

**To the Independent Planning Commission, re Mount Pleasant Coal Mine expansion, SD 10418.**

SUBMISSION, re discovery of the legless lizard *Delma vescolineata*.

**\* OBJECTION to the expansion.**

( This is not an 'optimisation'.)

From: Beverley F.A. Atkinson

My previous objection referred to the value *to humans*, of the only ridge locally connecting the river to the western clifftops of the Upper Hunter Valley. But now we find that a rare newly found species may have done so long before us; to the extent that it may have evolved in a separate local adaptation to the particular locality.

**\*1** the Australian Museum's map shows that the distribution of *Delma vescolineata* is very limited compared to other species.

**a.** It is limited to the zone where the inland and coastal ecosystems start to blend in the gap between mountain ranges. That has long been known as an area of rich biodiversity and evolution, for flora and fauna. It nurtures species which respond to this mix of conditions. Much of the zone is already compromised by agriculture, mining and development.

**b.** It has been found and first studied, on and near the Mine site, around that unique sloping ridge joining river to escarpment tops; which the Mine expansion would sever, compromise and pollute.

**\*2** Needing water, food, protection and yet coolness for hatching, the lizard may need to move from the river plain to high ground with ease and safety, managing without legs, and possibly without venom. These impairments compared to legged lizards and even snakes may be overcome by locally beneficial characteristics, but research would be needed to discover them.

**\*3** Slopes linking river to rocky tops elsewhere around the valley (supposedly thought OK for offsets perhaps) must offer different survival conditions from those experienced on the Western escarpment near that ridge. Otherwise, the lizard would be better known and more widely distributed. The height of the Western escarpment brings the highest ground nearest to the river. Cliffs offer an isolation which can both separate, and protect, species. This lizard has stayed close to this land-bridge for a reason. Unable to fly or walk, it has here an accessible gradient.

**\*4** The Hunter Valley is already seeing climate change driving species both higher up in altitude, and further south, for adaptive survival. The Castlerock Ridge currently allows safe movement between the food and water of the river flat, and the top grounds. It may be for this lizard, a crucial habitat for survival and endurance of climate change. That extinction threat being doubly from coal, is a cruel irony for both lizard and human.

**Generally,**

The Castlerock Road ridge is the only such ridge closely connecting river-flat and cliff-top zones in the open valley. It is the only east-west ridge long enough to almost cross the river flat and change the airshed pattern. Humans have used its slopes for eons. No chance that innumerable species did not do the same!

All that ends in MACH's plan for a temporary and lethal coal mine cutting the land out, and forever banishing natural access for all species.

The Mine expansion would sever the ridge, leaving a precipitous slope into a poisonous void.

Remaining surrounding slopes would be compromised by disturbance, infrastructure and pollution.

New rock heaps would reach to 200m above the river flat. So any fauna species dependent on that unique easy passage to the cliff-top zone would be threatened by the Mine itself, well before climate change could complete its extinction.

MOD3 Mine plan ends in 2026. Its progressive effect on local species now, needs examining, to prevent unforeseen damage to this lizard and other affected species. Research should begin at once, taking into account the plans of MOD3.

I encourage the needed research following the discovery of this delicate, harmless 'new' species, and look forward to the insights it will give into the interdependence of the whole field of nature supporting us, the human species, which is acting so pointlessly to destroy the whole.

'Offsets' are clearly a distraction only. They would do nothing to ward off extinction, since the essential contributing character of this ridge habitat of *Delma vescolineata* looks to be its specific locality and immediate geographic connections.

In any case, I know of no instances of obedience to offset-promises made by coal mines locally or elsewhere; only rumours of disobedience. For company or Government to pretend that the next one will always be fine, one after another, and without full public scrutiny, is unacceptable.

Rehabilitation will not be more than cosmetic even if the full five years' work were completed following 2048 as was said to me by Mr Lauritzen. It would do nothing to resurrect this little creature, and could not replace its complex supporting ecosystem.

**I ask for straight refusal of this mine's fatal expansion.**