

Burning Mountain keeps glowing after 500,000 years on fire

THERE'S a mountain in the Upper Hunter which has been burning for hundreds of thousands of years.

The Wonaruah Aboriginal tribe believes that the mountain caught fire when the 'Wingen (fire) Maid', a sandstone outcrop across the valley with the features of a woman, cried tears of fire onto the mountain for her husband, who died in battle.

Of course, the explanations offered by science are not quite so romantic.

'The most accepted hypothesis is that oxidation of iron pyrites and sulphurous coal material gave off sufficient heat to cause combustion of coal,' according to the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

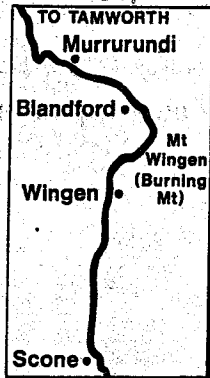
Burning Mountain is on the eastern side of the New England Highway, between Scone and Murrurundi.

About 20 metres below the earth, a coal seam rich in sulphur has been burning for possibly 500,000 years. It is expected to burn for hundreds of thousands of years into the future.

The parks service is in the process of finalising a plan of management for Burning Mountain, the only phenomenon of its type in Australia and one of only three in the world.

The mountain is listed for its geological significance by the Australian Heritage Commission, the National Trust and the Geological Society of Australia.

No mining can take place there



Wingen's Burning Mountain.

because the area is a nature reserve. The sulphurous character of the coal would probably make mining an undesirable proposition.

A senior ranger, Ms Janine Floyd, said the area surrounding the burning seam was home to a variety of vegetation.

'As you get closer to the top of the mountain, you can see a bare patch with a few smokey vents and you can smell the sulphur,' she said.

'You can also see the slumps that occur where the land has just slipped into the area taken by the coal seam. At the top it's bare because it is too hot for vegetation.'

The mountain is close to the highway and can be reached in about 15 minutes by foot from a parking area.

The plan of management, which aims to preserve the site, will be on public exhibition until the end of April.

— Nathan Vass