

MINING YOUR OWN BUSINESS: IGNORANCE IS NOT A SOLUTION

ABSTRACT

Is water more precious than gold; environment more valuable than mercury; human life more imperative than copper? If the answer is yes, then why have our waters been polluted, our environment destroyed, and lives lost at the expense of mining? This paper explores some of the consequences of mining and governmental inaction, such as the violation of human rights and environmental destruction, while looking at actions undertaken by Indigenous peoples and anthropologists.

INTRODUCTION

Our environment is being exploited. Human rights are being denied. Mines are being built all over this planet with little regard to safe practices, the environment and humanity. More and more the greed of mining companies and the governments that back them are being revealed. People are beginning to stand against these decisions which are made without their consent and are realizing that “minding your own business” will get you nowhere. This paper delves into the affairs of mining companies and the actions and motivations of the people who have fought against them.

In this paper I argue that wealth, industry and policy are inextricably tied and that these forces, rather than human rights, are what drive decisions of environmental exploitation. As an example I discuss the impacts of mining undertaken on the lands of Indigenous peoples. In these situa-

tions Indigenous groups are frequently forced to independently defend the land. I will look closely at gold mining in the Amazon and copper sulfide mining in the United States as well as an issue closer to home—Prosperity Mine, a gold mine proposed by Taseko Mines in British Columbia¹. I will pose questions—within the context of mining on Indigenous peoples lands— such as: What is wealth? What are the links between human rights and environment? What are the responses to the mines? Can anthropologists help? And what are Indigenous groups doing to defend their land?

WHAT IS WEALTH?

At a recent protest in Williams Lake against the proposed Prosperity Mine, people held picket signs reading “Water is more precious than gold” (Hitchcock 2010). There can be no argument to this statement; water is essential, while gold is superfluous. Just as land, environment, culture,

and human life are far more important than copper, zinc, and mercury. But history would seem to suggest otherwise. When European empires explored and colonized the New World, they were driven, in part, by their greed for gold. These imposed colonial forces despoiled and destroyed environments, peoples and cultures, and it can be argued that “this holocaust continues today [...]” (Sponsel 1997:100). Despite this, mines continue to be approved by governments and by the general population while Indigenous groups, and others concerned for the environment, struggle to protect their land and their lives. In Brazil, like the rest of the world, the problems of gold mining tend to be denied, minimized, or ignored by the government (Sponsel 1997:114). This ignorance leads to the continuous suffering of Indigenous peoples (through loss of lands, drinking water, and other resources leading to decreased standards of living and a degradation of culture) and a draining of the natural resources that exist in the Amazon, leaving the land polluted and unsalvageable. In Wisconsin, USA, the Department of Natural Resources, in its opposition of a mine on the Sakaogon Chippewa peoples reserve, argued that the “lake and the bounty of the lakes harvest lie at the heart of their identity as a people... The rice and the lake are the major links between themselves, Mother Earth, their ancestors and future generations” (Gedicks 1997:131). Similarly Marilyn Baptiste, chief of the Xení Gwet’in has argued that the Taseko’s proposed “mine would kill the pristine and culturally and ecologically important Fish Lake

by turning it into a massive toxic tailing pond” (where the mine dumps their waste) (Baptiste and Sam 2010). How is it that the monetary value produced from these mines continues to be measured against the value of humanity, culture, and environment?

HUMAN RIGHTS AND ENVIRONMENT

The link between human rights and environment is shown clearly in the three different mining examples described in this paper. In each situation the government turns a blind eye to human rights abuses. Many are unaware of the destruction effected by mining: it causes biodiversity reduction, mass deforestation, and pollution which involves chemicals that seep into the soil and water, thereby contaminating, and often killing, all living things which come into contact with these substances. For every gold mine “about nine *tons* of waste are left for every *ounce* of gold extracted” (Sponsel 1997:103, emphasis in original). People have a right to their land and way of life. In 1994 the UN drafted a Declaration of Principles on Human Rights and the Environment, which stated:

2. All persons have the right to a secure, healthy and ecologically sound environment;
5. All persons have the right to freedom from pollution, environmental degradation and activities that adversely affect the environment, threaten life, health, livelihood, well-being or sustainable development within, across or outside national boundaries;
14. Indigenous peoples have the right to control their lands, territories and

natural resources and to maintain their traditional way of life [...]. (as cited in Sponsel 1997:118)

These proposed principles are ideal and one could assume that they would help Indigenous groups in their cases against mining developments, but once thought through one would realize that the basic human rights agreement signed by nearly every country in the world has not protected people thus far from these projects. Wayne LaBine a tribal planner for the Sakaogon Chippewa reservation stated: “The threat of annihilation has been hanging over this community since 1975. The mental stress and mental anguish are unbearable at times” (Gedicks 1997:131). It would seem obvious that no people should be forced into a situation like that; where their culture and livelihood are constantly at risk. Sponsel argues that the political bodies that control the decisions on international human rights are frequently the agents of rights violations (1997:119). With that in mind it is clear that governments place environmental and Indigenous people’s welfare as a secondary concern against profit and economic growth.

THE RESPONSE

The key players within these situations are the mining companies who are proposing the projects, the miners who carry them out, the governments who permit them to take place, the Indigenous groups who are opposing the mines, anthropologists and other specialists who involve themselves, and the general public. Both the

mining companies and government leave the public, including the miners, uninformed about the effects of mining processes. Sponsel states that in most situations “...the miners have tended to ignore, deny, or minimize the human and environmental problems they create, a stance that is reinforced by government action or lack of action” (1997:112). Davi Kopenawa Yanomami of the Yanomami people in Brazil stated: “The miners invaded our reserve and came to our communities feigning friendship; they lied to us, they tricked us Indians [...]” (Sponsel 1997:99). In addition to the public being left ill-informed, Indigenous voices are frequently ignored by dominant society. An article written in *The Northern Miner*, Canada’s mining industry newspaper, validates the objections of environmental groups while depicting Indigenous people’s protests as inconsequential: “The only objections raised at the Crandon press conference [...] came from native Americans who expressed concern over archaeological aspects of the site. No objections were heard from environmental groups” (Gedicks 1997:131). The government response to mining only reinforces the same views: that the concerns of Indigenous peoples are negligible. In the Roraima province in Brazil, governor General Fernando Ramos Pereira said of destructive mining within the country: “I am of the opinion that an area as rich as this—with gold, diamonds, and uranium—cannot afford the luxury of conserving a half a dozen Indian tribes who are holding back the development of Brazil” (Sponsel 1997:103). The governments within

North America may not be as bold as to say that, but the end result seems to be much the same. Arlyn Ackley, the chairman on the Sakaogon Chipewewa reserve, affirmed: “Let it be known here and now that these companies are prepared to plunder and destroy our people and lands for their insatiable greed. They may be more polite in North America, but they are no less deadly to Native people” (Gedicks 1997:132). Chief Marilyn Baptiste and Anne Marie Sam of the Xeni Gwet’in explain: “The \$500 billion that [...] has been generated by mining over the past 150 years have come from First Nations lands and resources that were never ceded through any treaty. What First Nations have got out of it is abandoned and polluting mines [...]” (Baptiste and Sam 2010). Most often the general public is left ill-informed and trusting the decisions of these projects to their governments. Even the media offers insufficient information. For example, I could find only one article written from the perspective of the Xeni Gwet’in—this was published in the Vancouver Sun. But this same newspaper also published a guest column written by the president and CEO of the Association for Mineral Exploration in British Columbia that promoted mining projects, painting “a rosy picture of future great wealth and prosperity” (Baptiste and Sam 2010).

CAN ANTHROPOLOGISTS HELP?

Here in British Columbia the response to the Taseko mine, so far, has been to create a short documentary

film called *Blue Gold*². This film was supported by an environmental group as well as the environmental studies department on campus; unfortunately the turnout to the premier was relatively small. In the other two examples the only efforts on the part of anthropologists revealed would have been the writing of the articles themselves. So can anthropologists help, and if they can how should they do so? Sponcel suggests in his article that advocacy anthropology is the most obvious outlet to provide assistance. Although he did not provide an example of such an instance, he did list a variety of international associations that are involved in this sort of representation (1997:117). He suggests that “[a]nthropological, economic, political, legal, and psychological research is sorely and urgently needed on all the different interest groups involved in [...] mining for a more holistic understanding of the situation and in search of ways to try to reduce or resolve aspects of the crisis” (1997:121). One also has to keep in mind that anthropologists “are usually short-term transients” (Sponcel 1997:116) which would affect their ability to provide accurate information and assistance. Improvements need to be made within the field. Anthropologists need to work with and for Indigenous groups rather than an outside institution that enters the scene with a preexisting set of assumptions and methods for aid. One has to acknowledge that anthropology, among other disciplines, can be a detriment as much as it can be an advantage in these situations.

CONCLUSION

All is not lost, yet. There are successes in opposing mining projects such as the opposition of a nickel mine by the Innu and Inuit in 1997, or the victory of landowners in Papua New Guinea against another massive mining project. Though these occurrences are still very few, there is hope that the recent global concern for the environment has brought publicity to these minority groups who are being exploited. If this publicity continues to expand, these atrocities will become more and more transparent to the public. Indigenous groups are joining together. They are uniting with environmental groups, community factions, specialists, and the media. People are beginning to come together to protest these unnecessary mines. The Sakaogon Chippewa peoples have managed to hold off Exxon and its Canadian partners' attempts at building a mine, but how long will it be until they, or someone else returns? In British Columbia the Xení Gwet'in are defending their lands in a federal review and the Tsilhqot'in nation is currently trying to protect Fish Lake by establishing fishing rights in court (Baptiste and Sam 2010). But if they succeed, will they too have to live in fear and mental anguish, wondering if they will have to fight this battle again in future years? Why are Indigenous groups forced to be the sole defenders of the land? Perhaps others are not as quick to react or have been too late in understanding the importance of environment. Frances Van Zile, a Chippewa woman, pointed out that "[t]his isn't an Indian issue, nor is it a white issue. It's everybody's issue. Everybody has to take care of [the]

water" and the land (Gedicks 1997:134). This is everyone's responsibility, and an opportunity to come together and protect the environment in whatever way we can. Now is the time to think of the future.

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NOTES

¹ For more information on the proposed "Prosperity Mine" and the communities who are fighting it please visit: <http://www.landkeepers.ca/> OR <http://www.protectfishlake.ca/> OR <http://www.raventrust.com/projects/fishlake/teztanbiny.html>

² To view the film *Blue Gold: The Tsilhqot'in Fight for Teztan Biny (Fish Lake)* visit: <http://vimeo.com/9679174>

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