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The mining industry and land rehabilitation in Australia - once were leaders

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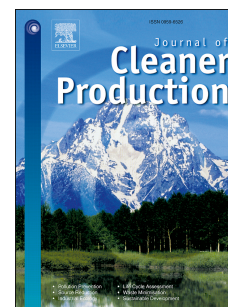
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The view that the Australian mining industry has lost its way and momentum and can no longer claim leadership in the field of disturbed land rehabilitation is one that could not be disputed easily. The noting that the current wave of innovations in restoration science and management is predominantly coming from working with lands and landscapes requiring damage repair from activities arguably less drastic than those created by mining, is also a valid observation. Examples of actions by which the industry could once again lead in this area are well noted, but the dominance of short-term thinking and waning commitment to go beyond compliance currently being expressed by the sector will regrettably not see much action enactment in the foreseeable future. Given the nature and shortfall reality of government financial assurance schemes, any recommendations for use of those limited securities for purposes that the industry themselves should take full responsibility, would be a policy to be approached with caution.

For many years, the Australian minerals industry considered itself, and was considered by others, to be a leader in the field of post-mining land rehabilitation; the question posed by the opinion piece rightfully challenges whether that truism still holds and after considering that it doesn't, calls for industry to step back up. Has the industry dropped the ball or are we just more aware and knowledgeable of what could be or should be; has our expanded knowledge through research, while providing critical solutions along the way, also just expanded our understanding of the risks and uncertainties and hence opportunity to be more critical of industry deficiencies? Has the expansion of the industry and the mining and processing technologies that now allow lower grades to be economically extracted and recovered mean that the consequential greater volumes of mine wastes produced made us more cognizant of the potential impacts and risks? Has the entry of the industry into areas where communities and other land uses are conflicted heightened concerns and expectations about how the industry addresses its environmental and social obligations?

Thus, is it that the industry commitment has stayed the same and the industry expansion and society's interest and awareness has just widened the gap to give the impression that that there's been a reduced effort, or has the commitment really declined? Unfortunately, and though not universal, experience and familiarity with the sector would suggest a reduction in overall commitment to fund innovation and research – and what is supported is primarily reactive and/or driven to meet a minimalist default position of compliance, a space in which there is little room for forward-thinking, innovation and the obligatory longevity of a committed investment. Reliance on compliance to achieve a positive outcome can be a risk in itself as a regulatory framework rarely incorporates the rate of new knowledge acquisition that science and research can and has delivered.

While ever there remains a dominance of short-term thinking and too few site champions with the capacity to influence senior site management who typically still have KPIs around production metrics and not future environmental values of a site, engendering change will be difficult. Without change and renewed commitment, however, mediocrity will rule and the Australian industry will not be able to legitimise living off past global recognition as a research and innovation leader in mined land rehabilitation nor reap the benefits of greater future certainty about post-mine environments.

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