From Ranger to Fukushima

Alexander Brown explores the origins of the nuclear connection between Australia and Japan and the transnational movement for a nuclear free future.

'You stop it on the other side of the world … you can't stop it here.' – Frank Gunnunga, Chain Reaction No 3, September 1975

In 2012 I was living in Japan during the peak of the anti-nuclear movement in Tokyo, when I came across an open letter from Mirarr elder Yvonne Margarula addressed to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. In her letter written in solidarity with the people of Fukushima, Margarula aired her suspicions that the uranium fuel used at the Fukushima Daiichi plant was sourced from her traditional lands, which include the Ranger uranium mine site.[1]

These suspicions were later confirmed in October 2011, when Dr Robert Floyd, Director-General of the Australian Safeguards and Non-proliferation Office, revealed that "Australian obligated nuclear material was at the Fukushima Daiichi site and in each of the reactors – maybe five out of six, or it could have been all of them; almost all of them".[2]

Margarula explains the history of the Ranger mine, her people's opposition to it and the commitment given by then-Prime Minister Gough Whitlam to his Japanese counterpart Tanaka Kakuei in 1974, to export uranium to Japan.[3] Learning about the longstanding connection between uranium mining in my home country and the Japanese nuclear power industry set me on a journey to understand this connection and to build solidarity between movements in the two countries. Having returned to Japan in 2018, I am now looking into the history of this connection and thinking about its implications for the global struggle for a nuclear free future.

The full extent of Australia's uranium reserves only became apparent during the prospecting boom of the 1960s and 1970s.[4] This boom was part of a global embrace of nuclear technology, which saw Japan develop a domestic nuclear power industry. The trouble was, Japan only had very limited reserves of uranium. In 1966 Japan began to look overseas for supplies, with exploration efforts focused on Australia and Canada as well as Niger, the People's Republic of China, the United States and Zimbabwe.[5]

In February 1967 an official with Japan's Atomic Fuel Corporation – the body tasked with securing uranium fuel for Japan's growing reactor fleet – returned to Japan from a research trip to Australia. He gave a press conference where he told his audience that, "as a nation, we too need to look to Australia", and warned that "if we do not act quickly to develop uranium mining in Canada, Australia and other foreign countries, we will be too late".[6]

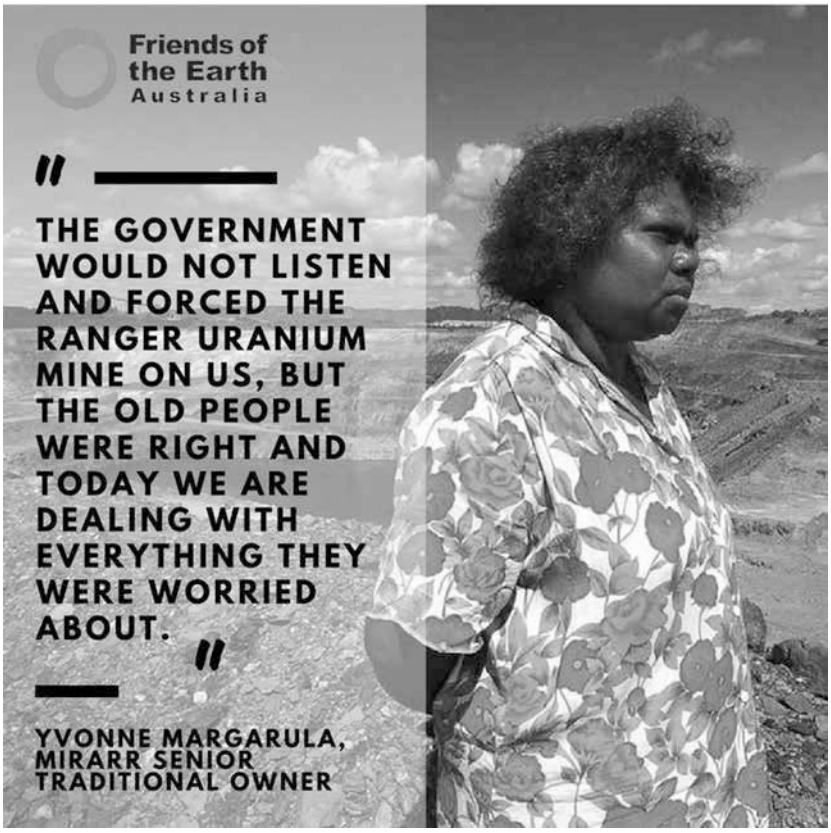
Aboriginal land rights

Following the discovery of the Ranger and other uranium deposits in the Alligator Rivers region in the Northern Territory, mining companies and the Australian government were eager to exploit them. However, following the election of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972, these plans were put on hold. The Aboriginal land rights movement had become a powerful political force and the new government had promised to develop a national system for recognising land rights claims. Mining was therefore suspended, pending the resolution of any potential land rights claims arising from the new system.

However, Aboriginal land rights soon came into conflict with the government's economic nationalist agenda, which was pursued in particular by Minister for Minerals and Energy Rex Connor. Connor was keen to make Australia's uranium reserves the centre of a quasi-nationalised mining and enrichment industry, as part of a strategy to free Australia from the influence of international capital. He wanted the government to retain control of the industry and to mine uranium resources gradually to keep prices high, thereby funding the government's reform agenda.[7]

In May 1974 the Whitlam government was returned to office following a double-dissolution election, but with a reduced majority in the lower house and having lost control of the Senate. Battling high

An aerial view of Fukushima Daiichi reactors after the March 2011 explosions, meltdowns and fires.



inflation and unemployment, the government was keen to display its economic credentials and saw uranium mining as a matter of urgency.

Later that year, Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei announced that he wanted answers on Australia's uranium policy during a forthcoming visit to Australia. On the eve of Tanaka's visit, Whitlam, Connor and Deputy Prime Minister Jim Cairns met with representatives of the owners of the Ranger mining lease, Peko-EZ. At three o'clock in the morning of 28 October 1974, they signed the Lodge Agreement, which provided for a 50% equity stake for the government and Peko-EZ (who held 25% each). Whitlam went on to inform Tanaka that the government would guarantee a stable supply of uranium, despite the fact that land rights laws and land claims in the Alligator Rivers region were yet to be finalised.[8]

Fox Inquiry

Despite his commitment on uranium exports, Whitlam faced growing domestic opposition to mining, including within his own party. He sought to address these concerns by announcing a public inquiry into the Ranger proposal, to be presided over by Justice Russell Fox. The Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry (known as the 'Fox Inquiry') took place over a period of 18 months and heard from 303 witnesses, producing 13,525 pages of testimony. In 1976 and 1977 Fox delivered two reports stemming from the inquiry to the new Fraser Liberal government. Fox made a number of recommendations and called for a broad national debate on uranium mining, but the new government interpreted his reports as giving a green light to mine in the Northern Territory.

One of the first Japanese public intellectuals to take an interest in the issue of uranium mining in Australia was Sibatani Atuhiro, a biologist who moved to Sydney in 1966 to take up a position as a research scientist at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). Sibatani was active in a critical movement within the scientific community that questioned the ideology of scientific rationalism and the role of science and scientists in facilitating war and industrial pollution. He became an active participant in a Sydney group called Science for People, which had been initiated by Hugh Saddler, who had been a key figure in the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science (BSSRS).

Groups such as this emerged in the 1960s alongside the movement against the Vietnam War, the feminist movement and civil rights and anti-racist struggles. The Sydney group concerned itself with the role of science in perpetuating war, racism and oppression. They wanted to interrogate the place of science in society and the responsibility of scientists to think about the social and political uses to which their work was put.[9]

Around 1974 Sibatani established a connection with Friends of the Earth, which eventually led him to take a public stand against the Ranger mine. After a number of abortive plans to coordinate action between anti-nuclear activists in Japan and Australian opponents of the mine, Sibatani decided to testify in front of the Fox inquiry in 1976. In his testimony, he countered claims about Japan's desperate need for uranium by pointing out the growing opposition to nuclear power in the country. He also attended the Bicycle Ride Against Uranium protests in Canberra that year.

In 1977 and 1981 he published two articles on the Ranger mine in Japanese magazines. In the articles, he explained the plan to mine uranium in the Alligator Rivers region and his testimony before the Fox inquiry. He also discussed a visit by Japanese anti-pollution activists who had taken part in the first Bicycle Ride Against Uranium in 1975. These articles appeared alongside similar pieces on domestic and international anti-nuclear movements. They demonstrate the concern which was growing in Japan at the time about the global expansion of the nuclear industry.

Historical roots

Discovering these writings against uranium mining in Australia, directed to the Japanese-speaking world from an expatriate writer, prompted me to think about the historical roots

of the transnational environmental and anti-nuclear movements. The 1970s were a time when Japanese environmental activists were particularly active in reaching out to the Pacific nations, as part of a broad anti-nuclear movement.[10]

Scientists like Sibatani were at the forefront of many of these movements. They articulated a critique of the way science was used by industry and the military-industrial complex, which was leading to significant harms affecting people and their environment and undermining democracy. Their vision of science in defense of people and the natural world seems to prefigure the work of contemporary climate scientists, whose work has galvanised the global environmental movement.

Reading Sibatani's articles today enables us to recognise how resistance first arose in and between Japan and Australia, as the two countries became imbricated in a nuclear embrace. The words quoted at the start of this article come from a conversation between Frank Gunnunga of the Oenpelli Aboriginal Community Tribal Council and a group of Friends of the Earth activists, who had travelled to the Northern Territory to see the proposed mine site. Gunnunga's remark seems pessimistic. His assessment was, however, realistic.

Australia is a small player in the global capitalist economy and alone we are often powerless to prevent the depredations of international investors seeking to make a profit. However, looking at this remark again after Fukushima, we can see how 'stopping it over there' can indeed be critical to stopping it here. Japan after Fukushima witnessed an unprecedented wave of anti-nuclear protests which brought its domestic nuclear power program to a virtual standstill. Just nine of Japan's nuclear reactors are currently operating, down from 54 before the disaster. New reactor construction has also stalled, meaning there is little prospect of new capacity coming online to replace ageing reactors as they come to the end of their operating lives. This has, in turn, depressed uranium prices and made uranium mining unattractive to investors.

Nuclear technologies only function thanks to the cooperation of governments, mining companies, reactor manufacturers and electric utilities operating across national borders. The industry can, therefore, be resisted at every stage of its global production chain. Furthermore, as the industry expanded so did the capacity of transnational civil society and environmental organisations to challenge it.

Senior Mirarr Traditional Owner Yvonne Margarula pictured with Naoto Kan (the Prime Minister of Japan at the time of the Fukushima disaster) in 2014.

When Sibatani was warning his Japanese readers of the high price that Aboriginal people in Australia would pay for Japan's access to cheap uranium, the anti-nuclear movement in Japan was already starting to affect government plans to expand the industry. The growth of anti-nuclear movements in each country has had a positive effect on growth in the other. To paraphrase the quote from Frank Gunnunga with which I opened this essay, perhaps if we can stop it on the other side of the world, then we can stop it here.

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