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## Madagascar: Ilmenite mining in exchange for forests and people

Mining giant Rio Tinto, the world's second largest diversified miner, has been given permission to open up an enormous mine on the Indian Ocean island of Madagascar that will involve digging up some of the world's most unique forest on Indigenous territory.

The \$775 million titanium dioxide mining projected to be carried out in the Fort Dauphin region of the island is being developed by QIT Madagascar Minerals, a subsidiary of Rio Tinto, with 20 per cent owned by the government and support from the World Bank.

Up to 1,000 hectares of land and coastal rainforest bordering the Indian Ocean will be dug up in different phases to extract ilmenite, the mineral which can be used to produce the white titanium dioxide pigment used more and more to colour paint, paper, plastics and toothpaste as lead paint is discontinued due to health impacts. The huge economic growth of China has led to enormous demand for the white pigment, at a time when other ilmenite mines in Australia and South Africa are being exhausted.

The first production will begin in 2008, once a new port has been built, partly with \$35 million of funding from the World Bank. The mining project is expected to have an initial capacity of 750,000 tonnes a year and the whole operation could last for 40 years.

Friends of the Earth has opposed the plans from the outset, and even one of their leading directors, Andrew Lees, died 10 years ago in the same forest while investigating the controversial plans for a mine. A botanist with a special passion for waterlands, he was investigating the effect it would have not only on its wildlife, but also on the Malagasy people, many of whom live in the forest.

Madagascar has more groups of unique animals than anywhere else on earth. There are 24 families of species that are found only on the island. Best known of Madagascar's animals are the lemurs, monkey-like creatures with large eyes, of which there are 32 different species. Other creatures under ecological stress are the ploughshare tortoise, the world's rarest tortoise, of which only a few hundred survive today, and the sideneck turtle.

Tony Juniper, head of Friends of the Earth, is aghast that the project has got the go-ahead. The day he got to know of the decision, he said: "This is a very sad day and very bad news for the people of Madagascar. Rio Tinto is exploiting natural resources in the developing world and, once again, it is the local people who will pay the price. This mine will not solve the terrible problems of poverty on the island, but it will damage its precious biodiversity". He said that it was time international laws were introduced to protect the interests of people and the environment. "It is becoming increasingly clear that companies cannot be trusted to do so."

Christine Orengo, Lees's partner said. 'There is terrible poverty in Madagascar, but this is not the best way to alleviate it. Thousands of foreigners will come in to take the jobs, and there are worries about the spread of diseases such as HIV. I fear it's going to destroy one of the most beautiful regions in the world.'

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Rio Tinto has tried to preserve its image against criticisms and promised to replant the tropical forest they have to trash to get to the ilmenite working in areas of 50 hectares at a time. They would remove the ore from the sand and then replace the sand and replant it with trees. As if you can “plant” a thriving and biodiverse ecosystem like a forest!

Juniper said no company could guarantee that its plans would work out in the best way possible. 'You might have lots of plans for environmental protection, backed by lots of experts, but we are looking at a mine which will operate for 40 years.

“What are we going to do if, at the end of it all, there are species which become extinct and a habitat that is ruined and people who are still impoverished? Who's going to be held accountable for that? No one. It's the age-old story of multinationals getting exactly what they want, whatever the environmental cost.”

Article based on information from: “Madagascar's unique forest under threat”, August, 2005, The Observer, Guardian Unlimited,  
<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1544101,00.html>; Rio Tinto Mine Lifts Hopes of Madagascar Progress, Planet Ark, Mines & Communities Website,  
<http://www.minesandcommunities.org/Action/press704.htm>