

A giant leap forward in environmental management wins Pluton Resources more than local support

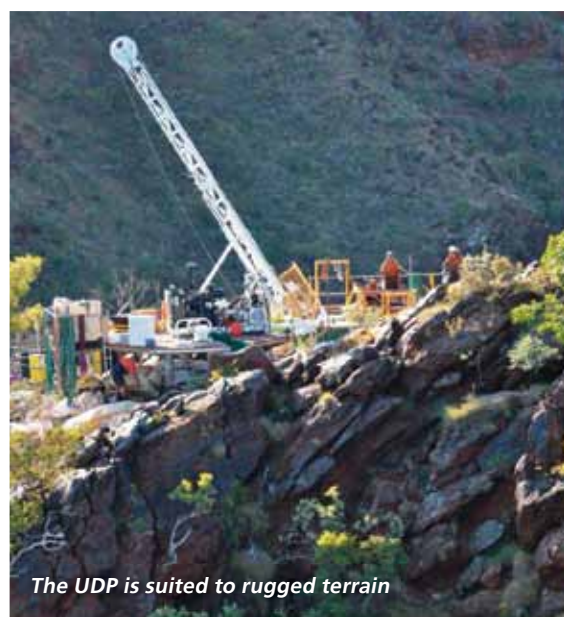
The Irvine Island challenge

How do you explore and potentially mine in a rugged and remote region without damaging its ecological balance, while at the same time enhancing the social and economic prospects of its traditional owners?

This was one of the key questions Pluton Resources CEO, Tony Schoer asked himself in 2006, while pondering the potential of Irvine Island - one of three remote islands in the Kimberley Iron Ore Hub in Yampi Sound, approximately 130 Kilometres north of Derby.

"The Mayala people are the traditional owners of Irvine Island, and had turned down offers from companies in the past because they were concerned about the effects on Irvine's environment and cultural heritage," said Tony.

"It was clear we needed to find a new approach with the Mayala people if they were to even consider the possibility of exploration - let alone mining operations. And we knew the key to this would be to engage and involve them in the whole process, as well as coming up with completely new thinking on approaching the project.



The UDP is suited to rugged terrain

"We had to show that we could explore and develop part of the island without compromising the cultural value of the land," he said.

In partnership with the Mayala community

Early in the project's concept development, Tony Schoer spent time with the Mayala people to help him understand what he could do to benefit both parties and enable the project to advance on Irvine.

In 2007 an exploration agreement was struck, with key principles including:

- assurance that exploration would cause minimal environmental impact to the island;
- an understanding that activity would be undertaken in accordance with the cultural values of the island; and
- a proviso giving the Mayala people the final say on which specific areas could and could not be used for exploration activity.

Other terms of the agreement included an equity share for the Mayala people. A further share issue resulting from a mining agreement in 2011 has made the community a significant shareholder in the company.

The Mayala recruits make up approximately half of the exploration workers on the project. They were provided with access to training and development opportunities including formal industry qualifications.

In future, once mining begins, employees and other people in the community will get support for apprenticeships, secondary and tertiary scholarships as well as on-the-job training.

Breaking new ground

Developed specifically for the Irvine Island project, Pluton's key to minimising disturbance to the environment lay in the unique and patented design of its Universal Drilling Platform (UDP). The platform can be dismantled, transported by helicopter and reassembled in one day.



Less than 5m² of vegetation is disturbed once the UDP is installed



Fibreglass sleeping pods as used in Antarctica provide campsite accommodation



Elder Graham Ejai, Tony Schoer, Elder Sandy Issac and Pluton Executives Pamela Kaye and Johari Bin Demin during the PDAC Convention

Key features of the UDP

- The modular platform is designed to be heli-lifted into places often difficult or impossible to reach without building roads.
- It can be constructed by hand and stabilised on sloping ground by adjusting the hydraulic legs.
- The platform disturbs no more than 5m² of land when installed, less than five per cent of the usual amount of land disturbed for the equivalent task using traditional drilling methods.
- Once the platform is removed vegetation fully rejuvenates within a few months.

“Minimising land disturbance during exploration can make an important difference to the industry’s footprint. A few months after drilling from the platforms, it is almost impossible to tell where we’ve been,” said CEO Tony Schoer.

Living on the Island

Yet Pluton’s innovative approach is far from confined to the drilling platform.

As an uninhabited island, the company had to once again think outside the box in terms of managing the living arrangements of a crew of 30, swelling to 45 during peak times.

Lightweight fibreglass sleeping pods, more commonly used in Antarctica, were imported for the work camp. These pods were installed on platforms above the ground and connected by a series of raised walkways – again minimising impacts on the local terrain.

A small desalination plant provides the 40,000 litres of water per day needed for drilling and camp use. The camp minimises its footprint by shipping in supplies and removing every bit of waste to the mainland, where it is sorted for recyclable materials. All island transport is on foot or by helicopter.

Recognised as international best practice

Pluton Resources was awarded a Golden Gecko for Environmental Excellence by the Department of Mines and Petroleum in Western Australia in 2010.

In March this year, company executives, along with Mayala elders were invited to the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada (PDAC) Convention in Toronto. There they gave a series of presentations on the Irvine Island partnership. PDAC later wrote to Pluton resources stating that the Irvine Island project was “a shining example of best practices.”

“We believe it’s part of the new paradigm in mining. Increasingly, exploration and mining companies are finding new ways to operate in an environmentally and socially responsible manner,” said Tony Schoer.

Where to next

With mining anticipated to commence in 2013/14 the big question is - how will the operation proceed with minimal impact on the ecological balance of the region?

What we can be assured of with this Award-winning team, is that whatever the final solution, it is bound to counter tradition and break new ground. 🌱

About Pluton Resources

Established in 2006, Pluton Resources Limited is a mineral exploration company focusing on iron ore in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, with additional copper, gold and silver projects located in northwestern Tasmania.

More information about the company can be found at www.plutonresources.com