, [the mining operations] will have disturbed [only] 5.6% of the northern jarrah forest". Today satellite imagery reveals that the actual disturbance will be much greater.

CONCERNS

Concerns from the community about the impact of such extensive mining were formally acknowledged as early as 1978, in a report by an expert technical advisory group (ref. 1) to the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA). The report referenced 1975 data estimating that

annual forest visits within 60km of Perth were nearing 250,000, with projections of a 7-to-10-fold increase in demand by the year 2000. The report also noted that “the needs of recreationists are often ignored or not fully recognised”, and the area available for recreation appears to be shrinking at a time when the demand is continuing to increase”. Nearly five decades on, those concerns remain largely unaddressed.

Eighty percent of WA’s population lives in the Perth region and the population has grown by over 50% over the past 25 years. Continuing growth is driving increasing demand for access to natural environments near the city.

Bushwalking is one of the most popular and accessible exercise activities. It has the potential to sustain the health and wellbeing of a wide sector of the community, and to reduce the escalating health costs to the state through the prevention of chronic lifestyle diseases such as obesity and diabetes, and mental health issues.

But continuing participation in bushwalking requires both suitable natural environments and opportunity, including sufficient trails. In the Perth region these are severely limited due to restrictive drinking water source area protection policy and increasingly by mining expansions.

WA’s current *Forest Management Plan 2024–33* (FMP) notes (in Section 3.6.2) the importance of forest for recreation in areas close to major settlements but fails to recognise for planning purposes the particular importance and proximity of the Northern Jarrah Forest (NJF) for the Perth metro area. The FMP ignores the anticipated extensive loss of social amenity value due to mining, and the need for increased national park areas to reduce pressures for recreational and tourism developments on existing parks.

Following the State Government ban on native forest logging which came into effect in 2024, future demand for native hardwood timber is expected to be met in part by continued, government-approved clearing of the forests for bauxite mining expansions.

Vast areas of mature forest habitat on Perth’s doorstep are being lost incrementally. A forest that was able to survive the intense, but selective logging of the early 1900s, will not show the same resilience to 100 years of the much more extreme impacts of bauxite strip-mining. Despite the miners’ quick re-seeding and re-greening of the degraded and ripped landscape with a diversity of local plant species, independent experts have expressed strong doubts that the young replacement forest will ultimately survive, let alone thrive, on the drastically altered substrate.

The FMP also fails to provide for a network of interconnected national parks in the Northern Jarrah Forest region that is needed to protect the forest from mining and provide and sustain viable forest ecosystems and threatened species.

The impacts of the mining, especially its environmental and social aftermath, are largely ignored. Part of the problem arises from the parallel operations of the FMP, the state’s agreements with the miners, and WA’s Environmental Protection Act. These often result in

strongly conflicting priorities and decisions in terms of the goals of conservation and sustainable social opportunities, including for recreation and tourism.

To date there has not been a lease-wide analysis of the environmental and social costs of an anticipated 100+ year mine-life. Proposed mining expansions are considered by the EPA and State Government on an incremental basis.

One after another, long-popular walk routes favoured by bushwalkers are disappearing. Over the course of the next 40-or-so years at least 30 known bushwalking areas will have been affected; ranging from Bannister Hill and Mount Solus in the south to beyond Mount Dale in the north, toward Mundaring village. Significant sections of the popular long-distance Bibbulmun Track will also require re-aligning through (at best) narrow buffer zones intended to screen out the mined environment.

With continued mining expansion, the opportunity to develop new trails – particularly in popular hiking areas such as Jarrahdale and Dwellingup – is lost, as is the potential for nature-based tourism infrastructure to be developed.

Current policies aimed at protecting drinking water sources also assist the bauxite mining industry by restricting the development of new trail infrastructure near Perth's water catchments. This has led to a narrow focus on the Bibbulmun Track and the Munda Biddi Trail, which are frequently portrayed as the sole recreational assets affected by bauxite mining expansions. Many other customary bushwalking areas with high public amenity value are being overlooked because they do not feature formal designated trails.

WAY FORWARD

HikeWest is not anti-mining and recognises the high value of the mining industry to the State and community of WA. However, the state forests are intended to be multiple-use and the NJF region has potential contribute substantially to the future environmental and social needs, and good health and wellbeing of the growing Perth community, including through bushwalking activity, new trails and tourism.

HikeWest will:

1. Continue to foster greater public awareness of the mining impacts.
2. Advocate for recognition by government of the preventive health contribution hiking/walking in nature can make to reducing the escalating costs to the state of lifestyle diseases such as obesity and diabetes.
3. Advocate for the need for State Government policies to protect and facilitate multiple-use forest management values and activities including recreational access, new trails development and tourism.
4. Advocate for greater transparency by the miners of their current mining operations and proposed expansions, so that existing and potential future social environment impacts, as well as the impacts on the natural environment, can be properly assessed.

5. Seek to ensure that adverse impacts of mining on trails and walk areas – including on future potential trails development opportunities near Perth – are avoided. At a minimum:
 - existing forest roads giving access to our walk areas should be kept open
 - mining plans should retain all attractive laterite breakaway landscapes plus sizeable, connected pockets of original forest
 - wide vegetation buffers should be left intact to screen operations from bushwalking areas
 - blasting noise and dust emissions from sites near walk areas should be minimised.
6. Advocate for a full, lease-wide cost-benefit assessment by the State Government across the full projected lives of the mining leases, taking account of the potential natural and social environmental impacts, to provide a sound, holistic context for considering the miners' incremental expansion proposals.
7. Urge State Government that the 'Precautionary Principle' should be applied in the consideration of new mining proposals and mining expansions in the Darling Range, just as it is applied in the case of current drinking water source protection policy.

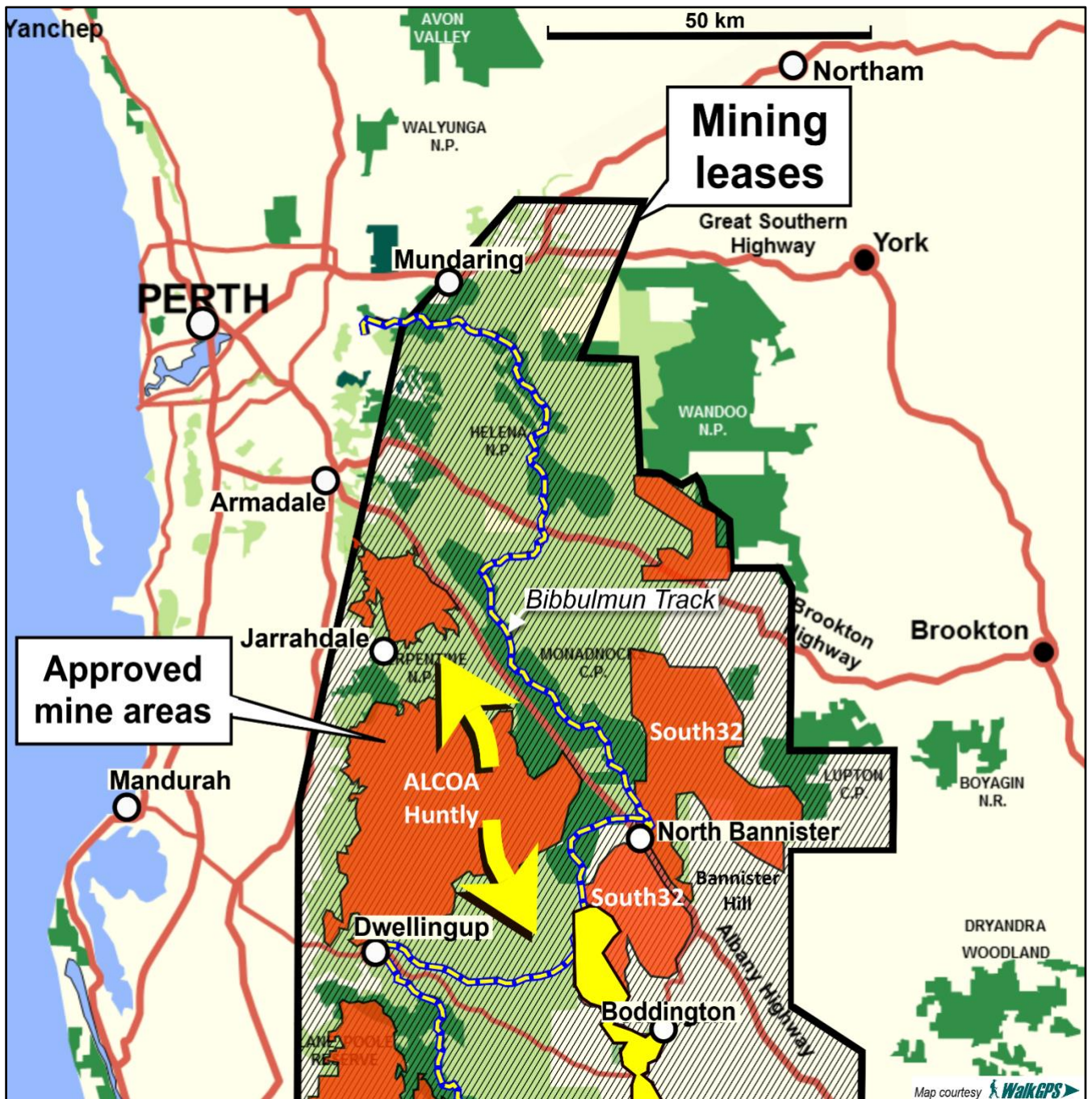


Figure 1: Bauxite mining in the Darling Range near Perth (currently proposed expansions in yellow).

Reference

1. ***Bauxite mining in the Darling Range, Western Australia*** – a report to the Environmental Protection Authority, The Technical Advisory Group, Bulletin 44, Department of Conservation & Environment, Western Australia. 1978.