
Costa Rica: Grass-roots resistance to open cast mining in Crucitas

On 17 December 2001, by Resolution # R-578-2001-MINAE and in a totally underhand manner, the Costa Rican Ministry of the Environment and Energy (MINAE) granted a concession for the exploitation of an open-cast goldmine using leaching with cyanide to Industrias Infinito S.A. a branch of the Canadian transnational corporation Vanesa Ventures.

The plans of Industrias Infinito S.A. are to exploit an area of 18 square kilometres in Crucitas, in the north of the country, between the mountains La Fortuna and Botija, some 3 km from the San Juan River. This involves the felling of over 190 hectares of forest (including species that are protected such as almond trees) because, as described by the journalist and opponent to the project, Marco Tulio Araya:

“Mining activities do not allow for any trees to remain standing, the trees must be clear-cut that is to say the mountain must be left bare to start digging and take out the rocks containing gold. Roughly a ton and a half of rock are needed to obtain one gram of gold. In order to obtain one kilo large amounts of material need to be ground and liquefied using millions of litres of water with cyanide, because cyanide acts as a magnet to the microscopic gold particles. A mine extracting gold and other metals using this procedure known as leaching requires as much water per hour as a peasant family uses in 20 years. To obtain such a quantity of water the company buys up the farms around the mine so nobody accuses it and diverts the streams to join them up, which is something clearly illegal. The water -contaminated with cyanide residues- that is no longer necessary goes to big lagoons where it continues poisoning any animal that drinks it. Sometimes the company puts up warning notices, but as neither the birds nor the animals know how to read, death and destruction continues.”

The cost is very high: it is not only the landscape of Las Crucitas that will be destroyed, but also no less than 32 neighbouring communities and the San Juan River, neighbouring with Nicaragua, will also be affected.

As in Costa Rica clear-cutting is banned and the only exception allowed is for National Convenience projects, after various comings and goings, the open-cast mining project ended up by being considered to be of “public interest” in order to get it approved. But the people of Costa Rica ask themselves what public usefulness is being referred to when mining brings destruction, contamination and more climate change.

It has been clearly shown -and communities affected by mining all over the world can testify to it- that mining is a short term activity but with long-term, extended and generally irreversible destructive effects. One of these effects is to contribute to climate change, both through the deforestation it generally involves – as is the case in Costa Rica – and because it is an industrial activity requiring a large amount of energy for its operation, mainly coming from the burning of fossil fuels (coal, gas or diesel), with emissions causing climate change.

Ever since the Government of Costa Rica issued the declaration of public interest, the ecologist and social movement led by the organizations and communities of the North Zone have been carrying out

a struggle against the project, with wide support from the general public.

Coecoceiba – Friends of the Earth Costa Rica reports that “The struggle against the Crucitas project has been going on for over fifteen years, thanks to the communities from the north zone. Over these fifteen years, they have managed to reject environmental impact assessments, enormous companies such as Placer Dome and to build up a strong social web that today once again unites to resist and overcome a further onslaught against the communities and their environment.”

The Costa Rican people have reacted strongly against what they consider to be an environmental crime, showing up the duality of the Government's policy: “The present Government has two policies regarding the environment. One that it shows on an international level, maintaining that environmental conservation must exist, that the world is in danger due to the environmental collapse, among other universally accepted phrases. Around the world, the “Initiative of Peace with Nature”, carbon neutral and “Costa Rica for Ever” have become an important part of the foreign policy whereby the country attempts to position itself in diverse fora while requesting financial resources. The country's internal environmental policy, its everyday policy, is in contradiction with the other. This second policy is the one advocating deregulation, eliminating the requirement of environmental impact assessment to more and more activities to determine if they are feasible. This is the policy that defends tooth and nail that an open-cast mine with cyanide leaching is compatible with the environment and to achieve this, they recite the old and outdated formula that “the project is viable from a social, economic and environmental standpoint.” (see http://www.feconcr.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1382&Itemid=76)

A "March for Life" was organized in Quezada City on November 14th to express the peoples' opposition to destructive projects. People from communities in the vicinity of the mining `project came together to demonstrate against open-cast mining and to demand the repeal of the decree. The march was followed by a cultural activity.

Many organizations have filed an application for enforcement of rights, demanding that the permits granted be reconsidered and cancelled. From neighbouring Nicaragua, the events are being followed with concern as there are communities in this country that would be affected by the open-cast mine.

Indignation is great and resistance grows.

For more information, visit the webpage of the anti-mine campaign in Crucitas:
<http://fueradecrucitas.blogspot.com/>