

# A journey to the heart of the anti-nuclear resistance in Australia: Rad Tour 2018

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Looking at a map of South Australia's nuclear landscape, the land is scarred. Uranium mines and weapon test sites, coupled with indications of where the government is currently proposing to site nuclear waste dumps, leave their marks across the desert. But amidst the devastation these poisonous activities have left on the land and its people, there is fierce resistance and boundless hope.

Friends of the Earth Australia has been running [Radioactive Exposure](#)

[Tours](#) for the past thirty years. Designed to bring people from around Australia to meet local activists at various nuclear sites, the Rad Tour provides a unique opportunity to learn about the land, the people, and the nuclear industry in the most up-front and personal way.

This year's tour featured visits to uranium mines, bomb test legacy sites, and proposed radioactive waste dumps on Arabunna, Adnyamathanha, and Kokatha land in South Australia, and introduced urban-based activists to those directly confronting the nuclear industry out in country. It brought together about 30 people including campaigners from the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons and Reaching Critical Will, environmental activists with Friends of the Earth Australia and other organisations, and interested students and others looking to learn about the land, the people, and the industries operating out in the desert.

The journey of ten days takes us to many places and introduces us to many people, but can be loosely grouped into three tragic themes: bombing, mining, and dumping. Each of these aspects of the nuclear chain is stained with racism, militarism, and capitalism. Each represents a piece of a dirty, dangerous, but ultimately dying nuclear industry. And each has been and continues to be met with fierce resistance from local communities, including Traditional Owners of the land.

## Testing the bomb

The first two days of the trip are spent driving from Melbourne to Adelaide to Port Augusta. We pick up activists along the way, before finally heading out to the desert. Our first big stop on the Tour is a confrontation with the atomic bomb.

The UK government conducted [twelve nuclear weapon tests](#) in Australia. Nine took place in South Australia, at Emu Field and Maralinga. All of the tests used plutonium – some of which may have been produced from uranium mined at Radium Hill in South Australia. The UK and Australia also

conducted hundreds of so-called 'minor trials' to test the effects of fire and non-nuclear explosions on atomic bombs, which spread plutonium far and wide.

One of the tests at Emu Field in 1953 resulted in a radioactive cloud spreading over 250 kilometres northwest of the test site. This "[Black Mist](#)" is held responsible for a sudden outbreak of sickness and death amongst Aboriginal communities. A Royal Commission in 1983–1984 found that the test had been conducted under wind conditions known to produce "unacceptable levels" of fallout and did not take into account the existence of people down wind of the test site. The Commission [reported](#) that regard for Aboriginal safety was characterised by "ignorance, incompetence and cynicism".

Prior to the bomb tests at Maralinga, many Aboriginal people were forcibly removed from their homelands and taken to places such as the Yalata mission. Even so, Aboriginal populations continued moving through the region at the time of the seven Maralinga tests in 1956–1957. There are tragic accounts of Aboriginal families inadvertently sleeping in atomic bomb craters.

The government has so far [conducted](#) four "clean ups" of Maralinga over the years. Each one finds that the previous effort was insufficient. The latest "clean up" in the mid-1990s found plutonium buried in shallow, unlined pits – and much of that plutonium remains in that condition today. Nuclear engineer and whistleblower Alan Parkinson [told the ABC](#): "What was done at Maralinga was a cheap and nasty solution that wouldn't be adopted on white-fellas land."

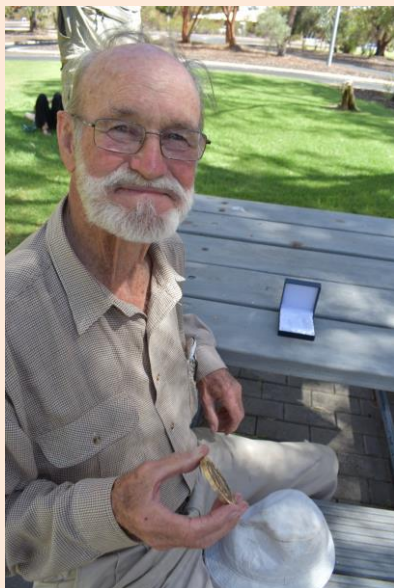
While our Tour didn't take us to the Emu Field or Maralinga sites this time, we did visit people and lands affected by the testing in Woomera, a small town about 450 km north of Adelaide that is full of the ghosts of both people and weapons.

Driving into Woomera we catch a glimpse of the Nurrungar spy base from the highway. The white dome sticks out in a big way against the red earth. Jointly operated with the US military from 1969 to 1999, its official workload was "space-based surveillance," providing launch-on-warning surveillance of Soviet ICBMs during the Cold War. Thus, the Soviet Union regarded it as one of its top ten targets in a nuclear attack. Its surveillance systems have also been used to pinpoint targets for bombing in Cambodia during the Vietnam War and to detect (or in one infamous case, failing to detect) the launch of Iraqi missiles during the Persian Gulf War.

The base saw fierce protests from activists around Australia, which were partially responsible for the base's decommissioning in 1999. One of the participants in our Rad Tour told us a story of a protest she had been part of. She described how the security forces built a cage in the open desert to contain arrested activists. An obvious human abuse waiting to happen, the cage was never used because of the activists' creative resistance to it – they refused to get off the bus the security forces had put them on, signing songs and reciting their legal rights until they were driven back to the police station in Woomera. The remaining dome of Nurrungar is a bleak reminder of Australia's active role in US wars. But it's also a beacon of hope that other such sites, such as Pine Gap in the Northern Territory, will one day also be closed.

We set up camp near the [Woomera Prohibited Area](#) (WPA), which is a 122,188 square kilometre weapons testing range. Equivalent to the size of Bangladesh, it is the largest such range in the world. The WPA was home to Maralinga and Emu Field (though in 2014 the Maralinga lands were finally ceded back to their Traditional Owners), as well as a former refugee detention center, which operated from 1999 to 2003. It was closed because of riots in response to human rights

abuses and public protests that included breakouts of the refugees. The public scrutiny and access to the facility led the Australian government to turn to off-shore detention of refugees and asylum seekers in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, where human rights abuses continue.



On our first night at Woomera we were joined by Avon Hudson, a nuclear weapon test whistleblower who as a Royal Australian Air Force serviceperson was assigned to work at Maralinga during the time of the 'minor trials'.

Avon gave testimony to the Royal Commission investigating UK nuclear weapon testing in the 1980s after disclosing classified information to the media starting in the 1970s. His stories, told to us around the campfire and while visiting various sites in Woomera, were full of pain. He described how those serving in the Australian military were not given information or protection against the nuclear tests, how the radioactive fallout affected Aboriginal and other local communities, and how the radioactive racism by the government continues to leave a lasting mark on current and future generations.

We visited the Woomera Cemetery, where a disturbing number of babies and children are buried. Journalist Bryan Littlely [notes](#) that the cemetery "contains 23 graves for stillborn babies born in the hospital between December 1953 and September 1968, and a further 46 graves for other children who died around that period." While there has not yet been enough research to definitely prove a causal link between the weapons testing and the high numbers of stillbirths and early childhood deaths in the region, more than 100 South Australians joined a



[class action lawsuit](#) against the British Ministry of Defense in 2010, demanding answers to the cause of death of their babies. However, "the case [was not allowed to proceed](#) because it was [deemed impossible](#) to prove radiation caused their illness."

While it has so far escaped having to answer for the deaths in Woomera, the UK government did pay A\$13.5 million in compensation to the Maralinga Tjarutja Traditional Owners in 1995. But other known victims of British testing, including members of the Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta, have not been compensated.

Responding to the UK court's decision against the survivors, then Greens Senator Scott Ludlam wrote in a [letter](#) to the UK parliament in 2013: "Of the British and Australian veterans who were involved in the testing, and the Aboriginal people in the area at the time of the blasts, only 29 Aboriginal people have ever received compensation from the Australian Government and veterans



continue to struggle to obtain the medical support they need despite experiencing unusually high rates of cancer and other ill effects associated with exposure to radiation."







One of those who never received compensation or an apology was Yami Lester, Yunkunytjatjara elder and activist, who was blinded by the Emu Field nuclear weapon test in 1953 when he was ten years old. He was a key player in the Royal Commission, and went on to be a powerful advocate for land rights and against nuclear waste dumps. We didn't get to meet Yami on this Tour, because he passed away in July 2017, just two weeks after the United Nations adopted the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#).

*Four generations of the Lester family – Yami Lester with daughter Rose, grand-daughter Kiah and great-grand-daughter Lucy.*



Yami's daughters Karina and Rose Lester played an important role in raising support for the nuclear weapons ban treaty in Australia and participating in its negotiation in New York. Working with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), Karina delivered a statement on behalf of more than 30 indigenous groups from around the world at the negotiations, successfully advocating for provisions on victim assistance and environmental remediation, as well as a recognition of the disproportionate impact of nuclear weapons on indigenous populations.

*Rose Lester and Dimity Hawkins with the Nobel Peace Prize Medal.*

Several of us from ICAN, the civil society coalition that advocated for years for the nuclear ban treaty, were on this year's Rad Tour. We joined to connect with and learn from those resisting other pieces of the chain of nuclear violence, and to sit on country that has been so harmed time and again.

To spread awareness of the nuclear weapon ban treaty, we launched T.E.S., the Treaty Enforcement Squad, at the Woomera Missile Park. Against the ridiculous backdrop of model rockets and bombs, three of us dressed in red coveralls emblazoned with the new T.E.S. logo on the front and "Treaty Enforcer" on the back. Through social media we delivered the [T.E.S. manifesto](#): *"Our mission is to defend and protect the supreme law of the universe, the nuclear weapon ban treaty. On 7 July 2017, the world banned the bomb. We say no to the harbingers of death! We say no to massive nuclear violence! We are the enemy of the nuclear state. We will smash the racist patriarchal militarist system. We are here with one simple message: wherever you are in the world, if you love the bomb, if you protect the bomb, if you finance the bomb ... we will come for you."*

From one action in the Australian outback may an international sensation grow – we hope that others around the world will take up the idea, don the costume, and hold their governments to account wherever nuclear ban treaty violations occur.



*The Treaty Enforcement Squad at the Woomera Missile Park.*

## Digging up the poison

After two days of learning about the effects of British atomic testing and visiting disturbing sites in Woomera, we headed further into the radioactive nightmare to visit a quintessential site related to the starting point of the nuclear violence chain: the [Olympic Dam](#) uranium mine near Roxby Downs.

As of April 2018, two uranium mines are operating in South Australia: Olympic Dam and Beverley Four Mile. These mines [produced and exported](#) 5,493 tonnes of uranium oxide in 2016 – 63% of



Australia's total production that year. The only other operating uranium mine in Australia is Ranger in the Northern Territory, where mining has ceased but stockpiled ore is being processed until the mine's final closure a few years from now.

"Irantu Wanti" say the Aboriginal activists who have campaigned against uranium mines across the country. Leave the poison in the ground. But the government has not listened, ripping uranium from the earth not just here in South Australia but also in the Northern Territory and maybe soon in Western Australia.

After days spent camping on the red earth of this region, it was devastating to see the massive Olympic Dam mine displacing the ground, burrowing into it with machines and metal, bringing poison up from the depths. We went on a tour conducted by BHP, the mine's operator. We were not allowed to take photos, or leave the vehicle we were on.

In addition to the uranium ore, Olympic Dam has [generated](#) over 150 million tonnes of uranium tailings – radioactive sludge that is left over after extracting the uranium-bearing minerals from the ore. Friends of the Earth [describes](#) it as a "toxic, acidic soup of radionuclides and heavy metals." The tailings, and the processes used in extraction, risk the safety of workers and local communities. In the mid-1990s it was [revealed](#) that about three billion litres had seeped from the tailings dams over two years. Between 2003 and 2012, BHP reported 31 radiation leaks at the mine. On our tour, we were not permitted to see the tailings dams.

In 2010, a mineworker was so concerned about occupational health issues at Olympic Dam that he [leaked](#) information to the media. "The leaked documents show that BHP uses manipulated averages and distorted sampling to ensure its official figures of worker radiation exposure slip under the maximum exposure levels set by government," [explains](#) the educational resource [australianmap.net](#).

The mine is also a drain on natural resources. It uses around 37 million litres of water from the Great Artesian Basin every single day. This is the largest and deepest artesian basin – a confined aquifer containing groundwater – in the world. It provides the only source of fresh water through much of inland Australia. The government and various industries use it, but Olympic Dam has been increasing its use since its founding. While the BHP tour guides showing us around the mine assure us that they are responsibly using the water and that it can continue to rely on the basin for at least the next 85 years of the mine's anticipated lifespan, environmental activists have serious and legitimate [questions](#) about the sustainability of this level of water usage.

After our trip to the mine, we visited the Mound Springs near Lake Eyre, in Arabunna country. These are natural springs sustained by the underlying Great Artesian Basin. We were accompanied by Kokatha Traditional Owner Glen Wingfield, who, while not Arabunna, has spent his life visiting the springs. He lamented the depletion of the springs, explaining that it gets sadder to visit each time because the water levels are down more and more each and every time. [Studies have shown](#) that the pressure in the Great Artesian Basin has declined due to increased extraction. As the water table drops, springs have started drying up across South Australia as well as Queensland.



*Mound Spring (left) and swimming at Coward Spring (right).*

Uranium mining companies, and federal and state governments, typically ignore the concerns of Traditional Owners, use divide-and-rule tactics to split local communities, provide false or misleading information, and even use legal threats – all to ensure that the uranium industry gets its way. When it comes to Olympic Dam, this racism is enshrined in legislation. WMC Resources Limited, which started the uranium mine, was granted legal privileges under the South Australian Roxby Downs Indenture Act. This legislation [overrides](#) the SA Aboriginal Heritage Act, the Environment Protect Act, the Water Resources Act, and the Freedom of Information Act. The current mine owner, BHP, [refuses to relinquish](#) these legal privileges.

The problems of uranium mining, however, are not just local. Australia's uranium is exported around the world. It was in the Fukushima reactors that suffered a meltdown in 2011. It is converted into high-level nuclear waste in power reactors across the globe. Australia's uranium exports have produced over 176 tonnes of plutonium – enough to build over 17,600 nuclear weapons.

On the tour of Olympic Dam, it wasn't clear the BHP guides knew where their uranium was going. "Europe," said one. "I think maybe China," said another. They promised to provide a list of countries at the tour's end. They were more certain that none was going to Russia or to India, which both have nuclear weapons. But they did say, several times, that they would sell to whomever the government gave them permission to sell to. When asked how they felt about their uranium being involved in the Fukushima disaster, or potentially going to fuel India's nuclear weapon program, they simply asserted, "That is your opinion" – even though we had not actually expressed an opinion but asked a question. It's a sad fact that BHP's customers include nuclear weapons states as well as countries refusing to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty or the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Aboriginal communities and environmental activists have long resisted the mine, from before it was even constructed. The night after we visited Olympic Dam, Glen Wingfield told us about his family's consistent activism against the mine – as well as his brief time spent working there. The Traditional Owners were not consulted before the mine's construction, and have fiercely opposed it. They have been joined by others concerned about the mine's environmental impacts. In 2016, the Desert Liberation Front organised a "party at the gates of hell," following a [protest](#) in 2012 that saw hundreds travel from around the country to shut down the main road into the mine for four hours. Protests have also been held [outside BHP's Melbourne headquarters](#), and resource and environment ministers' offices.





*Glen Wingfield with the Nobel Peace Prize Medal.*

While BHP anticipates the mine will operate for another 85 years, opposition to its operation will continue. And while that opposition has not yet seen the closure of the mine, it likely did play a role in BHP's decision not to go ahead with its planned mega-expansion of the mine in 2012. For now, at least, the gates of hell have not been enlarged.



*Sunrise at Lake Eyre.*



*Lake Eyre.*

## **Dumping radioactive waste**

From the gates of hell we travelled to what might be described as the gates of paradise. For now.

The federal government of Australia wants to build a [facility to store and dispose of radioactive waste](#) in South Australia, either at Wallerberdina Station near Hawker or on farming land in Kimba. Wallerberdina Station is located in the Flinders Ranges, the largest mountain range in South Australia, 540 million years old. Approaching from the north on our drive down from Lake Eyre can only be described as breathtaking. The red dirt, the brown and green bush, and the ever-changing purples, blues, and reds of the mountains themselves are some of the most complex and stunning scenes one can likely see in the world.



*Flinders Ranges.*





*Flinders Ranges.*

Most people might find it shocking that the federal government would want to put a nuclear waste dump smack in the middle of this landscape. But after visiting other sites on the Rad Tour, it was only yet another disappointment – and another point of resistance.

The waste would include low- and intermediate-level waste produced by federal and state agencies. To try to convince the local community to accept the proposal, the government has promised a A\$10 million compensation package and around 15 full-time equivalent jobs. However, it's not clear how many of those jobs would be local, or whether those jobs will continue for the several hundred years that the dump is planned to be operational.

**What is known** is that the Wallerberdina site is of great cultural, historical, and spiritual significance to the Adnyamathanha people. It borders the Yappala Indigenous Protected Area, which is a crucial location for biodiversity in the Flinders Ranges. Its unique ecosystem provides a refuge for many native species of flora and fauna, contains many archaeological sites as well as the first registered Aboriginal Songline of its type in Australia, and is home to Pungka Pudanha, a natural spring and sacred woman's site.

*A tree uprooted by the 2006 flood.*



In case that isn't enough, the area is a known floodplain. Our travels around the proposed site contained ample evidence of previous floods that sent massive trees rushing down the plain, smashing into each other and into various bridges and other built objects. The last big flood occurred in 2006.

The Adnyamathanha Traditional Owners were not consulted before their land was nominated for consideration by the government for the waste dump. "Through this area are registered cultural heritage sites and places of huge importance to our family, our history and we plan, our future," wrote Adnyamathanha Traditional Owners in a [2015 statement](#). "We don't want a nuclear waste dump here on our country and worry that if the waste comes here it will harm our environment and *muda* (our lore, our creation, our everything)."

The Traditional Owners, as well as the Flinders Local Action Group and Friends of the Earth Australia, have long [argued](#) that Australia's nuclear waste could and should be stored at the Lucas Heights nuclear research reactor site, managed by the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation. Its own scientists have [said](#) that the site is capable of handling and storing wastes for long period of time. But the government persists with its campaign to establish a waste dump in a "remote" area of the country – with typical racist disregard for the fact that these sites are "more remote for some people than for others." The government frequently spreads misinformation about the importance of this site in particular for medical nuclear waste, arguing that without this dump Australia can't have cancer treatments or x-rays. None of this is true, as doctors with the [Medical Association for Prevention of War](#) have pointed out. Dr Margie Beavis of MAPW was on the Rad Tour with us, and explained how nuclear medicine is not reliant on Australian production or storage of radioactive materials.

We met Adnyamathanha Traditional Owners Vivianne and Regina McKenzie, and Tony Clark, at the proposed site. They invited us into the Yappala Indigenous Protected Area to view the floodplains and swim in the beautiful Pungka Pudanha. We'd just been camping at Wilpena Pound in the Flinders Ranges National Park only a few kilometres away. It is impossible to understand the government's rationale for wanting to build a toxic waste dump on this land so cherished by its Traditional Owners, local communities, and tourists alike. The assertion that the poison that the government dug up from the earth should be stored here as waste, poisoning this environment, is unfathomable and abhorrent.



*Margie Beavis, Regina McKenzie and Dimity Hawkins.*





*Pungka Pudanha – Hookina Spring*



*Members of the Flinders Local Action Group with the Nobel Peace Prize Medal.*

The McKenzies have been working tirelessly to prevent the proposed dump from being established, as have other local activists. Fortunately, they have some serious recent successes to inspire them.

In 2015, the South Australian government announced a plan to import 138,000 tonnes of high-level nuclear waste from around the world to South Australia as a commercial enterprise. The SA Labor government [promoted](#) the waste dump throughout the state in the largest "community consultation" ever conducted in the state, costing millions in taxpayer dollars.

But Traditional Owners began protesting immediately, arguing that the so-called consultations were not accessible and that misinformation was rife. In May 2015 they issued a [statement](#) calling on the Australian population to support them in their campaign "to prevent dirty and dangerous nuclear projects being imposed on our lands and our lives and future generations."

In May 2016, Traditional Owners, unions, church, environmental, and other civil society groups established the [No Dump Alliance](#). The Alliance contacted state and federal leaders to make them aware of threats from nuclear waste and the growing opposition to the dump from across the state. It also [built up knowledge](#) amongst communities and engaged people in actions big and small throughout the region.

In 2016, a Citizen's Jury, established by then state Premier Jay Weatherill and made up of 350 people, deliberated over evidence and information. In November that year, two-thirds of the Jury [rejected](#) "under any circumstances" the plan to import or store high-level waste. They cited lack of Aboriginal consent, unsubstantiated economic assumptions and projections, and lack of confidence in the governmental proposal's validity.



*SA Conservation Council campaigner Cat Beaton with the [Standing Strong book](#) celebrating the successful campaign to stop the importation of high-level nuclear waste to South Australia.*

Other battles against proposed nuclear waste dumps have been fought and won in South Australia. From 1998 to 2004, the Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta, a council of senior Aboriginal women from northern South Australia, [successfully campaigned](#) against a proposed national nuclear waste dump near Woomera. In an open letter in 2004, the Kungkas [wrote](#): "People said that you can't win against the Government. Just a few women. We just kept talking and telling them to get their ears out of their pockets and listen. We never said we were going to give up. Government has big money to buy their way out but we never gave up."

## **Connected communities**

The attempts by the Australian government and the nuclear industry to impose a waste dump in the Flinders Ranges, just like their attempts to impose waste dumps and uranium mines elsewhere



in the country, or their refusal to compensate victims and survivors of nuclear testing, are all mired with racism. They are rooted in a fundamental dismissal and devaluation of the lives and experiences of indigenous Australians, and of communities they consider "remote" – both in their proximity to cities but more importantly, to power.

The industry and government's motivations for imposing nuclear violence on these people and this land are militarism and capitalism. Profit over people. Weapons over wellbeing. Their capacity for compassion and duty of care has been constrained by chronic short-termism – a total failure to protect future generations. The poison they pull out of the earth, process, sell, allow others to make bombs with, and bury back in the earth, wounds us all now and into the future.

But nuclear weapons are now prohibited under international law. New actors are challenging the possession of nuclear weapons in new ways, and nuclear-armed states are facing a challenge like never before. The nuclear energy industry – and thus the demand for uranium – is declining. Power plants are being shuttered; corporations are facing financial troubles. Dirty and dangerous, the nuclear industry is dying.

This is in no small part due to the relentless resistance against it.

This resistance was fierce throughout all of the country we visited, from Woomera up to Lake Eyre, from Roxby Downs to the Flinders Ranges. We listened to stories of those living on this land, we heard their histories, witnessed their actions, and supported their plans.

And, we were able to share something special with many of them: ICAN's Nobel Peace Prize.

Awarded in 2017, the Prize recognizes ICAN's efforts to highlight the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons and to work with governments to negotiate and adopt the nuclear weapon ban treaty. But the Prize is not just for those advocates directly involved in that aspect of the campaign's work. It's a recognition of all the efforts of anti-nuclear activists through the long history of the atomic age, activists who have put their bodies on the line in defence of the earth and human health, in protection of our planet, in opposition to governments that pull poison out of the ground and drop it on human beings and animals around the world.

Sharing the Nobel Prize with the resisters in South Australia was a deep joy. It seemed to bring inspiration and invigoration to many who have fought for so long against impossible odds in difficult places against powerful corporations and governments. It was a humbling reminder of the collective effort of all our advocacy and activism across time and space. We're all connected, and we cannot do this alone. Movements are made of people, reaching out across borders, across struggles, to cultivate solidarity and strength in one another. Resistance is fertile.

*Information on previous Rad Tours is posted at [www.nuclear.foe.org.au/radtour](http://www.nuclear.foe.org.au/radtour)*

*Photos by Dimity Hawkins, Ray Acheson, Jemila Rushton and Jim Green.*











*AC, Crunch, Gem and Jemila.*