

Environmental Remediation – A Leap of Faith

with John Thorogood (Principal Ecologist)

Mining is a high-risk industry. Investors know that, mine workers know that, and so too do environmental regulators. While true engineering failures are rare, all too frequently we're reminded of our chronic optimism when it comes to preparing for floods and other forces of nature. Competently engineered dams overtop, and waterways considered at EIS-stage and 'unlikely to be impacted', cop a toxic cocktail.

While in hind sight, it's often 'obvious' that there was an accident waiting to happen, in reality, few such accidents are the result of wilful mismanagement; mine operators and regulators alike are genuinely caught out. We live and learn.

And we do our best to make amends.

Queensland's Department of Environment and Resource Management has the power to require mine operators to remediate impacted waterways. In practice, this commonly means removing residual contaminants from the water and sediment of the channel. Remediation can be a 7- or 8-figure leap of faith. While of course it's possible to remove the contaminants, doing so without further impacting the environment is a challenge. And at what point do you simply allow nature to take its course; the next wet season will likely flush residual contaminants downstream, eventually diluting them to benign concentrations.

Remediation is a balancing act. Removing contaminants without doing further harm; and taking a principled stand, while stopping short of bloody-mindedness.

Understanding what constitutes a healthy ecosystem and understanding the resilience of that ecosystem to disturbance is, of course, fundamental to effective remediation. While to be human is to be optimistic, gaining a meaningful understanding of the environment we work in is simply prudent insurance.

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