

Can Mining Giant Rio Tinto Be Trusted? Environmental Contamination in Madagascar

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Mining giant Rio Tinto’s destruction of the sacred site at [Juukan Gorge](#) in Australia brought global attention to failures in the company’s operational culture. Rio Tinto must now demonstrate its social commitments are not just hollow talk.

For southern Madagascar, and four years into a dialogue with Rio Tinto about the breach of an environmental buffer zone and [contamination of local waterways](#) by its subsidiary Qit Minerals Madagascar (QMM), the lack of answers, a deficit of trust, and urgent need for action begs the question: can change come soon enough?

Rights to information, to safe drinking water and a healthy environment underpin Rio Tinto’s social licence to operate. Indeed, the company goes to great lengths to promote its social and environmental programmes and reassure shareholders it is a “responsible operator”.

Radionuclides

However, the investigation that followed the blowing up of the Juukan Gorge exposed narrative disjoints when it emerged that the claimed “misunderstanding” which led to the destruction was nothing of the kind. Rio Tinto [targeted the area](#) because of its high mineral wealth – it was an informed decision.

In Madagascar, an investigation by the [Andrew Lees Trust](#) (ALT UK) into the [QMM buffer breach](#) reveals the same *modus operandi* and language: a “misunderstanding” and “mistake”, when in fact the mine’s breach was also the result of a strategic decision to access the richest mineral deposit, just like at the Gorge.

Only in Madagascar, there has been no response or sanction by the government, which holds a 20 percent stake in the QMM mine. There has been no national investigation or inquiry.

The breach was an illegal incursion of the environment beyond the mine’s permitted boundaries. It placed mine tailings into the local lake and exposed ongoing risks from leakage and overflow of contaminated mine wastewaters into the local environment.

[Data](#) reveals that QMM’s wet mining process concentrates radionuclides in the mining basin.

Elevated levels of [uranium and lead](#) have been detected in waters around the mine, 52 and almost 40 times higher than WHO safe drinking water guidelines, respectively, in some places.

Guidelines

Villagers in Anosy are not compensated for damage done by QMM to their lakes and waterways, especially from toxic wastewater, when most have no alternative but to draw drinking water from these sources.

ALT UK has repeatedly lobbied Rio Tinto to address QMM's wastewater discharge, and to urgently provide safe drinking water to local communities. This work has included publishing [independent studies](#) into the QMM breach and water quality and working with partners including Publish What You Pay (PWYP Madagascar and UK) and Friends of the Earth.

Far from agreeing, thereby honouring its own water commitments and [communities' pressing needs](#) for potable water, the company insisted at its [2019 AGM](#) that elevated levels of uranium found in waters around the QMM mine are "naturally occurring" due to high background Naturally Occurring Radioactive Material (NORM) in the mineral rich sands.

A lack of credible supporting evidence, together with an independent review demonstrating that Rio Tinto's monitoring of radioactivity at the QMM mine was "unacceptable" ([Swanson 2019](#)), has forced the company to address failures and commission a new study.

New water data – the first from Rio Tinto's external provider, JBS&G – was shared last July and QMM asserted that "all results ... were within the relevant WHO guidelines for drinking water quality".

Uranium

However, hydrology expert Dr Emerman, commissioned by the ALT UK to analyse these findings, points out that Rio Tinto failed to comply with standard procedure by interpreting the JBS&G study as if no previous water data had been collected.

Dr Emerman's integration of the new data with existing water data has reinforced his previous analysis, which confirms the detrimental impact of QMM's operations on regional water quality ([Emerman 2020](#)).

Rio Tinto ignoring pre-existing assessments is like wiping sums off a blackboard when they present too knotty an equation – one that sits uncomfortably with decades of assuring Malagasy people there were no radioactivity issues around the QMM mine.

But disappearing data only raises more questions. Especially when Rio Tinto already acknowledges in its 2019 Annual Review that the QMM operation presents "a significant risk from a water and broader environmental perspective".

If the levels of uranium are now low, within the WHO limits as QMM claims, the inevitable question arises: what happened to Rio Tinto's previous argument that the highly elevated levels of uranium found in waters around the mine were "naturally occurring"?

Wellbeing

What is the explanation for the disappearance of contaminants? Why were previous water data collected by QMM, and independently by ALT UK, not included in the JBS&G analysis according to standard procedure?

And why, when JBS&G mapped the collection of a water sample from a mining rehabilitation pond was that data excluded from the report?

Although not a drinking water source, it could provide information about the loadings of contaminants in wastewater discharged from the QMM mining pond.

ALT UK requested QMM wastewater data almost a year ago, were promised it in July 2020, and are still waiting for it.

This data is important because drinking water is not the only concern. Local people depend on the lakes for fishing, domestic water and livelihoods. Any contamination of water and the surrounding environment affects their long-term health and wellbeing.

Trust deficit

Withholding information does not build trust. Nor does prolonged silence. Since 2018, the dialogue between my charity ALT UK and Rio Tinto has faltered.

It noticeably chilled when our independent radioactivity review was published in 2019, and after we refused Rio Tinto's request to remove the uranium finding from the report.

The company has attempted to push responsibility for answers onto QMM and regional leadership. However, our dialogue is premised on the need for oversight by the parent company.

QMM has failed to generate workable levels of trust, both for villagers who say that "QMM does what it wants" and for the ALT UK.

Indeed, our experience when [assisting local communities](#) has revealed worrying levels of coercion, manipulation and disinformation in QMM's social engagement practices.

Engagement

Is the parent company faring better than its Madagascar subsidiary? It took two years of persistent inquiry for Rio Tinto to finally admit QMM's buffer zone breach. Numerous related information requests and technical questions remain outstanding.

In the same way, it is hard to comprehend how senior executives could have been unaware of Juukan Gorge's importance. It is baffling when Rio Tinto fails to provide answers to technical questions when asked - especially those related to communities' rights to safe drinking water.

At one point in our exchange, a company officer exclaimed Rio Tinto was "not set up for this kind of engagement". A troubling admission given the company commitments to corporate social responsibility - and the substantial inequality of resources at play in the engagement.

Can Rio Tinto be trusted? Not yet. Not while we still await answers to our questions, and

while promises remain unfulfilled.

Remedy

These currently include: QMM wastewater data promised six months ago; the pledge for more transparency about any changes to QMM's wastewater management; an agreement to hold an annual meeting with the CEO.

Rio Tinto cannot be trusted while communities remain at risk from contaminated water.

We are just one of [many NGOs with questions](#) for Rio Tinto and demanding they act responsibly towards mine affected communities.

One is fighting to protect an Apache [sacred site at Oak Flat](#), which is targeted for demolition by Rio Tinto, contrary to all its promises following the Juukan Gorge debacle.

The [pledge by the incoming CEO](#) to build trust with stakeholders may best start by answering questions in ways that are meaningful, honest and committed to action, especially when evidence points to the need for urgent and responsive remedy.

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