

Update December 2024

At the end of SOMR's 12th year, the group is as committed as ever to protect the Macleay River catchment. Many issues need continuing attention, new issues and new approaches to finding solutions are arising. They are:



- **Hillgrove Gold and Antimony Mine**
- **Oven Mountain Pumped Hydro Scheme**
- **South Kempsey Battery Energy Storage**
- **Gravel extraction in the riverbed,**
- **Growing water use in the Upper Catchment and Water Sharing Plan**
- **Water Test Kit**
- **Events held in 2024**

Hillgrove Mine

In 2013, community concerns about antimony and arsenic contamination of the Macleay River led to the founding of SOMR. At the time, the Hillgrove Gold and Antimony Mine was seen as the main source of contamination. Since then, the mine changed owners a couple of times, was in production for short periods only and, depending on the market, changed priorities between gold and antimony. Contamination from tailing dams and old mine shafts has been reduced.

The current owners Larvotto Resources, trading on the Australian and German share markets, have been expanding gold and antimony explorations and are publishing positive results to attract investors. A new tailings dam is planned and production could commence in 2025.

In November *Australian Resources & Investments* reported that Larvotto Resources has been “accepted into the Defense Industrial Base Consortium (DIBC). Antimony produced from the project could support many defense applications in the US, including ammunition, nuclear weapons and night-vision goggles.”

“We are delighted to be accepted into the DIBC, which reflects the global significance of our Hillgrove antimony-gold project as it moves towards production,” Larvotto managing director Ron Heeks said.

“With an anticipated production of seven per cent of the world’s antimony supply, Hillgrove is poised to play a strategic role in addressing the critical minerals needs of the global market.” <https://www.australianresourcesandinvestment.com.au/2024/11/15/hillgrove-gets-us-backing/>

While the contamination of the Macleay River might be reduced, antimony from the Hillgrove Mine will potentially contribute to US military ventures in other parts of the world.

Oven Mountain Pumped Hydro Scheme

We reported previously that in mid 2024 the NSW Department of Planning Housing and

Infrastructure (DPIE) published Alinta's responses to the 76 public and agency submissions and advice of amendments regarding the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Development Application (DA) for the Oven Mountain Pumped Hydro Scheme – available on DPIE's Project Portal <https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/projects/oven-mountain-pumped-hydro-energy-storage>.

In October, responding to the public submissions, SOMR sent another extensive list of concerns about the effects on the river to the DPIE.

In late October, in an interview on local ABC radio, Alinta Director Anthony Wiseman mentioned that the 'DA Determination' was expected before the end of 2024 and Alinta's 'financial decision' to proceed by mid-2025.

While waiting for the Determination by the Minister for Planning Paul Scully, Alinta has announced the selection of two construction companies "*as the Early Contractor Involvement (ECI) partners for the Oven Mountain Pumped Hydro project*". The announcement qualified that "*these discussions will be preliminary in nature and not a guarantee of future work with the project.*" <https://ompshydro.com.au/news/omps-appoints-gamuda-ferrovial>

Alinta Energy, operating as energy provider in several Australian states is owned by a private investment firm of Hong Kong's billionaire Cheng family. (for some background, see a 2020 article: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/China-shadows-the-rise-of-Hong-Kong-s-next-tycoons> and Wikipedia)

Battery Storage in South Kempsey

SOMR has repeatedly pointed out that consideration of alternatives to the Oven Mountain location should be part of the decision-making process. This could be other locations of pumped hydro or batteries closer to the grid.

Recently, a proposal for a large-scale battery storage facility on approximately 5 ha of a private property in South Kempsey was made public. The project, South Kempsey Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) is initiated by 'Macleay Ventures' with the three previous Directors of OMPHS Pty Ltd (engaged by Alinta as a Development Company for the OMPHS Project) Anthony Melov, Brian Hall and Jeremy Moon.

The Department of Planning has issued the Secretary's Environmental Assessment Requirements (SEARs) for the South Kempsey BESS. As a State Significant Project, the Scoping Report can be found on the NSW Government Major Projects Website. <https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=PDA-77809456%2120241112T051328.304%20GMT>

The proponents are now preparing its Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). As for OMPHS, the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces is the only consent authority for the proposed development.

With a capacity to supply up to 200 megawatts (MW) over a duration of 4 hours (800 MW-hours) this is a mere 100Mw less than the Oven Mountain Pumped Hydro proposal. There would be far less infrastructure, logistical, environmental and cultural costs. The site is very close to the South Kempsey substation.

Riverside Gravel Extraction

For several years, SOMR members have reported problems with two Gravel Extraction Quarries in an active channel of the Macleay River at Turners Flat. The SOMR post from April 2022 describes the effects on the river in detail

<https://saveourmacleayriver.com/2022/04/>

When Kempsey Shire Council did not respond adequately to complaints, SOMR lodged a *suspicious activity report* with NRAR, the NSW Natural Resources Access Regulator, early in 2024. In June NRAR Project Officers inspected the site. Serious noncompliance issues were noted and Formal Warning Letters were sent by NRAR to the owners of the quarries.

SOMR accessed the letters under Freedom of Information and consequently contacted Council on 30 September 2024 with details of breaches such as operating illegally since 30 September 2023 when the previous CAA (controlled activity approval) expired, and raised the question of compliance with the Council DA of 1979. SOMR suggested that Council as the issuer of the DA needs to be aware of what is occurring on site and inspect the quarries on a regular basis.

On 6 December 2024 Council informed SOMR that they are investigating the complaint. A site visit has been conducted. Council are now in the process of reviewing the necessary permits and consents required.

Natural Resources Commission (NRC) Water Sharing Plan Review (Macleay catchment)

In October, SOMR was made aware of the opportunity to contribute to the NSW Water Sharing Plan Review.

Water sharing plans are legally binding plans made under the Water Management Act 2000, setting rules for sharing water for social, economic and agricultural use, cultural use and the environment. Valid for 10 years, they also set the rules for buying and selling water licences and allocations, known as water trading.

<https://water.dpie.nsw.gov.au/about-us/learn-about-water/an-introduction-to-water/water-sharing-plans>

NRC has a statutory role to review water sharing plans and report the findings to the Minister for Water. The Minister considers the report, but the NRC Review findings and recommendations are not binding. Current Water Sharing Plans expire on 1 July 2026.

SOMR took the opportunity to raise concerns about the effects of Armidale Regional Council's ambitious growth plans on downstream users. (see March and September 2024

updates on <https://saveourmacleayriver.com/>). In the submission, we also pointed out that the Macleay needs a body similar to the abandoned Catchment Management Authority to monitor and protect the whole of the catchment.

Armidale resident Kate Boyd, who is passionate about water protection, lodged a very detailed submission on behalf of the Armidale Branch of the National Parks Association.

As a result of the submissions we were invited to an online interview with the NRC's Principal Advisor where we could expand on the issues. Kate stressed the need for incentives to improve efficient use of water. The significant impact of logging and land clearing on the Macleay tributaries and a general need for better riparian protection were also discussed.

We hope our concerns were heard and will be related to the Minister.

Council Community Grant – Water Test Kit



SOMR representatives with the Kempsey Mayor

In 2020, SOMR purchased a basic water test kit with generous donations from members and supporters.

Several tests were done, (eg Saltwater Test Results <https://saveourmacleayriver.com/2022/03/>) before the chemicals reached their “use-by-date”. A new kit is needed and SOMR successfully applied for a small KSC community grant. With the money from Council and leftover money from the previous donations, a new kit will be purchased ASAP and two requests for water testing we already received will be met.

Events

During the year, SOMR members and the public were treated to some very interesting talks and presentations.

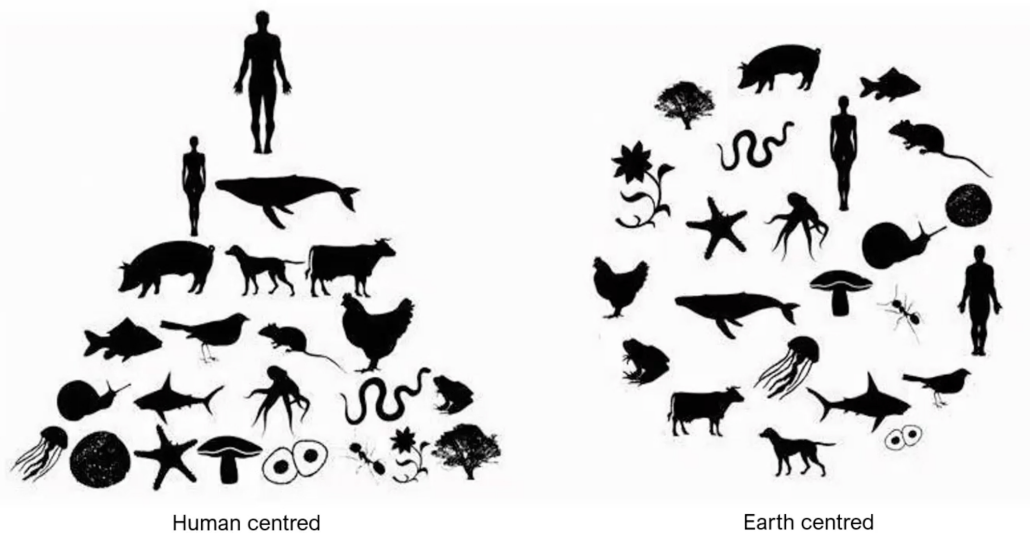
Water Quality

In August we reported extensively about Professor Scott Johnson's most informative presentation about the Macleay River Water Quality.

<https://saveourmacleayriver.com/macleay-river-water-quality-study/>

Earth Law – Rights of the River

In October, SOMR members and a couple of visitors listened to the National Convenor of the Australian Earth Laws Alliance (AELA), Michelle Maloney, who gave an inspiring talk about the Rights of the River at the Kempsey Library.



This image shows a fundamental shift in our understanding of our position of humans in the environment.

Michelle gave examples from around the world where natural features, such as rivers and forests, are protected as legal entities. Different approaches are being developed in Australia, e.g. for the Birrarung River (Yarra). SOMR is planning a similar presentation for members and possibly the wider public in Armidale in March/April 2025.

A plethora of background information can found on the AELA website.

<https://www.earthlaws.org.au/>

Macleay River Estuary

SOMR members heard an excellent presentation about the estuary management from John Schmidt, Senior Coast and Estuary Officer with Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water. He covered topics like

- Coastal Management Plan,
- Coastal floodplain assessment,

- Clybucca wetland and
- future bank condition assessment.

<https://saveourmacleayriver.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Schmidt-presentation-4122024.pdf>

SOMR is planning to facilitate a public information event on estuary management, possibly in mid-2025 when new research data about the bank conditions will be available.