

Rock kicker ready to return to operational mode as he rides the corporate rollercoaster

By Mark Fraser

Pioneer Resources Limited boss David Crook is looking forward to becoming a miner again.

Earlier in his career, the New Zealand-born geologist worked at the Gidgee gold mine in Western Australia for almost a decade, running the exploration team and making some quite robust discoveries – including the very profitable Kingfisher pit.

It was during this time he realised that an economic rock kicker benefitted from a background of both mining and exploration work.

“I was originally contracted to work there for six weeks and my stay lasted almost 10 years,” Crook recalled.

“It was an invaluable learning experience and put the whole exploration business into perspective.

“When I joined, the owners were drilling out the first two pits. It seemed at the time that the plant was being constructed around the drilling rigs ...

then gold production started and we had the daunting task of keeping the plant full.

“When the operation poured its 500,000th ounce, I drew a line in the sand and decided it was time to go out exploring again.

“Now, after 16 years of exploration and company management, its time to return to mining.

“So my main aspiration at the moment is to have Pioneer positioned as a miner within three years and the Mt Jewell gold project provides an excellent opportunity as far as that goes.”

Lucky find

Situated around 50 kilometres north of Kalgoorlie-Boulder in Crook’s adopted home state of Western Australia, Mt Jewell is currently the focus of Pioneer Resources’ exploration efforts.

The junior acquired the ground when it was spun out from Heron Resources Ltd in the early 2000s, but only started looking at its yellow metal potential in earnest post the onslaught of the global financial crisis, when it became obvious that gold was the commodity to be in.

Crook had been with Heron since 1997, helping the well-known (and quite adventurous) Ian Buchhorn gather an enormous land holding around the Kalgoorlie-Boulder region.

“We successfully put together the North Kalgoorlie Nickel Project tenements just as the then big three nickel laterite operations (Cawse, Bulong and Murrin Murrin) were

being developed and ramped up,” he said.

While the acquisition focus was lateritic nickel, many other mouth watering prospects were identified within Heron’s extensive tenements – including Mt Jewell.

After listing Pioneer on the same day as the celebration for the patron saint of mining – St Barbara’s Day – in 2003, Crook led the newly-formed company as it started its initial search for nickel sulphides.

When the GFC hit, however, he turned the junior’s attention to Mt Jewell and its other yellow metals holdings north, east and south of the WA gold mining capital.

“At the moment Mt Jewell is very much an early exploration play,” Crook explained.

“We followed up some anomalous geochemistry that I knew about, and from there it was the systematic application of modern exploration techniques.

“At the beginning we started off with quite a small target but very quickly this blossomed into two small deposits.

“We were able to acquire some more ground and, for the rest of this year, we plan to have a big push of target generating work and that will be interspersed with resource definition drilling.”

Repeat performance

If Crook is successful in turning Mt Jewell into a mine, it won’t be the first time he has been involved in the discovery of an economic greenfields ore body.

In 1983-84 he was part of the team which discovered what became the Radio Hill nickel sulphide operation in WA’s Pilbara.

A graduate of the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, Crook originally arrived in Australia in 1979 during a stopover on his way to a backpackers’ trip around Europe.

Instead, he ended up as a field hand, working near Alice Springs and Pine Creek in the Northern Territory, and then central NSW.

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David Crook

He became a fully fledged rock kicker in 1980 when he joined Whim Creek Consolidated in WA. He eventually managed to don the backpack for Europe in 1985 and, other than a brief sojourn in Botswana during 1995, has worked in the Golden State ever since.

He is married to Jenny and has three sons – with two being budding mining engineers.

Outside of work Crook is perpetually trying to lose 10 kilograms for the doctor, can cook a very average BBQ, enjoys the odd family trip back to New Zealand and is establishing an art collection with pieces sourced from areas he has worked.

Professional challenges

As for managing a company after so many years of being in the field, he said one of the reasons he chose to head a junior company was the fact it gave him the chance to back himself.

And now, in this position, Crook admits his greatest priority is keeping money up to the exploration team.

“Early in my career, a company secretary told me that a very important part of my job was to have an understanding of the stock market,” he recalled.

“Since then I have always viewed the junior miner and the stock market as integrally related.

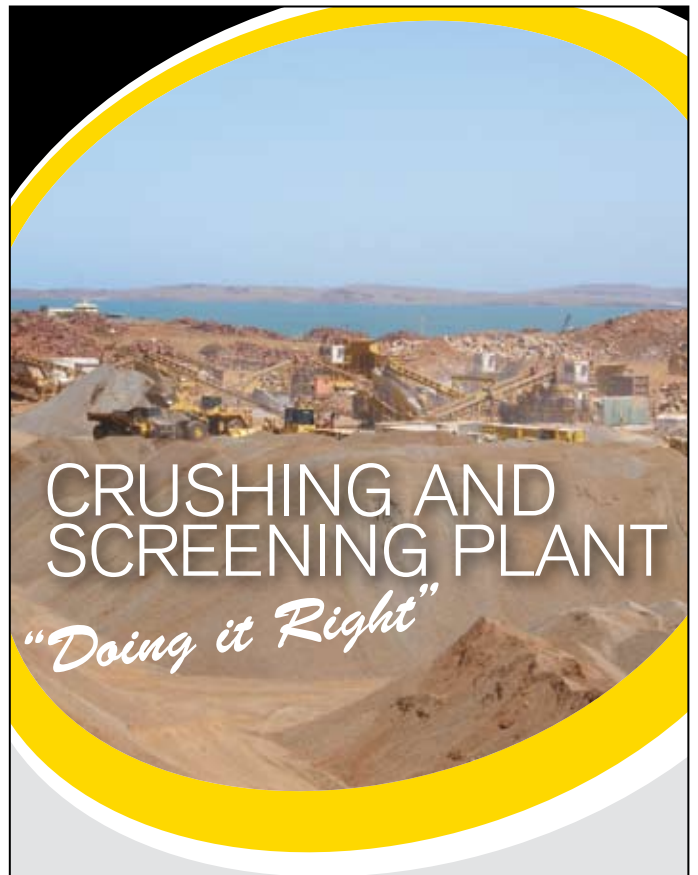
“Running a public company is an opportunity and honour not available to most people. Since the early 1980s this is a position I have aspired to.

“The biggest difference between running a company and being an employee of it is that it’s a real emotional roller coaster ride.

“That’s probably the biggest difference – but along with the responsibility, I am firmly of the belief that I’ve been delivered a great opportunity.

“At Pioneer we’ve got a great land holding, we are reasonably funded and have a good team.

“These are the building blocks – then it’s down to the old adage: The harder we work, the luckier we will get.”



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