

**ABC TV 7:30 Report
Transcript
4/18/2002**

Claims of environmental breaches threaten Ranger mine

MAXINE McKEW: The mining of uranium adjacent to Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory has vexed governments and environmentalists for decades.

The Ranger Uranium Mine in particular has had a troubled history since it opened in 1979.

The mine is now majority-owned by Rio Tinto, which had its annual general meeting in Melbourne today.

One of the boasts at the AGM was of the company's sound environment record.

But tonight we reveal allegations of serious breaches of environmental management at Ranger.

They've come from a scientist who used to work at the mine and have sparked investigations by the mining company and by the Office of Supervising Scientist - the Commonwealth agency which oversees environmental standards at Kakadu.

Already, the Northern Land Council, which represents traditional Aboriginal owners, has warned that the mine is under threat if the allegations are verified.

Heather Stewart reports.

YVONNE MARGARULA, KAKADU TRADITIONAL OWNER: TRANSLATION: We hunt and gather most times along the river run and gather fresh water muscels, snakes and turtles and our kids swim a lot around the creek.

HEATHER STEWART: Magela Creek, which runs through Kakadu National Park, has been a vital resource to the Mirrar people for generations.

Three kilometres upstream lies the Ranger Uranium Mine.

For more than 20 years it's been the community's main source of income, through mining royalties paid to the traditional owners.

But after more than 100 so-called environmental incidents at Ranger over the past 13 years, some involving radioactive leaks, traditional owners are having second thoughts.

YVONNE MARGARULA: (TRANSLATION): I don't trust the scientists and the company, the mining companies, because they don't give the straight facts or stories.

I'm worried about my people that drink the water and swim in the creeks.

BOB CLEARY, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, ENERGY RESOURCES OF AUSTRALIA: Never once in the 21 years of our operations have we not met our discharge standard for protecting Kakadu National Park.

We've done that every year.

HEATHER STEWART: In January, mining giant ERA, which operates both Ranger and the nearby Jabiluka uranium mines, detected high uranium levels downstream from the mines.

But ERA delayed passing the information on to authorities and traditional owners for five weeks.

It also admitted low-grade ore had been dumped incorrectly on an area at Ranger mine dedicated to rainwater run-off and that this wasn't detected for over a month.

That led to an unprecedented company apology.

BOB CLEARY: I apologise to the traditional owners for being tardy in giving information and that tardiness leading to some concern of theirs.

HEATHER STEWART: Documents taken by the 7:30 Report detailed more concerns about operations at Ranger.

For five years until 1998, Geoffrey Kyle was part of a team of scientists employed at Ranger to monitor water samples for uranium leaching.

A fortnight ago, he reported his concerns to the Office of the Supervising Scientist (OSS), the Commonwealth agency responsible for overseeing environmental management at the mine.

GEOFFREY KYLE, SCIENTIST, RANGER MINE: Throughout the tenure of my employment with Ranger, I tried to alert its management to various matters and to take remedial or preventative action.

My efforts were not met with success.

HEATHER STEWART: In his submission to the OSS, Geoffrey Kyle claims tailing spills were under-reported and water quality test results were misreported.

He claims the mine failed to clean up a spill in December 1997 and as a result more than 300 kilograms of uranium leached into a pond from which water is released into Magela Creek.

He also claims the mine routinely discharged water from a drain casing uranium at levels 9,000 parts per billion.

The limit downstream from the mine is six parts per billion.

Also, Geoffrey Kyle claims he detected uranium levels almost 70 times higher than the level expected in a pristine waterway.

He further claims he was not allowed to continue monitoring to validate these higher uranium levels.

PROFESSOR IAN WHITE, WATER RESOURCES, ANU: Reading through this report, it's clear that the person was professionally competent and a concerned citizen.

I think he's to be commended.

HEATHER STEWART: The 7:30 Report sought an independent analysis of Geoffrey Kyle's submission.

Professor Ian White is a member of the UNESCO ethics and water science bodies.

The chance of a hazardous overflow from the Ranger Mine is highest during the top end's water season, yet ERA's testing schedule has been carried out on a time schedule, which doesn't take account of damage from big storms.

PROFESSOR IAN WHITE: They sample at specific time intervals, which doesn't give you all the information you need.

It's cheaper, but doesn't give you the information to answer how much material has been released.

HEATHER STEWART: ERA says that will be addressed when a new best-practice monitoring system is implemented.

BOB CLEARY: It's a new standard that's being recognised as the benchmark for environmental management excellence.

We'll be compliant with that and will meet the requirements of that.

I think that will give our stakeholders a lot more comfort.

HEATHER STEWART: Meanwhile the company is investigating Geoffrey Kyle's allegations.

BOB CLEARY: We're taking it seriously, even though my initial investigations are that the issues that he raised at the time were dealt with - obviously not to his satisfaction.

HEATHER STEWART: And the Office of Supervising Scientist is also investigating.

DR ARTHUR JOHNSTON, SUPERVISING SCIENTIST: At the moment, all I can say is, we began an investigation and we'll see what comes out of that.

HEATHER STEWART: Andy Ralph represents the traditional owners of Kakadu National Park, who are now demanding a Senate inquiry into Geoffrey Kyle's allegations.

ANDY RALPH, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, GUNDJEHMI ABORIGINAL CORPORATION: If an environmental chemist is making allegations of severe contamination of a pristine creek which flows through Kakadu and the mining company don't advise the Government regulators what's going on, then that's clearly outrageous.

HEATHER STEWART: Yvonne Margarula is the senior custodian of Kakadu.

She doesn't trust the authorities and is concerned about the impact of the mine on her lands.

YVONNE MARGARULA: TRANSLATION: They're not giving us information and telling us properly and they're not doing their job, what we want them to do.

BOB CLEARY: I'm disappointed.

I want to do whatever we can to regain that confidence and part of that is to show that we have a total commitment to environmental performance.

It's something that we believe gives us the right to be where we are.

HEATHER STEWART: Until now, the Northern Land Council which brokered the original mining lease within Kakadu, has supported the mine's operation.

The land council too is concerned about Geoffrey Kyle's complaints.

It says the future of the mine might be in question if an inquiry shows they're valid.

NORMAN FRY, NORTHERN LAND COUNCIL: What came out of that, I would suggest to you, would probably lead to the whole question about mining in Kakadu itself.

HEATHER STEWART: So the mine could close?

NORMAN FRY: It could very well close under those conditions and if those things were found to be true, yes.

HEATHER STEWART: The truth of the whistleblowers claims won't be known until after the Office of the Supervising Scientist finishes its support to the Federal Environment Minister, David Kemp.

But the possible closure of the uranium mine is not an option being contemplated by ERA.

BOB CLEARY: We will keep the mine running.

We have another estimated 10 years, maybe a bit more, left in Ranger's life.

That's a significant size mining project in any terms.

So, yes, it's quite important that we do keep the mine running.

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<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/s535126.htm> 18 April 2002