

Flatulent dog warms Australian mining giants' hearts

Rio Tinto and Woodside Petroleum have thrown their weight behind a low-budget production that brings the story of legendary canine Red Dog to the big screen

BY MADELEINE COOREY
AFP, SYDNEY



The heart-warming tale of a friendly, flatulent and hitch-hiking dog has seen major mining firms branch out into

new territory, as they support an Australian film about the legendary Red Dog.

Companies such as Rio Tinto and Woodside Petroleum have backed the low-budget movie, which depicts Western Australia's resource-rich Pilbara region in the 1970s when the mining industry was taking off there.

"It was hard in the beginning because they are not in the film business," producer Nelson Woss said of working with the companies.

"But we talked to them and they acknowledged that it was a really important story." The result was that the makers

of the film *Red Dog*, which stars American Josh Lucas, were given rare access to mine sites close to the coastal town of Dampier and were able to follow the mining of iron ore from pit to port.

"We've had unprecedented access," Woss said. "We've gone right into their operations and filmed it. Yesterday we were on a Chinese ore carrier, filming the ore being put on the carrier."

Red Dog is based on the life of a russet-colored kelpie (Australian sheep dog) who became a key figure in Dampier as the community grew up around the expanding mining industry.

The entrance to the town now boasts a large statue of the dog, a monument which inspired the writer Louis de Bernieres to pen a half-fictional account of the animal's life on which the movie is based.

Woss said the stories he has been told about Red Dog during the weeks the crew has been filming in hot and sparsely populated Pilbara have supported the animal's legendary stature in the region.

"He interacted with everybody," he said. "But whenever there was an event or a community get-together, whether it was something official or a local barbecue at the beach, the dog had an uncanny ability to turn up."

"And, as a result, he was basically a member of the town."

Woss said the dog, owned by none but cared for by all, provided company to many of those stranded in the remote area by their work

— whether they were carrying out the hardest manual work or middle-managers sitting in the air-conditioned site office. He also interacted with local Aborigines.

"The dog went everywhere, he hitch-hiked on trucks, he was on trains, he apparently was on a boat. The workers just adored him so they would take him along wherever they went," he said.

"He had a unique ability to hitch-hike. He could tell who his friends were from the sound of their cars," Woss said, adding that the dog would wait in the middle of the road until the car stopped and picked him up.



The dog traveled intensively in the Pilbara, an area where towns can be hundreds of kilometers apart, as well as around Western Australia — a key producer of the iron ore exports driving the nation's economic recovery.

Woss said several locals had told him the story of Red Dog being taken by a holidaying miner to Perth, and then escaping from the man and hitch-hiking the 1,500km back to Dampier.

The canine was also known for its flatulence. "I think what happened was everybody fed him," Woss said. "And they weren't too worried about what they fed him. And as a result, I think at times he had digestion issues."

Dampier was shattered when Red Dog died, at an old age, in November 1979 because he had been part of the town for the best part of a decade, Woss said.

Lucas, whose credits include *Sweet Home Alabama* and *A Beautiful Mind*, heads a cast which includes Australians Rachael Taylor and Noah Taylor and canine co-star Koko. He said the dog had brought people together.

"It's a strange thing what this damned red dog did," he told the *Australian* from the set this week.

The film, which wraps up its Pilbara shoot this week, is due for release by Roadshow Films early next year. "It's an underdog film," Woss said.

Left: American actor Josh Lucas stars alongside Koko, who plays the canine lead, in *Red Dog*.

PHOTOS: AFP

Y2K-style computer bug looms over Taiwan

As the country counts down to the year 100, many fear older computers will experience glitches when they begin processing the date in three digits

BY BENJAMIN YEH
AFP, TAIPEI

Thousands of small businesses in Taiwan are looking with growing unease towards Dec. 31, 2010, fearing that the New Year will trigger a local version of the Y2K "millennium bug."

The country's unique calendar begins from the 1911 revolution that brought down the last Chinese emperor, meaning Jan. 1 will not be the start of 2011, but of year 100.

The concern is this could spell havoc for many older computers that have to get used to counting three digits rather than two.

"Numerous clients have approached me over the past six months and asked for advice on how to update computer hardware and software," said Lee Chin-hung, a technology consultant in Taipei County.

Taiwan Resibon Abrasive Products

Co, a plastics material maker employing more than 100 people, will replace some of the computers installed at its plant in Tamsui.

"If not, data such as the serial numbers of the finished products would end up in a complete mess," said Yeh Kun-ming, a company spokesman.

Experts estimate that up to 200,000 local shops and companies still use computers that are not armed to withstand the local version of the millennium bug.

"Primarily, the bug may cause problems for accounting, inventory and personnel systems at small businesses," said Louis Chen, a Ministry of Economic Affairs official.

Although there is little more than half a year left to get prepared, numerous companies have so far done nothing.

Fifteen percent of the country's small businesses say they have taken no pre-emptive measures



even though they believe they may be at risk, according to a recent government survey.

"Most of them are micro businesses. In addition to budget

considerations, many also know too little about coping with the threat," said Wang Wen-pu of Knowledge Free Way Corp, a Taipei-based private information service provider.

Lai Yueh-chun, the owner of a comic book rental shop, fears a "millennium bug" may wipe his clients' data from his computer when the New Year comes.

PHOTO: AFP

It is unavoidable that the situation Taiwan now finds itself in has led to comparisons with the big one — the Y2K "millennium bug" of New Year 2000.

Edward Tenner, US author of *Tech Speak* and other best sellers dealing with technology issues, said Y2K was a major concern a decade ago, even if few predicted a global meltdown.

"Most of the experts I met then expected localized interruptions rather than breakdowns — brush fires, not an inferno," he said.

Still, enterprises and government agencies worldwide spent hundreds of billions of US dollars to cope with the Y2K problems.

But when the clocks rolled over

into 2000, only a limited number of Y2K glitches erupted and none of them led to the kind of major incidents that had been described in the worst-case scenarios.

While some experts said the absence of major disasters reflected the determined and hugely expensive preparations before the turn of the millennium, others argued the danger had been overstated.

That experience may affect the way people in Taiwan react, or choose not to react, ahead of the local "Y2K" event.

Lai Yueh-chun, the 46-year-old owner of a comic book rental shop, has already replaced the motherboard and the hard disk in his computer.

"I'm afraid all data on my clients could be gone by Jan. 1 if I don't do anything," Lai said.

"But I'm still waiting to see if there's a cheaper option than buying a new computer."