They are gouging out our mother’s brains’
Amungme leader speaking of Freeport’s Grasberg mine in West Papua (Irian Jaya), near the home of the Amungme’s ancestral spirit

Mining is one of the world’s most important economic activities. The industry is dominated by transnational corporations that are richer than many of the countries where they operate.

Mining companies are active on all continents except Antarctica, and often pose a very serious threat to tribal peoples’ survival. Their sites turn the areas where tribal peoples live into wastelands of mud and dust. Roads built because of mining can cause even more damage than the sites themselves and cover up to 30 times more land.

Mining and logging: the evil twins
Many mining companies use up vast quantities of timber, especially where underground mining is involved. In the Philippines, for example, each mining company is also granted a logging concession to supply its need for pit props, shoring up tunnels, and making sluices. In this way, mining and logging interests combine to destroy the lives and lands of tribal peoples. Pollution is by no means confined simply to mining sites. Dust and toxic waste can flow hundreds of kilometres down rivers, affecting fishing, bathing and drinking water.

Mining involves a constant scramble for new mineral deposits and cheaper ways to exploit them. Short-term profits are placed above concern for human rights and the environment. As mining activities expand, the world’s tribal peoples are reduced to poverty by some of the world’s richest corporations.

Today, mining threatens tribal peoples for the following reasons:

• Most states still refuse to uphold tribal peoples’ rights over their territories, including the resources below ground. Instead, they make money by selling concessions on tribal lands to mining companies without the agreement of the true owners of the land.

• Mining is almost always opposed by those directly affected. Tribal peoples are seen as easy targets because they usually lack political or economic power.

• Governments and business leaders place a higher value on cash profit than on the basic rights of tribal peoples.
The main consequences of mining for tribal peoples are:

- Tribal land is seized by governments and mining companies. It is seldom – if ever – returned.
- The mining activities can disrupt or totally destroy the local subsistence economy, cutting off and polluting crucial water supplies, deforesting large areas and ruining soils forever.
- Because of tribal peoples’ intimate relationship to their land, they experience the theft of land as an attack on their cultures, religious beliefs and ways of life. Mining is often a violation of their most sacred places.
- Effects on health are often severe, and can include poisoning, asthma and respiratory problems, and malnutrition following environmental damage. Elsewhere, companies are able to get away with even lower environmental standards. In West Papua and Papua New Guinea, for example, major companies including Freeport McMoRan and Rio Tinto (formerly RTZ) let their waste pollute the rivers.
- Human Rights: Some companies have a lamentable record of collaboration with oppressive regimes. Rio Tinto – which operated in South Africa and Namibia throughout the apartheid regime – now owns a 12% stake in PT Freeport Indonesia, a subsidiary of Freeport McMoRan, USA. Freeport has a long record of collusion with Indonesia’s occupation of West Papua and the oppression of its tribal peoples; as a result, the company’s sites have often been targeted by the Papuans as symbols of their oppression.

Small-scale mining

It is not just multinationals that threaten tribal peoples’ existence. Small-scale mining operations can also pollute and kill. In Amazonia, for example, pioneer gold miners have polluted drinking water and fishing grounds with mercury used to extract the gold. They have also introduced prostitution, and diseases fatal to Brazil’s indigenous peoples.

- Many mines pump out poisonous waste either from underground workings or from processing plants. Gold production uses large quantities of cyanide compounds and other toxic materials. In August 1995, a major cyanide spillage occurred in Guyana, when waste from the Omai gold mine escaped into the Essequibo River.
- Human Rights: Some companies have a lamentable record of collaboration with oppressive regimes. Rio Tinto – which operated in South Africa and Namibia throughout the apartheid regime – now owns a 12% stake in PT Freeport Indonesia, a subsidiary of Freeport McMoRan, USA. Freeport has a long record of collusion with Indonesia’s occupation of West Papua and the oppression of its tribal peoples; as a result, the company’s sites have often been targeted by the Papuans as symbols of their oppression.

Mining by tribal peoples

Some tribal peoples in different parts of the world have their own forms of mining. In the Philippine Cordillera, the Ibaloi and Kankanai peoples have long mined for gold using no harmful chemicals. Access to the mines is controlled by community elders. When gold is found, the whole community may receive a share. This mining has proved sustainable over many centuries and provides a livelihood for many more people than the corporate mines that now threaten the area.

Tribal resistance

Tribal peoples from around the world are challenging the right of mining companies to take their land:

- In Australia, following years of protest by aboriginal organisations, new laws have forced mining companies to negotiate directly with Aborigines.
- In Panama, Survival supported the Guaymi in a campaign to halt the plans of Rio Tinto to open a huge copper mine at Cerro Colorado.
- In Mainit, Philippines, in the 1970s, Bontok women fought with mining company surveyors and drove them away. In some protests, they removed their clothes to shame their attackers into retreat. Today the companies are back, but the people of Mainit are determined to resist attempts to mine their land.

Tribal peoples should have the right to determine the future of their lands and decide what mining – if any – takes place on them. Survival calls on governments and companies to recognise this right and act accordingly.

Background Reading


Digging up Mother Earth © Survival 1998. For copies of other background sheets or more information about Survival’s work contact: Survival, 6 Charterhouse Buildings, London, EC1M 7ET, United Kingdom. Tel: 020 7687 8700, Fax: 020 7687 8701.

Survival is a worldwide organisation supporting tribal peoples. It stands for their right to decide their own future and helps them protect their lives, lands and human rights.