
[Madagascar: Rio Tinto mining project goes ahead... for the worst](#)

Madagascar is widely recognised as one of the most ecologically rich countries in the world, hosting unique plant and animal species. However, dating from French colonisation, the export-led production pattern was introduced in the country. Logging of primary rainforests for use in railroad construction and timber exports, and major forest clearance of the most fertile areas for cash-crop plantations was carried out, throwing a mainly subsistence farming society into famine and scarcity (see WRM Bulletin 66).

Now, Madagascar is amidst the poorest countries. However, it would be wise that language reflects the truth: the Malagasy people are not poor but have been impoverished, as has happened with most of the southern peoples.

At present there are no foreign countries overtly holding reins of the government, but colonialism still has its clutch deeply rooted in the country's economy. The modern pirates have come to "save" the country: the IMF has paved the way (through liberalisation requirements conditioning credits) for the Anglo-Canadian mining giant Rio Tinto to implement a project in the island (see WRM bulletins 22, 54 and 55).

QIT Madagascar Minerals S.A., (QMM) a Malagasy company owned 80% by Rio Tinto and 20% by the State, began to carry out a feasibility study and in November 2001 was granted an environmental permit for the project. The proposed project will require that hundreds of millions of tonnes of soil over 6,000 hectares will be dredged to extract ilmenite, a mineral that is usually treated with sulfuric acid to obtain titanium dioxide which is used to make pigment, which, in turn, is used extensively for paint and plastics manufacture. It will mean carving an artificial lake in what is left of the woodland and moving it, at about a metre a day, while a machine sucks up the earth and another sifts the ilmenite. The mining could last 60 years.

Within the framework of the new "greenwash" push of transnationals, Rio Tinto is eagerly trying to prove the unprovable: that mining is sustainable for the environment and the people! But everybody knows (or should be aware of) the real aim of any business company: to make profits. According to The Handbook for Corporate Action, this project "forms a key part in maintaining Rio Tinto's future share of the titanium dioxide feedstock supply".

Madagascar's government has given the go-ahead and the company has spent US \$ 41 million in anticipation of work starting in 2005. The election last year of Marc Ravalomanana brought to the presidential palace a young, self-made tycoon promising progress. A darling of the west, he is keen on Rio Tinto's proposed ilmenite mine, in the hope that it will generate jobs and funds for the exchequer. Marc Ravalomanana has recently met with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell on May at the US. Powell said Washington would support President Ravalomanana in his "efforts to institute political and economic reforms". The news a month later is of the World Bank granting \$32 million International Development Association (IDA) credit to "help Madagascar manage its mineral resource more effectively".

Interviewed by a journalist from The Guardian, Serge Lachapelle, executive director of QIT, announced that: "We will keep going, no matter what". The warning came as the project has arisen strong opposition from environmental organisations such as Friends of the Earth, Conservation International, and WWF.

The company's "sustainable scheme" is that each of the three proposed mining sites would leave untouched a conservation area totalling 10% of the mined area. In addition, the company would restore another 10% of forest and in the remaining area plant fast-growing trees, such as eucalyptus, to provide charcoal and timber for local people. Rio Tinto hopes that it "will help create ecosystems from scratch." What took nature millennia could be restored with a recipe: save top soil from the dredger, plant 50% so-called pioneer trees which like the sun, followed later by 40% which like sun and shade, followed by 10% which like just shade. It just makes seem so easy to play God!

Friends of the Earth has already made a report where it concluded that the mining project would not be compatible with true sustainable development in southeast Madagascar, or for the country as a whole. During a decade and a half of intensive preparation and study, this supposedly "green" project, backed by an impressive array of global experts, has failed to prevent the escalating degradation of the environment which the company claims the mine will address and dramatically mitigate. Is this intentional? Is QMM/Rio Tinto deliberately holding back on initiation of conservation and restoration measures now, in order better to promote the idea that the mine project is indispensable to this purpose?, asks Friends of the Earth.

Also WWF will issue a report on the mine later this year. A member of the organisation living in Fort Dauphin, a town which will be affected by the mining project, said that the research stations shown to the Guardian amounted to a "dog and pony show". The conservation areas were too fragmented to be viable and would pressure certain species. Nor had the company thought about the potentially explosive conflict of placing at least 800 foreign labourers in a small town of 3,000 unemployed young men.

A tour of the surrounding villages yielded conflicting views: most people, barefoot and in rags, knew a mine was planned, but exactly where and when, and its likely impact were a mystery. "It will destroy traditional agriculture, no way," said Karae, head of Houtotmotre village. After conferring with other elders he added: "Though, with the drought we don't have any crops, so then again maybe we have nothing to lose." Albert Mahazoly, 45, was recently laid off from a sisal plantation which was just about the only way of making money in Ankitry village. Now his family were among those queuing up for sacks of maize from the World Food Programme. This was a humiliation Mr Mahazoly was not planning to tolerate for long. "I'm ready to go to the mine. I'll do whatever they ask me," he said. The possibility that his unskilled labour might not be wanted came as a shock. "But I'll do anything," he said. And so the circle is closed: deprived, impoverished and plundered.

Article based on information from: "Mining giant threatens to scar island paradise", Rory Carroll, The Guardian, June 23, 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,982989,00.html> ; "The case against QMM/Rio Tinto in Madagascar", Nostromo Research, London, November 12, 2001, report commissioned by Friends of the Earth, <http://www.minesandcommunities.org/Company/foemadagascar2.htm> ; QIT Madagascar Minerals Ilmenite Project, http://www.hatch.ca/Sustainable_Development/Projects/madagascar-qit_minerals_ilmenite_project.htm ; "Rio Tinto in Madagascar", Rio Tinto homepage, <http://www.riotinto.com/news/showMediaRelease.asp?id=473> ; "Malagasy President Meets With Colin Powell", VOA 27.05.2003, <http://www.madagasikara.de/2003/Mai/030527voara8usa.htm> ; Madagascar: World Bank credit will help manage country's mineral resources, IRIN,

