

# AUSTRALIAN MAP – RECOVERING AUSTRALIA'S NUCLEAR HISTORY

Nuclear-Free Campaign – Friends of the Earth Australia  
www.nuclear.foe.org.au  
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*Recovering Australia's Nuclear History*

*New Matilda, 14 Sept. 2012, [www.newmatilda.com/2012/09/14/recovering-australias-nuclear-history](http://www.newmatilda.com/2012/09/14/recovering-australias-nuclear-history)*

Did you know that Prime Minister John Gorton's plan for a nuclear power plant at Jervis Bay in the late 1960s was driven by a secret nuclear weapons agenda? Or that whistleblowers – with the help of Friends of the Earth – uncovered a global uranium cartel in 1976 leading to an international controversy and fines totalling hundreds of millions of dollars?

Friends of the Earth have collated information, photos and videos about more than 50 of Australia's nuclear sites including uranium mines and processing plants, the Lucas Heights research reactor, proposed reactor and dump sites, and British nuclear weapons test sites. The material is stored online at [australianmap.net](http://australianmap.net), a free online resource.

Bringing this information together in one site allows for observations and comparisons that would otherwise be obscured. Two such issues are discussed here: children being exposed to radiation, usually because of slack management of contaminated sites, and radioactive contamination problems which have persisted for decades.

Due to the lack of fencing, the contaminated Port Pirie Uranium Treatment Complex site was used as a playground by children for a number of years. The situation was rectified only after a six-year community campaign led by Friends of the Earth.

After mining ceased at Rum Jungle in the NT, part of the area was converted to a lake. As a crocodile-free water body in the Darwin region, the site became popular despite the radioactivity.

In November 2010, the Rum Jungle South Recreation Reserve was closed due to low-level radiation in the area. The Department of Resources advised the local council to shut down the reserve as a precautionary measure.

In 2012, damage to a security gate allowed children to enter a contaminated site near Kalgoorlie. More than 5000 tonnes of tailings from the Yeelirrie uranium deposit, near Wiluna, were buried there in the 1980s. BHP Billiton said it would improve security.

In a 1997 report, Western Mining Company (WMC) admitted leaving the contaminated uranium mine at Yeelirrie, WA, exposed to the public with inadequate fencing and warning signs for more than 10 years. A spokesperson for WMC said a 1995 inspection revealed the problems and also admitted that the company could have known about the problems as early as 1992. WMC said there was inadequate signage warning against swimming in a dam at the site, which was found to be about 30 times above World Health Organisation radiation safety standards and admitted that people used the dam for "recreational" purposes including swimming.

Children and adults alike have been exposed to radiation from the contaminated uranium processing site at Hunters Hill in Sydney (and children are more susceptible to radiation-induced cancers due to their growing bodies).

Only in recent years has the contamination at Hunters Hill come to light after decades of deceit and obfuscation. The NSW Health Commission covered up the dangers. An internal memo in 1977 told staff to "stall and be non-committal" when responding to queries. Residents were told there was "no logical reason" to carry out radiation or health tests even though the NSW government knew that there were compelling reasons to do so.

A similar attitude has been displayed towards people living near the Lucas Heights research reactor. An internal 1998 federal Department of Industry, Science and Resources briefing document, obtained under Freedom of Information legislation, warns government officials: "Be careful in terms of health impacts — don't really want a detailed study done of the health of Sutherland residents."

Another incident with child safety concerns occurred in May 1997 when a radioactive source was stolen from an ANSTO promotional display at Menai High School. An ANSTO spokesperson said the source could be handled "quite safely but shouldn't be for long periods". The radioactive source was never recovered.

In the 1950s, the British-Australian nuclear complex suppressed research demonstrating the contamination of grazing sheep and cattle with strontium-90 from nuclear bomb tests in Australia. Whistleblower Hedley Marston warned that proof of widespread contamination would be found "in the bones of children". A testing program was conducted by the government in 1957, but it was done in secret using stolen body parts from dead and still-born babies and dead infants.

*The Advertiser* conspicuously failed to inform residents of Adelaide of the plume of radioactivity which contaminated the city after the bungled nuclear bomb test of 11 October 1956. *The Advertiser* did however run a story in 1957 titled "Radioactive Children Are Brilliant" — a baseless theory from a British psychiatrist linking strontium-90 to "brilliant" children.

Unresolved radioactive contamination issues have been another recurring feature of Australia's shameful nuclear history. There have been four "clean ups" of the Maralinga nuclear test site. The fourth was carried out in the late 1990s and it was done on the cheap. Most likely there will be a fifth clean up ... and a sixth.

The contaminated Port Pirie Uranium Treatment Complex was closed in 1962. Fifty years later, the SA government says the site is "actively monitored to provide additional information to assist with the ongoing development of management plans and potential remediation."

Hunters Hill in Sydney has been the subject of controversy in recent years due to the failure to decontaminate a former uranium processing site, and the use of the site as residential land. The site was last used for uranium processing in 1915. Nearly a century later and there is an

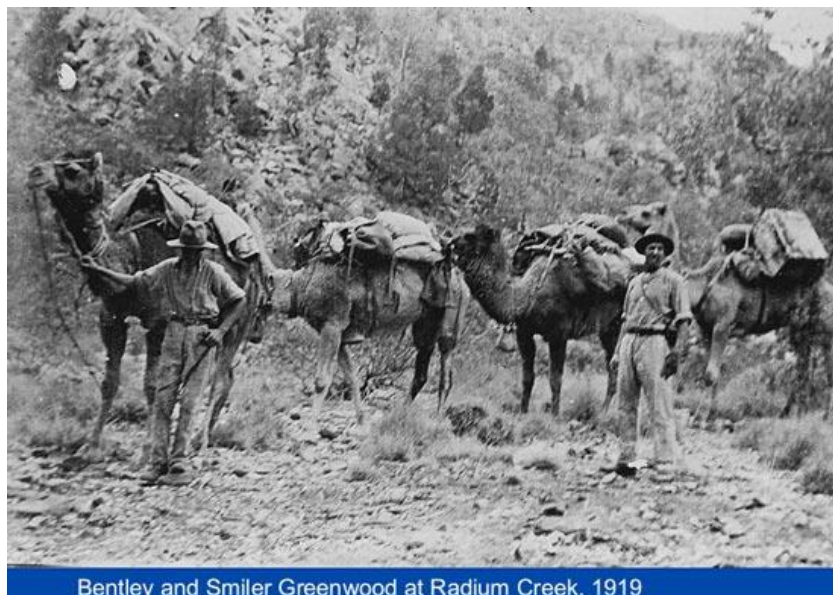
ongoing debate over site contamination and an appropriate location to store radioactive waste arising from site remediation.

Not one of Australia's former uranium mines has reached a stage where monitoring is unnecessary. Rehabilitation and remediation of uranium mine sites has proven to be more expensive and more problematic than anticipated, with extensive time periods where ongoing management and remediation are necessary. The long-term costs — financial and public health costs — are borne by the public not the mining companies.

Uranium exploration in the Wiluna region in the 1980s left a legacy of pollution and contamination. Even after a "clean up", the site was left with rusting drums containing uranium ore, and a sign reading "Danger — low level radiation ore exposed" was found lying face down in bushes.

At Mary Kathleen in Queensland, there is ongoing seepage of saline, metal and radionuclide-rich waters from tailings, as well as low-level uptake of heavy metals and radionuclides into vegetation. At Radium Hill in SA, maintenance of the tailings is required due to ongoing erosion. At Rum Jungle, despite extensive rehabilitation and remediation of the site, the Finnis River is still polluted with ongoing acid mine drainage. At Nabarlek in the NT, despite rehabilitation this former mine still requires ongoing monitoring and there has been ongoing site contamination and lasting impacts on water quality.

There is much else of interest and importance at [australianmap.net](http://australianmap.net) — material that the nuclear industry would rather you didn't know about.



Bentley and Smiler Greenwood at Radium Creek, 1919