

JUST Notes
SPECIAL ISSUE ON
Mountain Top Removal/Mining
October, 2009

We promise to stand with people who are poor by seeking out and addressing critical needs, particularly in those places where our presence could make a difference and by working with others to alleviate conditions of poverty and oppression.

- *Promise Chapter 2006*
Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange

EARTH CHARTER

PRINCIPLE II: ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY

5. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.

f. Manage the extraction and use of non-renewable resources such as minerals and fossil fuels in ways that minimize depletion and cause no serious environmental damage.

PRINCIPLE III: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

9. Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.

a. Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.

NOTE:

If you have no time to read the entire JUST Notes, click on the following link to watch an 8-minute video on the environmental consequences of mountain top removal.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPixjCneseE>

FACTS

UNITED STATES

- Mountaintop removal is a relatively new type of coal mining that began in Appalachia in the 1970s as an extension of conventional strip mining techniques. According to the Nature Conservancy, the mountain region including southwest Virginia, southern West Virginia, eastern Kentucky and northeastern Tennessee contains some of the highest levels of biological diversity in the nation. This region is also at the headwaters of the drinking water supplies of many US cities.
– *Adapted from ILoveMountains.org*
- During the last two decades, mountaintop removal mining in Appalachia has destroyed or severely damaged more than a million acres of forest and buried nearly 2,000 miles of streams.
– *Adapted from Yale Environment 360*
- Studies found that the natural return of forests to mountaintop mines reclaimed with grasses under hay and pasture or wildlife post-mining land uses occurs very slowly. Full reforestation across a large mine site in such cases may not occur for hundreds of years.
– *Adapted from ILoveMountains.org*

The Process of Mountain Top Removal

1) **CLEARING** — Before mining can begin, all topsoil and vegetation must be removed. Trees are often not even used commercially, but instead are burned or sometimes illegally dumped into valley fills.

2) **BLASTING** — Coal seams lie deep below the surface of the mountains. Accessing these seams through surface mining can require the removal of 500-800 feet or more of elevation. Blowing up this much mountain is accomplished by using millions of pounds of explosives.

3) DIGGING — Coal and debris is removed by using a machine called a dragline which stands 22 stories high and can hold 24 compact cars in its bucket. These are favored by coal companies because they replace the need for hundreds of jobs.

4) DUMPING WASTE — The waste from the mining operation, also known as overburden or spoil, is dumped into nearby valleys, burying streams.

5) PROCESSING — The coal is washed and treated before it is loaded on trains. The excess water left over from this process called coal slurry or sludge and is stored in open coal impoundments. Coal sludge is a mix of water, coal dust, clay and toxic chemicals such as arsenic mercury, lead, copper, and chromium.

6) RECLAMATION — While reclamation efforts such as stabilization and revegetation are required for mountaintop removal sites, in practice, state agencies that regulate mining are generous with granting waivers to coal companies. Most sites receive little more than a spraying of exotic grass seed, but even the best reclamation provides no comfort to nearby families and communities whose drinking water supplies have been polluted and whose homes will be threatened by floods.

– Adapted from *ILoveMountains.org*

In a world of rising energy prices, rising global temperatures, and rising sea levels, Americans are calling for clean and affordable energy. Yet under the influence of big energy companies, policy-makers are stubbornly clinging to the old, dirty fossil fuel technologies of the past. Along with global warming, mountaintop removal is an egregious example of the destructive impact of our addiction to coal.

– Adapted from *ILoveMountains.org*

ABANDONED MINES - Abandoned mine lands (AMLs) present serious threats to human health and the environment. Addressing AML impacts is becoming increasingly important due to increased exposure to people and risks of accidents, injuries, and tort claims. There are estimates of as many as 500,000 abandoned mines in our nation.

Recreational fishing can place anglers in proximity of AML sites, and is impacted by decreased fish population among polluted waters stemming from AML sites, and available fish may pose significant uptake of contaminants when consumed.

Surface runoff can carry AML-originated silt and debris down-stream, eventually leading to stream clogging. Sedimentation results in the blockage of the stream and can cause flooding of roads and/or residences and pose a danger to the public. Sedimentation may also cause adverse impacts on fish. Highly acidic water rich in metals, or, AMD, is a serious problem at many abandoned mines. Abandoned mines can produce AMD for more than 100 years and, consequently, pose significant risks to surface water and ground water. AMD can lower the pH of surrounding surface water, making it corrosive and unable to support many forms of aquatic life and vegetation. Humans may also be affected by consuming water and fish tissue with a metal content.

– Adapted from *Abandoned Mines*

GLOBAL IMPACT

The devastation and violence perpetrated by Canadian mining corporations has been documented clearly with links to human rights violations in Guatemala, Peru, Romania, the Philippines, Honduras, Ecuador, Bolivia, Ghana, Suriname, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Papua New Guinea, Tanzania, India, Indonesia, Zambia and Sudan. Though the criticism of Canadian mining corporations taking advantage of so-called weak human rights protection in the South is made often enough, significantly less is said about the role of the same corporations in the destruction and displacement of Indigenous communities within Canadian borders.

–Adapted from *Mining Watch*

LATIN AMERICA

In all of the countries of the region where mining companies have appeared, there is opposition and conflict. It is the reality today in Latin America and there is no apparent way out of this problem as long as the mining companies consider themselves to have the right to carry out mining operations anywhere that minerals are located, without consideration of the threat to water, the forced displacement of communities, and the opposition of persons affected by the risks to ecosystems and public health.

It is becoming more and more difficult for the mining companies to sell the benefits of their activities as local communities and support organizations become more and more informed about the negative impacts of mining.

Adding to this are the scant or non-existent contributions from taxes and royalties, the undermining of already-weak national institutions, and the creation and use of political and social corruption and illegitimate pressures which weaken the democracies of the region even further. In the face of community opposition, the response is co-optation, threats, militarization, and the use of force.

–Adapted from Mining Watch

El Salvador - A wave of violence targeted at anti-mining protesters has ripped through Cabañas in north-eastern El Salvador. Marcelo Rivera, a prominent anti-mining activist lead a group that opposed the re-opening of the El Dorado mine. He was forcibly taken by unknown assailants; Rivera's disfigured body was found dumped in a well two weeks after he was last seen alive.

The movement opposed to Pacific Rim's presence in Cabañas has been active since 2005, but as the truth about exploratory holes began to ripple through Cabañas, participation in anti-mining events burgeoned. The exploratory drill holes utilized by Pacific Rim to estimate gold deposits were re-channeling underground streams and drastically impacting the aquifer. Residents became active and spoke about the impacts of the holes, and explained the dangers of cyanide leach mining on the water table.

- Adapted from Upside Down World

Peru - Following the release of an independent review of Newmont Mining Corporation's human rights practices at Yanacocha gold mine in northern Peru, international aid agency Oxfam America urges the mining company to address human rights concerns at the Peru gold mine. Newmont, the largest US-based mining company, agreed to the review in 2007 following allegations of serious rights abuses by police and private security forces hired to protect the mine. Among other recommendations, the review calls on the company to more rigorously investigate human rights abuses, disclose contracts with police forces, consider severing ties with a private security contractor, and promote greater dialogue with local communities.

– Adapted from Oxfam

In September 2007, the US-based not-for-profit organization Blacksmith Institute, listed the town of La Oroya (35,000 inhabitants) in Peru as one of the top ten most polluted places on earth. A poly-metallic smelter has been the main cause of the released toxins. A survey conducted by the Peruvian Ministry of Health in 1999 revealed blood lead levels among local children to be triple the limits set by the World Health Organization (WHO). Sulphur dioxide concentrations also exceeded the World Health Organization guidelines by a factor of ten. Vegetation in the surrounding area has been destroyed by acid rain due to high sulphur dioxide emissions.

– Adapted from Friends of the Earth Netherlands

Honduras - Dangerous levels of lead and arsenic have been found in the blood of Honduran villagers living downstream from a controversial gold and silver mine owned by Canada's Goldcorp Inc., the world's third largest gold mining firm. According to the ecologists who organized the study, lead and arsenic levels in the blood were higher than the maximum recommended by international standards (70 ug/dl) in a sample of 10 people who live near the San Martín mine, in San Ignacio, a municipality located in the central Siria Valley. The study, presented last year and downplayed by the mining industry, is just one more item in the growing file opened in Honduras against the company operating the mine, which has been the target of local and international protests since it opened in 1999.

–Adapted by Inter Press Service News Agency (IPS)

Bolivia - Residents of four villages in the Andes of Bolivia protest asking the government for it declares a state of emergency given environmental pollution in Huanuni that's crunching communities. The degradation and soil salinization, loss of crops and disappearing water wells, are some of the problems affecting southern Andes of Bolivia. The mines in Huanuni, owned by the state, are planning to produce in 2009 a record nine thousand tons of tin.

Also, in Bolivia thousands of children work in underground tin, zinc and silver mines. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) this is one of the worst forms of child labor. It is estimated that more than 13,500 children and adolescents in Bolivia work in traditional mining (extraction of tin, silver and zinc), mainly in the south-western departments of Oruro and Potosí, and in gold mining in the subtropical area around La Paz. Another estimate states that 3,800 children – 10 per cent of the total mining workforce – work in tin, zinc and silver mines in the Ururo, Potosí and La Paz departments.

– Adapted from *Friends of the Earth Netherlands*

Mexico - Reviews of Mexican neo-liberal policies since the 1980s including NAFTA have concluded that land privatization for corporate use including mining projects has resulted in an exponential increase in displacement and migration. Since NAFTA came into effect in 1994, over 15 million Mexicans have been displaced from their lands. The myth that mining is a necessary activity for economic development has been central to the industry. Most employment created by mining projects for local residents is short term and low-paid. Furthermore, mining companies receive heavy government subsidies in most countries, leave virtual ghost-towns after their projects end and leave local governments to dispose of wastes. The environmental price and the long term cost to local communities are never calculated.

– Adapted from *Mining Watch*

Chile/Argentina - Pascua Lama - a major gold-mining project that stretches across both sides of the Chilean-Argentine border in the Andes Mountains threatens one of the richest farming valleys in the region of Atacama, which is also the area in the country most heavily affected by desertification. Critics point out that the project endangers three glaciers, an important source of water for the valley's farmers, thus jeopardizing environmental sustainability.

Canada's Barrick Gold Corporation, the world's largest gold producer, owns the mining concession for Pascua Lama, 75 percent of which lies on the Chilean side of the border. The mining giant's plan is to extract 615,000 ounces of gold, 30 million ounces of silver and 5,000 tons of copper annually over 17 years. However, the deposits lie under three Andean glaciers.

– Adapted by *Inter Press Service News Agency (IPS)*

CANADA

The Canadian government has consistently failed to create meaningful measures to regulate the activities of Canadian mining companies operating overseas. A private member's bill, number C-300, represents the best chance for urgently needed regulation. It is currently being reviewed by the House of Commons to ensure that Canadian mining companies live up to international human rights and labor standards and environmental best practices when they operate overseas, and that government financial and political support are not provided to companies that abuse human rights and the environment.

– Adapted from *Mining Watch*

Canadian Network on Corporate Accountability (CNCA) united non-governmental organizations, including human rights, environmental and development groups, unions and faith-based institutions around the shared objective of improving the accountability of Canadian corporations. In Canada, growing attention is focused on the human rights impacts of Canadian companies' overseas operations. In June 2005, a ground breaking report was released that called for the adoption of widespread policy and law reforms to hold Canadian companies accountable for the human rights and environmental impacts of their operations in developing countries.

– Adapted from *Canadian Network on Corporate Accountability*

On November 1st there will be a Multi-stakeholder Conference on Corporate Accountability on Canada's Extractive Industries Operating Abroad. Federal Government officials, general public and industry representatives, academics and students, and media are encouraged to attend.

– Adapted from *Halifax Initiative Conference*

AFRICA

Increased mineral resource capture on the continent as a whole has brought on its trail conflicts between communities sitting on mineral wealth, mining companies and government.

[For example,] conflicts in Rwanda and between Rwanda and Congo DR, the Sudanese Darfur conflict, the long fought conflict between forces of Jonas Savimbi and government forces in Angola, the diamond conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and other cycle of civil strives and wars experienced across the continent of Africa are attributed, in part, to contest over mineral and more generally natural resources. In fact the relative instability between Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea is partly attributed to contest over the resources of the Manor River basin. The Manor River basin is a rich biodiversity zone that divides the three West African countries-the Republic of Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

At the community level, scarcity conflicts arise over three major types of resources: water, productive agricultural lands, and forestry/non-forest products. These renewable resources spark conflict between local communities and transnational corporations because although they are the bedrock for livelihood and survival they rapidly become scarce in mining affected areas. —Adapted from *Third World Network Africa*

ASIA

China- China's mining industry is the world's most dangerous with explosions and other accidents claiming more than 3,000 lives last year - an average of 13 every day. Most accidents are caused by a failure to follow safety rules, including a lack of required ventilation or fire control equipment. However, recent efforts by the government to crack down on mine safety - including the closure of many small, dangerous mines - appear to be having some effect. According to official reports the average number of miners killed so far this year has been halved to around six a day.

—Adapted from *Mines and Communities*

Indonesia - Tin mining in Indonesia – number one exporter of tin to the Netherlands – only takes place on and off the shores of Bangka Island, east of Sumatra. The mining damages coral reefs; seriously affects fishermen's income; has created hundreds of toxic craters on the island; causes abrasion of the coastline; and does not provide a sustainable livelihood for the people on the island.

– Adapted from *Friends of the Earth Netherlands*

West Papua, Indonesia -The Grasberg mine is a large mining complex located in West Papua, Indonesia. Grasberg is situated 4,000 meters above sea level, and borders on Lorentz National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Grasberg is an open pit mine, but also includes zones of underground operations. In 2008, the mine produced 499,000 tons of copper; copper reserves as of December, 2008 were 16 million tons. The mine has the world's largest copper reserves and biggest gold deposits. It is probably also the most polluting mine in the world.

The Grasberg mine discharges very large amounts of tailings (the refuse material resulting from processing ore) directly into the Aghawagon River, which feeds into the Otomona River. The Otomona River runs through a plain covered by rainforest. The rainforest and wetlands area have been destroyed which were a vital hunting, fishing and gardening area for Kamoro traditional landowners. Local communities face water shortages as their rivers have become contaminated.

– Adapted from *Friends of the Earth Netherlands*

PRAYER

Prayer for a World Renewed

O God,
our creator and sustainer,
we pray to you:

We want to celebrate life.

We cry out against all that kills life:
hunger, poverty, unemployment, sickness,
debt, repression, individualism,
abuse of the earth, injustice,
and all other forms of slavery.

We want to announce fullness of life:
work, education, health, housing,
safe environment, bread for all.

We want communion, solidarity,
a world renewed.

We hope against hope.
With the God of history,

We want to make things new again.

-- Adapted from Education for Justice

TAKE ACTION

- Urge your Senators to reduce mountaintop removal coal mining <http://www.ilovemountains.org/appalachia-restoration-act/>
- Urge your Representatives to support the Clean Water Protection Act <http://www.ilovemountains.org/clean-water-protection-act/>
- Take action against violence towards anti-mining activists in El Salvador <http://www.share-elsalvador.org/news/082309-action.htm#salvadoran>

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Abandoned Mines <http://www.abandonedmines.gov/index.html>
- Halifax initiative Conference <http://halifaxinitiative.info/content/conference-corporate-accountability-canada%E2%80%99s-extractive-industries-operating-abroad>
- I Love Mountains <http://dev.ilovemountains.org/about>
- Links/resources to mining information- <http://www.minesandcommunities.org/links.php>
- Mining Projects in Africa <http://www.miningweekly.com/article/mining-in-africa-projects-2009-01-16-1#>
- Mining Watch Canada <http://www.miningwatch.ca>
- YALE 360 Video- <http://www.e360.yale.edu/content/feature.msp?id=2198>
- Zunia Knowledge Exchange <http://zunia.org/cat/mining/>