Impacts of Gold Mining on Wapichan Wiizi

In the name of development gold mining is destroying our environment, affecting the lungs of Mother Earth, contaminating rivers and weakening social relations in our communities. The greed from mining leads to deforestation and silences birds and wild animals. As we fight to breathe, we are surrounded by a deafening silence. If we choose to ignore it and not do anything about it, we are paving the way to our own extinction. Our actions will define the world where we will live and where future generations will live.

By Immaculata Casimero, Tony James, and Judy Winter - November 1st 2021

Wapichan Wiizi, the Wapichan’s ancestral territory, is home to the Wapichan, Macushi and Wai-Wai people living in 21 villages across southwestern Guyana. We have lived here for centuries, caring for the environment and using its resources sustainably, while maintaining our languages, cultures and traditions. Our home is a pristine place with diverse habitats including rolling savannahs, majestic mountains, marshy wetlands, bush islands, forest galleries and rocky outcrops. We share the land with many creatures including the giant armadillo, black caiman, giant anteater, Brazilian tapir, and many other species, including over 1,000 species of plants.

Our ancestors have, since the 19th century, fought for legal recognition of our lands. On 30 October 1967, our leaders – Henry Winter, Ritchie Moses, Edmund Anton, Stanislaus Lawrence, Marco Andrew and Indase Johnson – wrote a letter to government officials demanding full recognition of our territory. However, their request was never approved, in part because of the interests of third parties and the paternalistic assumption that the
Wapichan people could not effectively manage such a large area of land and therefore have no use for it.

**In the name of development**

Since the days of colonial incursions into our territory, our people have had little say in what happens in our traditional lands. Today, although our villages have recognized titles over portions of our lands, the vast majority of our territory is considered ‘state lands’. Our territory is carved into mining concessions that are handed out without our consent in the name of economic development. However, to the Wapichan *nao*, the care and maintenance of our planet is more important than any wealth, and any wealth generated from mining activities is neither reinvested in our communities nor contributes to our sustainable development.

It is ironic that at the same time the government is encouraging expanded mining in our pristine forests, it is also promoting conservation. Conservation groups, often funded in part by the government, visit our territory to emphasize the importance of preserving our natural resources, but for centuries, we have been doing just that. Our peoples’ work preserving our forests has contributed to Guyana being ranked as the world’s top ecotourism destination. However, mining across Guyana, including in our territory, has had devastating effects on the environment and is the leading contributor to deforestation.

In our territory, both large-scale exploration as well as smaller-scale mining are currently destroying the areas in and around Marudi, a mountain that holds special cultural and spiritual importance to our people. Mining in the area, from external agents, had begun as early as the 1930s, with waves of ‘pork-knockers’ (prospectors who subsisted on a diet of pickled pork or wild pigs) coming to seek their fortunes in their hunt for gold. Poor infrastructure has meant that companies attempting large-scale mining have come and gone. Most recently, one company has actively pursued the development of a large-scale operation in the area while the government has been promising to expand mining to give lands to small-scale miners to work. Our people have vocally opposed these developments.
A threat to the Darkness Mountain

The Marudi mountain holds a very special place in the hearts of the locals as it belongs to a chain of several culturally linked mountains. In Wapichan the mountain is called Marutu Taawa, meaning Darkness Mountain. We believe that this mountain chain is where Tominkar (creator) and his brother Duwidi lived before man was created. This mountain is also a place where the marunao nao (shamans) go to confer with the spirit masters and perform rituals for the safety and well-being of the people.

Marudi has many resources important to our people, including chalk to dress for the important ritual of the Parichara dance, the rare orara (vine used for fishing), or the haimara (a species of fish) that is found only in that area. Most importantly, the area is where our freshwater sources are found for all our cooking and drinking. According to an elder from Karaudarnau village, “The area is so important as all of the creeks coming from the Marudi area are feeding different streams and rivers. It is a special watershed in our territory supplying both the Kuyuwini/Essequibo and the Kwitaro Rivers.” We consider this area as ours.

The mining on Marudi and threatened expansion of mining in its surrounds are already having noticeable impacts on this culturally important landmark. With forested areas being replaced by large, mining waste-filled holes in the ground, the area has become a breeding ground for mosquitoes carrying malaria and dengue. We have noticed over the years that fish are less bountiful as their habitat is being polluted, water from the rivers is no longer safe to drink as the turbidity increases, and the birds and animals that depend on the rivers are moving away, affecting our livelihoods.

Even more worrying for us is mercury contamination from mining activities. Wapichan community members, in a study done in collaboration with World Wildlife Fund, collected mercury samples in four of our villages. We were alarmed to find that in Parabara village, which is closer to the mining area, women in particular, had mercury levels in their bodies above the World Health Organization’s designated safe reference level. These levels of
mercury can result in severe health effects including abnormal childbirths, memory loss and tiredness, among others. Our community monitors are now regularly monitoring the water quality in our lands and using that information to advocate for action from the government to stop these harmful impacts of the gold mining sector.

**The weakening of social relations**

Mining activities also have detrimental indirect effects on our communities. Large mining machinery and equipment is carried on an almost daily basis to the mines, damaging our roads and making it more difficult for our local businessmen to travel to the nearest town to secure the goods they need to supply the villages. Pollution of our waterways also occurs when fuel spills from trucks carrying fuel into the mining areas.

Mining is also undermining social connections within our communities. Some of our young men go to work in the mines as mining and government policies have eroded our ability to practice our traditional economies. This leaves our women to look after our families and farms for long periods at a time. In many instances, our men return with very little money or none at all. Along with the increase in mining has come an increase in drug and alcohol use. Domestic abuse of their partners and children, particularly by men who return home from work in the mines, is very common.

Our children are thus exposed to unsafe home environments and lack the support they need to do well in school. Boys are more likely to drop out of school and opt to go into the mines, while some young girls go into the mines to take up jobs as cooks, salesgirls or prostitutes. All of this contributes to an increase in sexually transmitted infections in the area.

Crime is also common in the mines. One recent incident involved 17-year-old Shadrach Martin who was allegedly stabbed to death in the Marudi gold mines and a second recent incident involved bandits shooting a Brazilian miner to death, stealing his gold and jewellery. To date there have been no updates about the investigations, leaving villagers fearful that the perpetrators are still on the loose. The lack of enforcement of mining and environmental regulations in the mines as well as that of investigations into crimes occurring in the area is
partly due to corruption amongst mine officers and police, who are reported to take bribes from miners and to turn a blind eye to the various illegal activities taking place.

**Fight to breathe**

We call on regional and national authorities to respect our rights as Indigenous Peoples and to implement the recommendations of international human rights treaty bodies. We call on the government of Guyana to revise the Amerindian Act 2006, taking into consideration the recommendations made by the Indigenous Peoples. We call on the government of Guyana to return to our control the land that is rightfully ours so that we can continue to sustainably manage, maintain, and protect our lands and resources.

We envision a future in which we can engage in village-operated tourism and agriculture, among other sustainable activities, as sources of income while preserving our lands, traditional knowledge and cultural heritage. We hope government agencies will recognize the expertise of our community members and their ability to monitor our territory and the negative impact external factors like gold mining have on our lands.

The gold we dig out of the earth cannot be replaced. The environment would be destroyed, including the lungs of Mother Earth, our valuable trees, cut down and our rivers polluted. The miners might leave the area and return to their fancy, lavish homes in the cities, leaving us with nothing but polluted rivers, deforestation and an environment that is not fit to live in. With no trees, no birds will sing and no animals will be heard. There is a deafening silence all over as we gasp for breath. If we chose to ignore it now, we are paving a way for our own extinction if we do not take immediate action. Our actions now will determine the world we are living in and that of our future generations.