

Trekking into controversy

Issues in the news: Mining and the Kokoda Trail

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October 9, 2006

What is the Kokoda Trail?

The Kokoda Trail (or track, as it is sometimes known) saw intense fighting between Australian and Japanese forces during World War II. It is considered one of the most significant battles fought by Australians during the war. In August and September 1942, the Japanese, heading south, tried to take Port Moresby, in Papua New Guinea, by land over the Kokoda Trail and by putting troops ashore at Milne Bay, but were repulsed on both fronts.

In the island's rugged and isolated jungles, local Papuans (who became known as the fuzzy-wuzzy angels) helped an outnumbered force of Australians defeat 6000 Japanese troops. If the capital, Port Moresby, had been captured, the Japanese would have been ideally placed to launch an attack on Australia. In appalling conditions, more than 600 Australians lost their lives.

More recently, Kokoda has become known as one of the world's greatest treks. Keen trekkers, often with an interest in history, take on the challenging 96-kilometre wartime trail through mountainous and isolated rainforests and steep valleys. About 3300 tourists have visited the trail this year.

What is the mining situation?

This year Australian mining company Frontier Resources was granted exploration rights in the Kokoda region. It plans to explore an area about 400 metres from the trail for gold and copper. Managing director Peter McNeil acknowledges that trekkers may see some work from the trail but said if any mining occurs, a detour could separate miners and trekkers.

Frontier Resources and the PNG Department of Mining say a mine would benefit the local community of subsistence farmers. Both the PNG Government and the mining company say they will ensure the track is preserved.

Should Australia intervene?

Prime Minister John Howard has expressed his concern about the mining proposal. The Kokoda Trail is a place of historical and military significance - some have labelled it sacred ground. As with Anzac Cove at Gallipoli, it is increasingly a place of pilgrimage for Australians. Mr Howard said he is prepared to step in and stop the

company from developing its mining operation in order to preserve the trail. People have criticised the Australian Government's failure to show a similar level of commitment to heritage sites in Australia. Greens Senator Bob Brown has accused the Government of failing to protect places of significance in Australia from mining operations, such as Western Australia's Burrup Peninsula, where Woodside Petroleum wants to build a natural-gas plant.

Frontier Resources' Mr McNeil says any future mining would not damage the trail but that not undertaking the exploration - with estimated gold and copper deposits valued at up to \$1.7 billion - would deny locals income.

Critics say tourism to the area creates jobs and money for locals without environmental damage. They say there is a risk that development will cause pollution and damage tourism, and that wealth generated by mining is likely to benefit the company rather than local communities.

The PNG Government says the Australian Government has over-reacted.

PNG's high commissioner in Canberra has warned that Australia may need to compensate locals if the mine development is blocked.

Recent headlines

"Locals want Kokoda mine to proceed"

- *The Age*, October 3

"Compensation likely if Kokoda mine blocked. War sensitivities provoke controversy"

- *The Age*, October 2

"Howard plea to PNG: don't mine Kokoda"

- *The Age*, September 30

What The Age says

"So the Prime Minister, John Howard, is right to be worried about a mining company's plans to carve into the trail to extract gold and copper. While respecting the mining company's right to get a return on its investment, it must be hoped that any mining does not desecrate a site of enormous military and historical significance. As the Gallipoli roadworks drama showed, Australians want to be consulted on matters of the heart. We remember the Kokoda fallen. We want the trail preserved for future generations."

- Editorial opinion, October 29

What people say

"We understand the trail, the track is something very important (to Australia). At the same time you have to understand we cannot live on as it is. We are people that need some good things . . . like water systems, better education for our young, health and

sanitation."

- Mount Kodu leader Barney Jack, *The Age*, October 3

"I don't think we have any right to say this is some sort of sacred Australian site and you can't touch it."

- Defence expert Michael O'Connor, *The Age*, October 2

"So John Howard is upset that they want to mine the Kokoda Trail as this is sacred ground. But mining Kakadu is OK because that is not sacred ground (because no diggers died). Just 40,000 years of our heritage, not to mention an environmental wonder. Maybe he can find a few endangered parrots in PNG!"

- Daniel McKinley, *The Age*, October 2

"In the Australian psyche, the Kokoda campaign has become symbolic of Australia's role in South-East Asia during World War II, just as Gallipoli has become a symbol of the broader Anzac campaign in World War I . . . Kokoda has become a sacred symbol and as such should be exempt from the attention of mining companies."

- Luke Henning, *The Age*, October 2

"It's fascinating that Prime Minister John Howard is determined to block the development of a gold mine near the Kokoda Trail in PNG because it is 'of enormous historical and military significance to Australia', while, closer to home, the Government of Western Australia and Woodside Energy are planning to turn the largest outdoor rock engraving site in the world into an industrial estate in WA's Pilbara region. The Burrup Peninsula contains perhaps as many as half a million Aboriginal rock engravings, some dating back almost 30,000 years, and is the only Australian site on the New York-based World Monument Fund's list of the world's 100 most endangered monuments."

- Stephen Bennetts, *The Age*, October 2

"We obviously respect the laws of Papua New Guinea. But the Kokoda Trail is of enormous historical and military significance to Australia and there has to be a way that fairness and justice can be done to all interests. We don't intend to have it run away from us without anything that can be done, being done."

- Prime Minister John Howard, *The Age*, September 30