



Moonee Colliery - industrial heritage set in pristine bushland | The village of Catherine Hill Bay, relatively intact since the nineteenth century | The wild beauty of an untouched coastline

# Catherine Hill Bay

## the campaign to save a historic village and its endangered flora and fauna from extinction

Recent changes to the NSW planning system have seen the Heritage Act and NSW Heritage Council become virtually obsolete and, at the time this magazine goes to press, further changes are imminent. As the balance tips increasingly towards the power of development over social, environmental and heritage considerations, the tiny coastal village of Catherine Hill Bay with its nineteenth century cottages reminiscent of its mining past is set to become a test case – and a dangerous precedent – for the rest of the State. Located on the NSW Central Coast in a pristine environment which is home to many endangered species, Catherine Hill Bay is the proposed site for two major development proposals for a total of 900 houses. Together, they would increase the size of the village ten times. Catherine Hill Bay and its endangered flora and fauna are currently facing extinction.

Located just south of Newcastle, Catherine Hill Bay is a former mining village with a history dating back to the 1870s – the oldest settlement in the City of Lake Macquarie. Comprising two tiny hamlets about one kilometre apart, the village consists of around 100 homes most of which are modest timber cottages, some dating from the nineteenth century, and including remnant infrastructure from almost 140 years of coal mining history. They are set in a dramatic natural landscape of bush and heath facing crescent-shaped beaches.

The National Trust has long recognised the heritage and environmental significance of the region, and classified Catherine Hill Bay and its cemetery in 1983. A relatively untouched area of natural beauty, the site is also home to four threatened plant species, eight threatened fauna species, four state-listed endangered ecological communities and five rare vegetation communities. Among the threatened species are the Powerful Owl, the Sugar Glider and the native Black-eyed Susan.

Their presence was formally recognised by the Commonwealth Department of the Environment in 2007, under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.

'Protected' as a Heritage Conservation Area in 2004 by Lake Macquarie City Council, Catherine Hill Bay was nominated in 2005 by the local Progress Association for listing on the State Heritage Register. Although some specific sites had been accepted for inclusion, the nomination for the area as a whole was still under investigation by the NSW Heritage Office when, late in 2006, Planning Minister Frank Sartor cleared the way for large scale development of the 'Bay'.

Rosecorp planned to build 600 homes on 60 hectares of land at the former Moonee Colliery, while also setting aside 310 hectares for conservation – land which was clearly superfluous to development needs and posed maintenance problems. Shops, tourist accommodation and recreational facilities were to be part of the development. In addition, Coal and Allied proposed

a further 300 homes – a total of 900 homes plus associated infrastructure. **It is a juggernaut.**

### Part 3(A) of the Planning Act – opening the way for development

The proposal went on public exhibition early in January 2007. The deadline for submissions was extended to the end of March by the Department of Planning to allow for the holiday period. In February 2007 local residents joined a public rally in Sydney, to protest against the Planning Minister's newly proclaimed powers to approve major development projects – the controversial Part 3(A) of the amended Planning Act – which effectively overrides local councils and communities, and subsumes heritage and environmental considerations. The implications for a community such as Catherine Hill Bay are grave.



In August, four days of 'community consultation' failed to achieve a reduction in the scale of development proposed for the coastal communities of Catherine Hill Bay, Gwandalan and Nords Wharf. In September 2007, revised plans were released but, despite demands by an independent panel that the concept be overhauled the number of residences was not reduced. This was in spite of a ruling by the Land and Environment Court that there should be no headland development – the headland remains part of the proposed development site – and the Department of Planning's own assessments that there should be no residential development at Catherine Hill Bay.

In addition, the Nature Conservation Council of NSW has stated as part of a major submission to the Planning Minister that bushland corridors allowed for in the development proposals are unviable – too narrow, too close to human habitation and under threat from cats and dogs.

## A disturbing precedent

Apart from its intrinsic significance, the community and environment of Catherine Hill Bay are seen by the National Trust as a test case. If development is allowed to proceed, this could signal the destruction of rural and coastal communities throughout New South Wales. Isolated coastal communities are under serious threat of extinction with vast subdivisions in environmentally sensitive sites at Jervis Bay and Port Stephens set to be approved if mooted changes to the planning system are enacted. Although of State Heritage Significance, Currawong at Pittwater is similarly under threat. Approval of the proposed development of Catherine Hill Bay will render ineffectual the work of the past 50 years to protect headlands, wetlands and beaches, as well as historic communities.

*As well as joining the Catherine Hill Bay community in their fight to save their village and environment, the Trust has launched a major media and lobbying campaign in the light of the Minister for Planning's moves to override the Heritage Act and other legislation that protects places of special environmental and heritage value.*

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opinion

## HERITAGE ACTIVIST JACK MUNDEY CALLS FOR A REVIVAL OF THE COMMUNITY SPIRIT THAT SAVED SYDNEY IN THE 1970s



Jack Munday.  
Photo: Christopher Shain

Jack Munday has become an icon in the battle to protect Australia's heritage. He symbolised the power of the community when he led the Builders' Labourers Federation (now the CFMEU) in placing Green Bans on heritage sites threatened by the development rampages of the 1970s. Supported by people from all walks of life who cared about heritage, community advocacy and unsympathetic change, he galvanised the energy needed to save built and natural heritage which included Kelly's Bush in Hunters Hill – the first successful campaign to save native bushland – and inner city areas such as The Rocks and Victoria Street in the Cross. He has been fighting to save heritage ever since, and has campaigned in conjunction with the National Trust on many occasions over the years.

Two years ago Jack joined the campaign to save Catherine Hill Bay. He talked to Angela le Sueur about why this area is so important, and the challenges for the future.

Catherine Hill Bay is a unique place; a small and relatively early coastal community which earned its livelihood from the coal mining industry, and has managed to remain intact.

Heritage doesn't just exist in our cities – although the fight to protect urban heritage is constant. Rural New South Wales is in bad shape. Buildings are collapsing or being demolished – but that is only a part of it. Whole communities are disappearing, and unsympathetic development is posing threats to bushland and coast alike, together with the flora and fauna that belong here. All these elements are brought together at Catherine Hill Bay.

The arrogance of the current NSW Government is evidenced by the rolling in of heritage and environmental considerations with planning and development. No longer do we have the certainty that heritage and environment will be given any kind of priority – or even the evaluation they deserve. This takes me back to the years of the Askin Government and the way we dealt with this kind of arrogance then – by making individuals in the community see that, by working together, we could speak out and become an effective force for change.

It is important to remember that the first NSW heritage legislation and the first Land and Environment Court were created in the 1970s. They were introduced by the Wran Government, but the driving force came from outside Parliament – from combined action by the National Trust, trade unions and the Green Bans, local action groups and community pressure.

If there is a lesson to be learnt from those years, it is that grass roots and community based organisations working together can bring about change. Although change can occur at the ballot box, our democratic right to protect what we care about must be guarded on a daily basis. Elections happen every three or four years. A lot of damage can be done in that time. We must be vigilant and prepared to speak out at all times.

Catherine Hill Bay is a classic example of how we could, and should, revive the spirit of the 1960s and '70s that saved so much of Sydney's heritage, where people from all walks of life, and all age groups came together to say 'NO!'.

The issues are even more important today than they were then. Climate change and global warming are so obviously the most challenging issues facing human kind, and the next few decades will determine whether we have any future at all. We must find a way to live in harmony with the environment, rather than imposing our will upon it.

We must fight to protect this small but highly significant part of our history, heritage and environment from development and change which are totally unsustainable. The 900 plus residences and associated infrastructure proposed for Catherine Hill Bay threaten not just to overwhelm the 'Bay', but to subsume similar communities everywhere – and, ultimately, to contribute to the demise of us all.