

Behind the Seams: confessions of a blockade virgin - as published on crickey.com

by Heidi Ross, organiser of the Kerry Blockade

Something is very wrong when a quiet, conservative Queensland farming community turns to civil disobedience, forcing a dramatic 10-day showdown with police and 15 arrests at a coal seam gas drilling site.

The people of the beautiful Kerry Valley and Scenic Rim, about 100 kilometres south of Brisbane, are not complainers. We're a hard-working blend of old-time country folk and tree-changers. We all get on with our lot and care for where we live. Many still trust in our governments to do the right thing and look after our best interests — the precious water and productive farmland that sustains our families and communities across Queensland; the land our forebears fought in wars to protect; the land many have farmed for generations.

Our decision to blockade the Arrow Energy drill rig on the morning of January 12 2012 was not taken lightly. At first suggestion, the proposition appeared radical and extreme — “that’s what those activist types do, not us”. But, as we contemplated our future, the desperation in our communities was also palpable. Our repeated approaches to government departments and ministers were falling on deaf ears.

The gas company, Chinese-owned Arrow Energy also continued to drill, despite pleas for independent water testing and community consultation.

The clincher was precedent and the knowledge we did not stand alone. In the months before, NSW farmers had successfully staged two similar blockades at Gloucester and on the Liverpool Plains. Photographs of those events and guidance from those communities was reassuring and slowly, almost one at a time until we reached a critical mass, the farmers of Kerry and others came to the conclusion we had no choice but to take matters into our own hands and “block” the gate.

What followed was an intriguing evolution of everyday people, from law-abiding citizens to law breakers, and the forging of powerful connections — the very basis of a growing movement of communities across Australia, who are choosing to stand united, locking the gate to coal seam gas and coal mining.

Just after dawn on that first morning, 45 of us sat nervously across the entrance to the Arrow Energy drill site — a trio of stereotypical farming men in Akubra hats took up the defence of one side of the gate, with a mixture of old and young covering the remainder of the entrance. Out front, a gentleman in his sixties with a broken leg sat in a wheelchair, one wheel removed so police could not easily relocate him.

Together, we defied police requests to allow drill workers access, calling for protection of our water supplies through baseline testing of landholder bores and an independent assessment of our aquifers before further drilling. No one knew what to expect, but surprisingly the atmosphere was not one of fear, but determined peaceful defiance. Within hours, it was clear that Arrow Energy would not negotiate with us to secure a “social licence” in this community. Instead they called in the Queensland police.

The paddy wagons arrived in a show of force, but still we sat across the entrance. The officer in charge seemed uncomfortable as he repeated his warning to move many times before eventually instructing his men to arrest those in the path of the trucks. Nine people had their first ride to the watch-house that morning. They still laugh at having their mug shots taken. If the police action on that first day was designed to intimidate, it did not. Instead defiance and confidence grew, as our community began to understand the anatomy of a blockade and the simple procedure of choosing to be arrested for contravening a police order or moving to avoid arrest. By the next morning, blockade numbers had swelled and more lined up to be

arrested. But there was to be twist. A young man, who'd seen first hand the full impact of coal seam gas in NSW Pilliga forests, took it upon himself to jump the security fence and climb the drilling rig. As an organiser, my heart dropped at first. How would the community handle this? Only a day before just standing on this line in protest was beyond their comfort zone. My fears were unfounded. They celebrated this man as their hero — “he did what we wished we had the balls to do”, said one local farmer.

As news of the Kerry blockade spread, the full power and strength of the “Lock The Gate” alliance kicked in. On cue, supporters from the umbrella of gas and coal affected communities all over Australia poured into Kerry to help man what became a 10-day action. A roster was developed to keep a 24-hour presence at the gate and, with the permission of the neighbouring land owner, we set up camp. Each night, our laughter could be heard as the bonds between us strengthened over meals generously supplied by so many in the Kerry and surrounding communities, grateful for the blockaders fighting spirit.

As an organiser, I witnessed many wonderful interactions between people on the blockade — strangers one day and unlikely best friends the next. Those personal transitions were the most significant part of my experience. I felt privileged to be part of this journey, where — at first — the visitors were regarded, by some, with suspicion, as originally the idea of a blockade had also been. Ten days later, my heart swelled with pride as I stood watching the appreciation, respect and camaraderie between blockaders and the confidence with which they held their ground until the Arrow workers, drill and police withdrew.

It was a unique blending of communities and cultures, united by a common threat. We, the residents of the Scenic Rim, would have struggled to sustain such a lengthy blockade by ourselves, so have have a strong gratitude for the vigorous support we received from others in our “lock the gate” family. Distance by road and separation by a state boundary now means nothing. Events at Kerry helped us understand we are firmly connected by gas and coal. Our most significant bond is with landholders in northern New South Wales: both our regions are covered by Arrow Energy exploration permits and we are united by a planned gas pipeline. The Kerry blockade has brought about a strong pact. Those from northern NSW have a strong history of successful civil disobedience, so we could not have picked better allies for a fight to defend our water and our rich food-growing homelands.

The presence on the blockade of those who have become “environmental refugees” also helped shed new light on what might lie ahead for our region: these people are caught in a terrible Catch-22. They cannot live in their homes because the gas production around them makes them ill, but they also cannot leave because their properties are now unsaleable. They came to Kerry to warn of the full implications of living in a gas production area. Their therapy lay in awareness-raising, hopefully preventing others from suffering the same fate. Their selflessness, honesty and passion touched us all.

While we got used to the idea of ourselves as protesters, previously unlikely alliances were also formed and preconceptions shattered. Locals and farmers, who may regard themselves as staunchly conservative, stood with wry smiles alongside people they might have previously regarded as long-haired hippies and rent-a-crowd. They now appreciate that rent-a-crowd is often a term government and corporations encourage to try to reduce the impact of actions such as the Kerry blockade. We know all who attended had valid concerns and most were from communities also impacted by the rapid invasion of coal or gas.

While there were many positives to embrace, what disturbed me the most was the personal toll I also witnessed among local landholders on the blockade. Having done this part of the journey myself some time ago, I felt deeply for those just coming to realise what might lie ahead. One night a strong crowd watched a screening of aerial footage from an established Queensland gas field at Tara, only a few hundred kilometres from where they stood. The horror and dismay on their faces spoke a thousand words as images flashed before them of a vast web of wells, pipelines, access roads and huge waste water storage ponds, scarring the landscape for as far as the camera could see. “When would the gas company have shown us those pictures of what it’s really like”, questioned a clearly distressed middle-aged woman before she turned defiantly; “over my dead body will they come in here and destroy what my family has worked hard for over the last 140 years.”

Another memory that is now burnt within me is of a younger farmer who sat quietly at the start of the blockade, taking in this new experience. A few days later I encountered him early one morning. His eyes were red and he simmered with anger and emotion. Still a man of few words, he told me he’d spent the previous evening watching the renowned *Gasland* film and a series of Australian documentary programs.

He and his wife slept little that night, he said. Tears welled as he told of their new appreciation of the the potential risk coal seam gas production poses to water supplies and the full implications of above-ground gas infrastructure on farm life, lifestyle and scenic amenity — a factor particularly important to our Scenic Rim’s tourism industry. His personal trauma was reflected across the blockade.

As organisers we referred to it as going from nought to 100 in three days: a high proportion of locals had never in their wildest dreams considered joining a protest action and many did not really understand the fight. Now those same people were putting themselves up to be arrested. They’d arrive for the usual morning show-down with police and whisper “I’m ready”. My heart would fill with pride at their courage, strength of conviction and new-found confidence in this strange role we now played, well outside all of our comfort zones.

In the end, in typical Queensland style, it was the use of police force that smashed the Kerry blockade, but not before a deeply symbolic last stand — the brainchild of a quiet unassuming farmer whose pent-up rage and frustration spilled over. I still feel his pain and hear his words often — questioning why we must be forced to “bark like mongrel dogs” beside the road. This too eats at me in my darkest hours, as I spend day after day putting energy into this fight: energy that should be going to my family, our livelihood and my health.

In those final blockade moments, landholder Rod Andersen led all on the blockade to throw down their hats, as well as others from people who were too scared to attend, in front of the departing Arrow Energy trucks.

The company’s apparent disregard for the community played out, as the truck wheels drove over the hats, crushing the symbol of the Australian bush — the Akubra hat — into the dust. The heartlessness of that action was the final straw for me and many others. Is this really how you treat a community? You ride rough-shod over everything: just like our hats, we too feel Arrow Energy would prefer to crush us to prevent our loud and vocal concerns being heard. Community anger and resentment remains towards Arrow Energy and government, potentially fed by two key aspects of the blockade: the tough intimidatory stance taken by Queensland police — presumably on orders from higher — and Arrow Energy’s refusal to engage in genuine negotiation to resolve our concerns. At an early meeting at the blockade, Arrow’s

vice-president of exploration Tony Knight told myself and others in the negotiating team he recognised his company has failed to actively engage with the people of the Scenic Rim. The group from Arrow also told us they thought the community requests for water testing and open public meetings were valid and they would return in 24 hours, having “put meat on the bones” of our proposal.

Their failure to do this and to take up what could have been a golden opportunity to begin a new, more honest and open phase in their relationship with this scarred, but now well-researched, community may well become a defining moment and also a nail in the coffin of Arrow Energy’s plans for this region. To gain social licence, genuine transparency and honesty must surely be a priority.

Instead of building bridges with the community, Arrow Energy paid for an increased Queensland police presence at Kerry. In general the police did treat those on the blockade well – at one point we even shared tea and cake. But at times, the “good-cop” routine became the “bad cop” routine. The intimidatory tactics used harked back to Queensland’s Bjelke-Petersen era. Two vans of what used to be called the tactical response unit – the heavies in their blue overalls – were called in to provide back-up to approximately 30 other officers and then came the mounted police. The guys in overalls played tough. When they arrested a local tourism operator – a mild-mannered peaceful man in his mid-sixties – he was roughly handcuffed from behind and remained on those shackles for his journey to the police station to be charged. It was overkill.

One afternoon more than 17 officers – including the “toughies” – stood firmly outside the gate and there were an unknown number inside, all defending the drill from a mere 30 peaceful blockaders, including the elderly and young children. Throughout the blockade, all present were photographed by police and every action recorded, no doubt for those ASIO files the federal government has now admitted it is compiling on those who attend coal seam gas related protest actions.

Another intimidation tactic was use of the law. Early arrestees faced the relatively trivial offence of failing to obey a police order (and were later fined \$200 with no conviction), however, Boonah resident Linda Weston, who joined a flash action at another rig in the Scenic Rim on one morning of the blockade, now faces a more serious offence under the *Petroleum and Gas Act 2004*. Lock the gate president Drew Hutton is the only other person to face this relatively new charge, which must be requested by the mining company and can involve thousands of dollars in fines. On the same day, police threatened one of my fellow organisers with a charge of aiding and abetting: “Aiding and abetting what?” asked our barrister later ... “the community”.

I have no doubt this blockade will not be our last and I wonder at what might happen in the future. We’re no longer “blockade virgins” and the people here feel they have everything to lose if they stand by and do nothing. Some of those who at first hesitated about even taking part in the blockade now talk of the need to step things up – direct action, maybe chaining themselves to workers’ cars or using farm machinery to blockade roads used by mining vehicles. They also now understand that sometimes, breaking the rules can have its place. When you give that new-found personal empowerment to every gas and coal-affected community in the country, the future must be frightening for the mining companies involved and state governments. Even more so, when those people refuse to be intimidated.

The umbrella alliance of all our community groups — Lock the Gate — has become the symbol of what stands to be the biggest united environmental action in Australia's history. A sleeping tiger has been awakened in my community and as I write a strong contingent of Scenic Rim residents is preparing to travel four hours to support others threatened by the expansion of New Hope Coal's operation at Jondaryan. Just as those people came to stand united with us, we will stand with them. The more the companies and governments ride rough-shod over us, the stronger our resolve to protect our water, food, health and land. I cannot but wonder where it will all lead.

Heidi Ross is on the committee of community group Keep the Scenic Rim Scenic and was an organiser of the so-called Kerry blockade. After a career in media and small business, she spends her days fighting to keep coal and coal seam gas out of communities, including her own, while also working to establish an exclusive 'wilderness camp' on the edge of World Heritage Lamington National Park. Born in Africa, Heidi worked for several years in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's London bureau before returning to Brisbane to raise her family. They have lived in the Scenic Rim since 2008.