
Madagascar: communities defend rainforests against Rio Tinto

Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto has been frequently denounced for its depredatory activities against forests and local villagers in Indonesia (see WRM Bulletin 8), Papua New Guinea (see WRM Bulletin 7) and South Africa. Now Rio Tinto has set its sights in rainforests of Madagascar, one of the megabiodiverse countries in the world, due to its situation in the tropical zone and to the fact of being a big island. Local villagers are strongly opposing the company's plans to mine for titanium, a mineral used to make hardened steel, on the Southeast coast of the country despite the company's efforts to woo the community.

Qit-Fer Madagascar Minerals, a Rio Tinto subsidiary, first proposed to mine the 40 kilometres of coastal dunes that cover the villages of Petricky, Mandena and St Luce in 1986. Since then the project has faced significant opposition from the communities and environmentalists because the mine would deforest the area. Even the World Bank, which had been asked to finance the project, pulled out in 1992 as a result of the findings of an environmental impact assessment carried out by a consulting firm hired by Qit-Fer.

Facing a vigorous international campaign against the mine led by Friends of the Earth, Qit-Fer has spent five months conducting a so called "consultation" process with the 120 communities who live in the area of the mine. Nevertheless such consultation did not actually take place. The company just provided large dinner feasts for the meetings and displayed models of dredging machines, but the devastating impacts of similar Rio Tinto mines in several countries were not mentioned or shown.

Local people reacted to such manoeuvres: "We have seen pictures of the dredging machine and you won't be able to recreate Petricky for a long time after that. What wood will we use for the next 47 years?" said a Lovarhano villager. "Petricky existed before the existence of the people, it is sacred land. The forest of Petricky is our mother. If you cut it down we will have nothing," said one man in Ambovo. Since part of the mining project includes a huge industrial port at Evatra which is situated on a pristine river mouth, Evatra's leader, Ludovic denounced that if the port is built "the sea won't be able to get through to the river and we won't be able to fish".

Regarding employment, community members are also worried about the company's recent statement that all but 350 jobs would be filled by skilled foreign engineers and technicians for the 40 year duration of the project. The additional 3000 jobs required at the start of the project will not necessarily go to local people. The company has failed to discuss other alternative sustainable economic practices based on the local management of natural resources, forests included.

Source: Drillbits & Tailings, Volume 4, Number 5, 31/3/1999, based on: "Forest People Tell Mining Giant Never!" by Anna Weekes, Gemini News Service, February 3, 1999. "Habitat faces destruction sooner or later" by Colin Barraclough, Miami Herald, November 21, 1997. Pers. comm. Friends of the Earth UK. Comments by WRM International Secretariat.

