Building a better life in mining towns

We often hear it said that Australia is one of the most urbanised nations on earth; our suburbs sprawl while the vast bulk of the continent remains empty and — to many of us — lonely, hostile, and frightening. Although we find it interesting to visit we wouldn't dream of actually living 'out there'!

And yet, following the resource boom in the '60s, increasing numbers of people have had to do just that as mining companies set up townships in some of the most remote areas of the country.

Over the past decade the population of northern Australia has grown by about 30%, compared with only 14% in the south of the country. Much of this is due to the development of industries linked to the mining, refinement, and transport of minerals.

The enterprises involved have mostly had to recruit their staff from the more highly populated south.

These new 'resource communities' were initially, and generally still are, isolated and lacking a number of the facilities found in established settlements in the south of the country. Many people believed that the isolation and harshness of the environment made residents in these places suffer a greater-than-average incidence of psychological disorder. They thought of mining towns as places of stress and social problems.

In the last few years some of these ideas have been tested. The CSIRO Division of Building, Construction and Engineering carried out a large survey in mining towns to find out how the residents feel about life there, with the aim of helping companies and local councils to provide a better life-style.

The complete survey covered 17 mining towns in Western Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania. (Some parts of it used smaller numbers of towns when focusing on particular aspects.)

Detailed questionnaires with different versions for men and women asked about reasons for moving to mining towns, past residential experiences and future hopes, the adequacy of local facilities, recreational opportunities, and job satisfaction. They also asked about the existence of any social problems, including alcoholism, and measured a number of aspects of the residents' psychological state.

A team comprising Dr Cecily Neil, Ms Judith Jones, and Ms Cheryl McNamara carried out this sociological research as a follow-up to initial studies on mining towns (described in Ecos 2). They set to work with carefully worded questionnaires and then turned statisticians to analyse all the answers.

The questionnaires included means of assessing whether

From Tasmania to the Kimberley — the mining towns investigated during Dr Neil's survey.

The towns in the survey

Port Hedland and South Hedland

Dampier

Karratha Wickham

Tom Price

Paraburdoo

Moranbah
Dysart
Emerald Blackwater
Moura
Biloela

Cobar

Waratah
Savage River
Zeehan Rosebery
Queenstown

people feel in control of their lives, sense of achievement or despair, quality of life, alcohol consumption, and psychological disturbance.

Wherever possible, they used already-tested sets of questions — such as Goldberg's General Health Questionnaire, which has also been used in a number of other studies in Australia. This made possible comparisons with other communities.

Trained CSIRO representatives delivered the complete package in person to randomly selected households, an explanation of the survey being given at the same time.

Myths crumble

The popular idea that the environment in these towns is far more stressful for women than for men was disproved in those places studied. Although some variation between towns existed, in general females' mental health scores were similar to those recorded elsewhere in Australia, while men's scores tended to be higher — that is, suggesting a greater degree of psychological disturbance.

The differences between women's scores in different towns were not connected with the community's size, or its isolation, or how harsh the people perceived the environment to be. Equally, people's feelings about missing their relatives showed no correlation with the number of reported symptoms of mental disturbance.

However, answers to questions about money and status revealed that a perception of an 'over-emphasis' on money matters did correlate with higher scores in the mental health section — but only if the social networks of the people were inadequate, as revealed by a series of questions about friends and levels of social contact.

In other words, a good set

Sunset at Cobar, N.S.W.

of friends could buffer people's irritations about money matters and stop them becoming upset or depressed by the over-emphasis on money that may develop in these settlements. (Remember, it is mainly in order to earn and accumulate more money that most people go there.)

Job satisfaction was the single most important factor influencing men's mental health scores. Interestingly, their type of accommodation had little effect.

In a more detailed study of six towns in the Pilbara, Dr Neil showed that no significant correlation existed between mental health and the type of dwelling that men without their families live in. (Accommodation can vary from single person's quarters — like barracks — where noise is often a problem, to shared flats, where one's mate can be the problem, and even to surplus three-bedroom houses originally intended for families.)

The reasons, Dr Neil thinks, are that the men all share common work ties, which

means that anybody whose domestic behaviour is too upsetting can expect trouble with his work-mates, and that the employer is also the landlord, which may help discourage antisocial actions against any buildings.

Also, stress is probably lessened by the general reduction in the amount of time spent in the accommodation due to the fact that the favourite leisure pursuit — drinking with your mates — takes place in local hotels or, if these are not available, in 'wet messes'.

Furthermore, as other questions revealed, most people see their life-style as being very similar to that of the others around them. In other words, there is a homogeneity of the population, and people with similar interests and values form friendships more readily.

Finally, being a single man in these towns is not unusual, whereas single men living elsewhere may feel ill at ease going out alone of an evening.

Outback suburbs?

The idea that housing style could influence the stability of

the population had led the planners and architects of these towns to conclude that replicas of the suburbs in Australian cities would be the best way of making remote outback communities happy places.

Dr Neil found little relationship between reported levels of satisfaction with the housing or layout of towns and the mental health of the inhabitants, leading her to conclude that ideas of 'social engineering' through the design of buildings were not valid. But many companies building outback towns believed that, to attract and maintain a reasonably stable population, they should provide something resembling the areas from which most workers had been recruited.

This meant ignoring innovative house designs that suited the environmental extremes of the remote locations. Thus, the housing was often climatically unsuited to the region, and hence did not offer the satisfaction that it should have.

Also, building suburban-type houses does not necessarily reproduce the same total 'housing system' that exists in the suburbs. There, a house reflects your status and your achievements, both to yourself and others — it is a symbol, and separates you from the rest of the world.

In a mining town, the local housing contains little variation. You may not be permitted to buy your house or even to choose which one to rent.

Once your seniority and family size have been taken into account, the allocation of the houses is random. You cannot build your own home, and your next-door neighbours, doing the same job as you, earn the same salary.

So, although dwellings in the remote communities may resemble suburban houses in physical design, the differences in social context

mean that they do not have the same symbolic function as they would in the city. The temporary, rented dwelling does not satisfy the same expectations and status aspirations.

Coping with closure

The days of the resource boom seem to be over, and some mines, now exhausted, must close. If a whole town has grown up depending on a mine for its economic base, then closure can have disastrous effects. How this closure is handled is important to the well-being of the workers, and it is then that many of the original planning decisions can have good or bad effects.

Dr Neil is collaborating with researchers in Canada and Sweden and comparing the experiences of mine closures in those countries and here. She says that we can learn some better ways of managing our own closures to minimise the bad effects on the societies involved.

For example, in Kiruna, a mining town in northern Sweden, the government gave money to help establish new industries there from the time
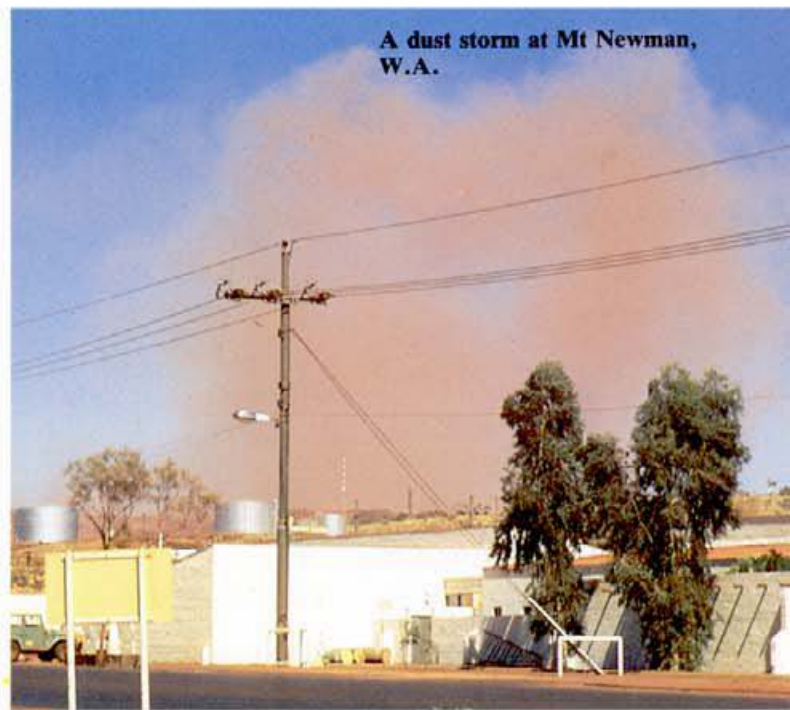
of the first wave of retrenchments. Although mining is still continuing at a reduced level, the town is now becoming important in space and allied industries.

By contrast, sudden announcements, especially when the workers first hear about their fate in the media, are obviously bad for morale. Surveys show that many workers don't actually believe the announcements that closure is imminent — just as we wouldn't if somebody announced that our world would end tomorrow. There's a feeling that 'they won't really let it happen'.

How to get the message across in the best way, and how to deal with the inevitable disruption, may be the subject of further research.

Meanwhile, if new mining communities start up, we'll know better how to plan them according to the predicted life expectancy of the mining or quarrying operation. Nowadays, some companies — being more aware of the effects of closure — are only constructing basic dormitory accommodation and flying their workers in and out on a

short-shift basis (such as 2 weeks on, 10 days off).

In cases where the mining operation has a reasonably short life expectancy, such an arrangement saves on the costs of a proper town infrastructure and minimises the disruption when closure comes about.

Aside from examples like this, the work of Dr Neil and other sociologists has implications for the welfare of people in different isolated, single-enterprise settlements, such as oil rigs, Antarctic

bases, and even — who knows? — the first human extraterrestrial settlements!

Roger Beckmann

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A dust storm at Mt Newman, W.A.

Many mining towns, such as Shay Gap in Western Australia shown here, are remote isolated communities.