

Mining and the community

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Abstract

In formulating its strategic plan in 1998 the New Zealand Minerals Industry identified two related critical issues facing it. These are, broadly speaking, the issues of access to minerals; and the perception the public has towards the industry and its behaviour towards the environment.

This presentation will report on the Industry's response to the public perception issue. The Industry has, through the NZMIA Council, and its Communication and Website Committees, developed and implemented strategies covering: communication through the print media, and through its website www.minerals.co.nz, a long-term educational outreach programme with schools, focussing on the significance of minerals, their contribution to community wellbeing and the negligible long-term environmental effects of the Industry's activities.

Introduction

What happened before and since we last met in 1997?

In regard to natural resources worldwide a re-drawing of the balance between the conservative and extractive forces has occurred throughout human societies during the recent twenty years.

With acknowledgement of change, it is useful to hear in mind the four keys to change. These keys are as relevant to the individual as they are to family, a company, or an industry. To change: I must believe I can, I must exert my willpower to, I must practice daily, and I must experience the joy of success.

In 1991 the environmental effects-based sector-neutral Resource Management Act was passed. This governs the consenting process surrounding activities run by the 86 Regional and District Councils. Through these, potential impacts on water, dust, noise, and the wider environment are managed.

In the same year the Crown Minerals Act containing the landowner access power of veto came into force. This turned on its head the hitherto presumptive right of access to minerals, the national interest in them, and the behaviour and attitudes of the industry.

I am sure we could reference a number of other indices reflective of a waning and weakening interest by New Zealand towards its minerals estate. We had a Ministry of Mines and a Minister. We now have a division within a Government

agency. However, we should focus upon the current positive signs. For example, the presence and statements of the Deputy Prime Minister, Hon Jim Anderton, and Associate Energy Minister, Hon Paul Swain, at this Conference.

In 1997, following a ten year period of acrimony between sectors of the community and the industry which saw violence and property destruction on the Coromandel, a private member bill to prohibit mining which became a national bill, the Parliament, all bar seven or eight MPs, acted to prohibit mining on twelve categories of DoC lands containing an estimated seventy percent of the nation's minerals - about a third of the DoC estate.

In 100 years the minerals industry had changed markedly, including its behaviour towards the natural environment. But society's perception of the industry's behaviour in New Zealand was out of phase.

The industry chose to change because it believed it could, wanted to, and had to. In 1998 it focussed its collective willpower and developed a National Strategy including an R&D Technology Strategy. As with any good strategy, it yielded a plan of action to address critical issues facing it. One of those was and is the perception of the public towards our industry and its behaviour towards the environment. I will talk a little about our experience in putting that plan into daily practice.

I call it our long-term educational outreach programme.

I should note here that as with any effort to change, the fourth key is the need to experience the joy of success.

Public perception

Whether we accept it or not, public perception has become an integral part of mining operations.

As an industry we ignore this at our peril.

Now more than ever in the past, local, national, and international mining industry operations are the subject of intense public scrutiny and interest.

Public interest is in part fuelled by the activities of lobby and interest groups and in large part the past behaviour of the industry which is used to colour the present public perception of current industry behaviour.

These groups are generally well organised and technologically literate.

In New Zealand there is a public perception – especially pronounced in urban areas and more noticeable the further north one goes, that the products of mining activity are good, but the activity in itself is intrinsically bad. So motorways and shopping malls, fridges, TVs, cell phones, and four wheel drives are all part of modern life. But the mining and quarrying operations, processing plants and rehabilitation areas that provide these ‘necessities of life’ are regarded with open disdain.

School curricula

In both primary and secondary schools the mining industry falls within several curriculum areas, notably science, social studies, geography, and technology. Several textbooks used in secondary schools feature mining and processing operations in New Zealand. One features a section titled ‘Greenies versus Greedies’.

The Science curriculum includes such achievement objectives as:

‘Research a national environmental issue and explain the need for responsible and co-operative guardianship of New Zealand’s environment’

‘Report on an important natural resource in New Zealand including its method of formation, location, and extraction, as appropriate, and any issues associated with its use.

Sample learning contexts suggested include gold, ironsands, building materials, resources from the sea floor and the Glenbrook steel mill.

‘Research chemical processes involved in the manufacture of a common substance, e.g. petrochemicals, metals, ammonia, fertilisers’

‘Investigate chemical effects of human activity on the environment’

Sample learning contexts include rocks, gemstones and soils, mining our natural resources, pollution, fertilisers

The Social Studies Curriculum section on Resource and Economic Activities requires students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how and why people manage resources and how and why people view and use resources differently and the consequences of this.

It is vital that the industry responds positively to these developments, and to the bias and inaccuracies contained in some school texts.

Industry strategy

NZMIA has developed and implemented a Communications Strategy. This strategy has a primary audience of central and regional government, the media and educational institutions. Its objectives are to:

1. raise community understanding and appreciation of, and get support for, the minerals industry;
2. be accepted as an environmentally responsible industry; and
3. maintain access to land for exploration and mining

The Communications Strategy identifies key messages:

1. The minerals industry is one of the top tier of export earners in New Zealand. It is a major and essential contributor to employment and wealth within the community.
2. Minerals are essential to allow us to enjoy a wide range of benefits in a modern society.
3. Access to mineral resources is required to allow individuals, communities and the national economy to benefit.
4. The minerals industry is environmentally responsible and meets and where possible exceeds statutory environmental standards.
5. Open dialogue with communities on all aspects of the minerals industry’s activities is encouraged and welcomed.
6. Mine sites are rehabilitated to minimise visual and environmental impact.
7. The minerals industry acknowledges that the historic practices of the past that have resulted in environmental degradation cannot now be allowed to happen. This is reflected in the stringent environmental regime of the 1991 RMA and in the commitment of the minerals industry.

Action on the World Wide Web

As an integral part of the Communications Strategy in 1998 NZMIA nominated a website committee charged with the design, development, and the placing on-line of an Association website.

The site would be aimed at supporting a commitment to minerals education and adding value to existing educational initiatives.

In 1997 Richard Barker researched mining related websites. He stated:

‘More than 125 primary and secondary schools throughout New Zealand maintain websites but there is no information on the internet about mining in New Zealand that is intended for schools or the general public’.

The NZMIA site went on-line in July 1998. In 2000 the NZMIA website is being visited by over 60 people a day who access over 160 pages on the site. The site presents the Association, its aims and activities. It also features the activities of members.

The site also presents a wide range of educational and informational material designed for use in schools.

Current subject areas includes a series of downloadable teaching modules covering:

- Aggregates
- Industrial minerals (case studies of limestone and halloysite clay)
- Coal
- Ironsands
- The Lake Taupo Jago Dive Project
- The Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences
- Volcanoes

Areas currently under development:

- Rehabilitation
- Base and precious metals
- Mining matters: Perception and reality in the New Zealand industry.

Each section contains a broad range of information for teachers and students and is written to follow current curricula. The material features information about each New Zealand industry, processes, products, and rehabilitation. Also included are activities and lesson ideas, as well as pointers to other resources (Mineral Resource Series booklets, NZMIA brochures etc) and links to other sites of interest.

Sections have been trialled with teachers and modified in response to ongoing feedback.

The latest section on volcanoes links to over 50 volcano-related websites in New Zealand and around the world to provide an online database for students and teachers. This section has been included because the subject matters is widely used in schools at several levels and it forms an excellent introduction to minerals.

In each case the aim is the same: to present current, relevant, factual material in an accessible and unbiased manner, to allow the actions of the industry to speak for themselves, and to present those actions to as wide an audience as practicable.

In this way it is believed that we can most effectively relay the message that the environmentally responsible minerals industry is a vital, essential and integral part of our country's economy and wellbeing.

The website development has required information input from member industries and close liaison with the website designer and developer. This same close liaison has been maintained as the website is regularly updated and refreshed both to provide current information and to maintain interest.

Monitoring of the site lets us know which pages are hit most regularly, how many people log in to the site and for how long and a range of other data. Within broad parameters this allows us to be responsive to our audience.

And the final goal?

As people drive down the road and pass an operating quarry or mining operation that they realise what they are looking at is a temporary landuse with negligible long term environmental effects and which is responsible for much of what they take for granted each day. In short, to have New Zealander's mindful that minerals are the essential foundation of our human bodies, communities and the economy and health of our nation. And to view and allow the fulfillment of these needs from the natural environment, with sensitivity and due respect, in an informed rational and balanced manner, minus much of the emotion which presently fuels and clouds these debates.

It's just like a building site. In this case it's the building site of much of our modern society, and the minerals industry is an integral and necessary part of all our lives.

As in any effort of this nature we are getting positive feedback and in a small way are beginning to experience some success.

However, real joy of success will be manifest in having a New Zealand population informed and making balanced judgements regarding mining, the economy, and the environment. Moreover, by 2010, when the attainable goals of the industry - to create another 12,000 jobs in rural New Zealand areas where they are needed, and an extra \$1 billion mainly in exports such as smart industrial minerals, filling specialised market niches, along with the substitution of imported fertiliser inputs to our agricultural complex - are realised, then we will have experienced the joy of having succeeded.

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Author

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