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Huichol Indians Seek to Block Canadian Mine Project in San Luis Potosí

by Lindajoy Fenley

Category/Department: Human Rights

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A Canadian company planning to mine silver in San Luis Potosí faces opposition from environmental and indigenous-rights groups protesting the project because, they say, it will create environmental havoc and destroy a sacred mountain.

The Wixárika (Huicholes), claim First Majestic Silver's Real de Catorce project will destroy Wirikuta, the tribe's most sacred mountain, pollute the environment, and contribute to water shortages in local communities.

Although development has historically trumped the interests of indigenous communities around the world, the Huicholes, who are world renowned for colorful embroidered clothing and even more fanciful psychedelic-yarn paintings, have mobilized support in Mexico and abroad. The Internet abounds with blogs and videos against First Majestic's plans for Real de Catorce.

The Huicholes are also among the indigenous communities displaced by recent construction of hydroelectric dams ([SourceMex, Sept. 14, 2005](#)).

A British Columbia-based Tye Web site questioned the development efforts by Canadian concerns on the Huichol land. "What is a sacred mountain worth? Vancouver mining company accused of 'war of extermination' against Mexico's Huichol," said a headline on the Tye site. The article compared the conflict to the popular movie because of colliding worldviews regarding the value of silver versus the sacred.

Several other sites questioned First Majestic's plans, which they said would damage an aquifer feeding 16 villages and an ecosystem "recognized by the World Wildlife Fund as among the three-most-biodiverse deserts in the world.

Cultural Survival, an international indigenous-rights organization, quoted First Majestic investment relations director Todd Anthony as saying it was "too early to comment on the specifics" of the Huichol campaign against the company's mining plans. "But we see nothing that could prevent the Real de Catorce mine from becoming fully operational."

Mining companies have won in the past, according to magazine, which noted most of the world's mines are located on indigenous lands. A 2006 article in the magazine said, "Throughout the world, indigenous peoples in particular have seen their centuries-old traditions razed by the introduction of industrial-scale business. From Peru to Ghana to Nevada, mining projects have left native tribes plagued by contaminated waterways and forests, health problems, upsurges in violence, destruction of local traditions, and community infighting."

Will the Huichol's organized campaign and ensuing international outcry make a difference this time?

Anthropologist Marina Anguiano, who has studied the Wixárika for 40 years and recently led a discussion against the mining project at a Mexico City showing of her film about their traditions, said this indigenous group is strong. While some indigenous groups around the world have weakened, she pointed out that the Wixárika population has increased from approximately 10,000 in 1968 to 46,379 in 2005.

Firm maintains project not harmful

First Majestic, which already operates three Mexican mines (in Coahuila, Durango, and Jalisco states), acquired 22 mining concessions for the 6,327-hectare Real de Catorce project in San Luis Potosí from Montreal-based Normabec Mining in 2009. It also is developing a project in Zacatecas state slated to begin production later this year.

The company did not respond to email and phone requests for comment on opposition to its Real de Catorce project. However, its Web site states that First Majestic said the company "is committed to safeguarding and respecting the historical and environmental heritage of the communities and areas where we operate in Mexico."

Pointing to its awards for safe mines, clean industry, and socially responsible business practices, the company site states that underground mining at Real de Catorce will be "totally undetectable by human settlements on surface" and that "all work carried out will follow...strict standards which will be eco-friendly and subject to all environmental rules and regulations."

An environmental-impact statement, a risk study, and the change of use of land studies were to have begun during the second quarter, according to a company press release.

The Real de Catorce district has an estimated historic production of 230 million ounces of recovered silver, 150 million of which was extracted from 1773 to 1776 and the remainder after 1851, said company documents.

While the project at Real de Catorce is still in an exploratory stage, company plans call for creating a thematic park and mining museum the site says will create additional local jobs. A press release on April 7, 2011, said that park construction has begun and that the final concept and plan will be presented to environmental and heritage authorities during the second quarter.

The First Majestic site states that "underground mining methods...remain the only economic way of mining at this mine."

In an April 21 interview with financial analyst Dominic Frisby, First Majestic CEO Keith Neumeyer painted a rosy picture of his company's future, saying he expects production to double in the next four years to 16 million ounces. "Mexico is really shining," he told Frisby.

While the analyst mentioned problems other mining companies face elsewhere (in Bolivia, for example), neither he nor Neumeyer said anything about problems in Mexico during the 30-minute interview available to listeners on Frisby's Web site.

Indigenous group mobilizes support

While the company touts the benefits of the mining venture, Huicholes have mobilized against the project by taking concerns to the government and enlisting the help of environmental and indigenous-rights groups.

In the fall of 2010, 10 Huichol leaders from Jalisco, Nayarit, and Durango states signed a declaration against the Real de Catorce project. In October, the declaration was published by Mining Watch Canada, a pan-Canadian initiative supported by environmental, social justice, aboriginal, and labor organizations focusing on threats to public health, water and air quality, fish and wildlife habitat, and community interests posed by irresponsible mineral practices around the world.

The declaration demands immediate cancellation of First Majestic's mining concession and application of a moratorium on exploration or exploitation in the Real de Catorce desert or any other area sacred to the Huichol peyote pilgrimage that traverses several states. Leaders signing the declaration vowed to "use all the resources necessary to stop this devastating mining project, making use of national and international legal resources that are in our favor as well as nonviolent actions of civil protest that are necessary."

Since signing the declaration, tribal members have lobbied extensively to prevent the Canadian company from exploiting their sacred land for silver. They took their protest to Cancún in December when the UN held a climate-change and environmental conference. They have also traveled to Mexico City to speak with legislators.

In February, Sen. Francisco Javier Castellón of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) called for the appropriate government agencies—including the Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) and the mining division of the Secretaría de Economía (SE)—to review First Majestic's concessions and take appropriate action if the mining project threatens the environment or the way of life of indigenous groups. Similarly, Deputy Domingo Rodríguez Martell (PRD), a member of the indigenous affairs committee (Comisión de Asuntos Indígenas) in the lower house, in March called for cancelling First Majestic's mining concessions, according to a report from 's news Web site. On April 6, Guadalajara daily newspaper reported the Senate has asked the SE to conduct a detailed review of First Majestic's concessions in Real de Catorce.

Canada leads foreign mining interests

Mexico has attracted multinational mining companies because of its role as the world's leading silver producer and an important source of copper and gold. Approximately three-quarters of the more than 200 foreign mining companies operating in the country are Canadian, according to the Canadian Embassy in Mexico.

Most of the companies have operated successfully and without major problems, although authorities shut down operations of two Canadian-based companies in central and southern Mexico because of environmental violations. Minera San Xavier, a subsidiary of British Columbia-based New Gold, obtained an injunction in December 2009 allowing it to resume operations at its facility in Cerro San Pedro in San Luis Potosí state during the legal proceedings two years ago. The permit for that mine was originally granted in 1999 ([SourceMex, Feb. 2, 2005](#)).

In another case, state environmental authorities in Chiapas state ordered the closure of Blackfire Exploration's open-pit barite mine near the town of Chiconmuselo after it was determined that the facility was contaminating surrounding areas. In addition, it was alleged that Calgary-based Blackfire repressed protestors and might be responsible for the death of an activist who sought to shut down its operations. ([SourceMex, Oct. 10, 2010](#)).

Mining Watch Canada recently reported that Blackfire was accused of making recurring payments to the mayor of Chiconmuselo for unofficial services for the benefit of Blackfire Mexico.

The Canadian watchdog group said that, on March 10, 2010, "a coalition of nine Canadian nongovernmental groups filed a memo with the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] asking that the company and its Mexican subsidiary be investigated under the Corruption of Foreign Public Officials Act."

Meanwhile, mining companies, enjoying a global price boom, have come up against a new and serious threat—drug gangs ([SourceMex, Oct. 20, 2010](#)).

On April 14, Reuters said, "Mexican drug cartels greedy for new sources of revenue are targeting the country's rich mines, pushing up companies' security costs and prompting at least one project to be halted." The wire service said that Canadian miner Torex Gold Resources, Inc. halted exploratory drilling at Cuetzala del Progreso, Guerrero, in March after assailants stole company trucks. Reuters also reported that "Mexican authorities blamed a drug cartel for illegally extracting iron ore at another site and exporting it to China."

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