Why is it special?

The Drip and Corner Gorges of the Goulburn River form part of an ancient, visually dramatic landscape. Many visit this iconic and culturally significant place to experience its natural beauty and extensive Aboriginal heritage, walking along the Goulburn River or picnicking under soaring sandstone cliffs. Clear spring water drips and seeps through sculptural rock formations laden with ferns, bottlebrushes and weeping grasses.

The Drip Gorge sits on the western most lip of the Sydney sandstone basin and on the lowest point of the Great Dividing Range. It is only a short walk from an access road and is widely used by the community, tourists and schools for recreational, educational and cultural purposes. It allows families to have a ‘wilderness experience’ similar to walks in the Blue Mountains Heritage Area or Northern Territory gorges.

There is also a recent coal mining history amongst these beautiful cliffs and river gorges. A small coal mine using pit ponies operated in the region before 1980. In the 1980s, Ulan Coal developed their open cut mine and longwall operation, diverting kilometers of the Goulburn River around their open cut coal mine in 1981.
What’s the threat?

Since 1981, the unstable water channels, bank erosion, mine tailings and poor downstream water quality, particularly after significant rain events, have created a legacy of coal mining impacts in the region. There is no evidence of successful rehabilitation. Now, the headway of the Goulburn River is under threat from increasing coal production and proposed mega coal mines.

In 2007, coal company Felix Resources (now owned by Yancoal), was granted approval to construct and operate three open cut coal mines within the Moolarben Creek valley and one underground mine - directly threatening the integrity of the Drip Gorge through cliff collapse and loss of groundwater. After being granted approval for eight separate modifications within ‘Stage 1’, the company is now seeking approval for ‘Stage 2’, increasing production by creating a fourth open cut mega mine of approximately 1270 hectares.

The proposed ‘Stage 2’ Moolarben mine will result in:

- The removal of a total of 851 hectares of remnant native vegetation, including 157 hectares of Critically Endangered Ecological Communities.
- The diversion and relocation of two creeks in the headwaters of the Goulburn River, with some sections of the final creek alignment to be located through mine spoil.
- Additional coal mined at a rate of up to 12 million tonnes of coal per year for the next 24 years, operating 24 hours per day, 7 days per week.
- Two underground longwall mines producing a maximum combined coal rate of 4 million tonnes of coal per year and mining within 100 metres from the bed of the Goulburn River.
- Multiple new coal stockpiles, a dump station, crushing and sizing plant, overhead trippers, and reclaim tunnels.
- A large extraction of groundwater and interference to aquifer and river system due to mine subsidence, dewatering and on site water use, in the order of 18 million litres of water per day.
- Removal of 21 significant Aboriginal heritage sites and the disturbance of a further nine sites.
- Likely longwall mine damage and instability along a 100 metre high cliff line and gorges containing numerous artworks – hand stencils, animal tracks and animal motifs.

The company’s own assessment of this ‘Stage 2’ coal project admits there is a high probability of impacting on ground water supply for humans and the environment, high risk of subsidence, and a high risk of loss of flora and fauna, impacts on places of national significance, and loss of wildlife corridors to nearby National Parks.

Dewatering aquifers

Since the approval for Stage One of Moolarben Coal Project, the company has made eight separate applications to modify the Minister’s approval for the project, each with impacts on the local environment and community.

Modification 7 was approved in February 2011, one month before a change of NSW Government. This modification approval involves dewatering the Ulan coal seam in preparation for the assumed approval of increased mining in future years. This dewatering process within the headwaters of the Goulburn River is likely to impact on the base flow of the Goulburn River and interfere with surrounding aquifers, surrounding agricultural bores and groundwater dependant ecosystems.

The Environmental Assessment predicts a Ulan aquifer draw down of 100 meters inside the Goulburn River National Park after the Moolarben Coal mining process, with a 15 metre drawdown over ten kilometres from the mine site. This modeling did not take into account the dewatering impacts from the adjoining Wilpinjong Mine or the Ulan Coal mine.
Threatened species at risk

The development of the Moolarben Coal open cut and underground operations will negatively impact unique and threatened species and their habitat. It will result in impacts to 226 hectares of the Critically Endangered White Box/Yellow Box/Blakely’s Redgum Ecological Community and loss of threatened species habitat for woodland birds, bats, owls and iconic native mammals.

The critical woodlands to be destroyed provide habitat for nationally listed endangered animal species including the Swift Parrot, Squirrel Glider, Painted Honeyeater, Hooded Robin, Diamond Firetail and the now Critically Endangered Regent Honeyeater. Studies have also identified the occurrence of habitat for the threatened Brown Treecreeper, Speckled Warbler, Gilbert’s Whistler, Glossy Black Cockatoo, Powerful Owl, Large Bentwing Bat, Large-eared Pied Bat and Greater Long-eared Bat. Foraging and breeding sites will be lost, especially from areas where there is a high density of tree hollows.

Impacts will also be felt from the removal of several kilometers of creek habitat and significant cultural landscapes along the Murragamba Creek and Eastern Creek valleys, including two groundwater dependant ecosystems.

The cumulative impacts of coal mines

The Moolarben Coal Project is set to operate alongside the 28 square kilometre Wilpinjong open cut mine, while neighbouring Ulan Coal has been granted permission to expand its open cut and longwall operations to include a 400m wide longwall – the largest in Australia.

The impact of these three large and expanding coal mines in the Ulan Wollar area raises many questions about interference to regional groundwater and long term viability and integrity of the Goulburn River, a major tributary of the Hunter River. The combined total water being removed from the groundwater system by mining is set to be in excess of 30 million litres per day.

The local community has also expressed their concerns with the risks to surface water, damage to the Drip and Corner Gorges, impacts to groundwater dependant ecosystems, fears of local tourism industry decline, dust, noise and an overall inadequate assessment of cumulative and regional impacts associated with these three mining operations.
Recommendations

There is broad and enduring community and agency support for the protection of the highly valued and regionally significant Drip Gorge riparian area and adjacent escarpments by incorporating them into the Goulburn River National Park. The panel for the independent planning assessment hearing concluded that the significant cultural, spiritual, historical, educational, tourism and recreational values associated with The Drip and the Corner Gorge should lead to their protection.

Moolarben Coal Mine should relinquish this area of crown lease for its inclusion into the national estate for the people of NSW.

The Government must take action to:

• Protect the Drip Gorge by adding it to the Goulburn River National Park.
• Commission an Independent Regional Water Survey and cumulative impact study to determine the full environmental impacts of all three mines on the groundwater and river systems of the Upper Goulburn River catchment.
• Reject the proposed Moolarben Stage 2 opencut and longwall coal mines.

“The Moolarben Coal Mine should do the right thing by the community and the environment and allow The Drip and Corner Gorges to be included in the bordering Goulburn River National park”. Julia Imrie, local resident