Mining sites [abstract]

Few things are as redundant as an abandoned mine. A mine has a single purpose: the extraction of a mineral for economic benefit. It is a complex and highly specialised environment, maintained at great cost by the mining company during its working life.

When a mine is closed, the forces of destruction gain the ascendancy. Usually the company commences the process by realising its assets, removing the useful machinery and leaving the buildings as empty shells. What we see on a historic mine site is rarely more than a small part of what was there when the mine was in operation.

Alternatively, in remote areas the mine plant may simply be abandoned intact. Fire, termites and decay soon destroy the organic materials, leaving the more durable metals and masonry. Closure of a remote mine also causes the loss of economic and social infrastructure in the surrounding district, making it unlikely that an alternative use will be found for the site. Most of the fabric of an abandoned mine has no function in any context other than mining. Usually there is no question of using a historic mine for any purpose other than cultural tourism.

Mine sites present hazards to visitors. Underground workings are usually inaccessible and dangerous. When we talk about conserving a historic mine site, we normally mean only the surface workings.

Sometimes mining operations have left a legacy of noxious and toxic waste which extends to a considerable area around the mine; the principal product of a copper smelter was not copper, it was slag.

These more embarrassing aspects of the mining industry’s heritage can lead to conflict between the historic values of the mine site, and the natural values of the surroundings. A conservation plan which looks at the values inherent in the place, and resolves them, is needed for such places.

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