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Huichol Indians Gain Protected Status for Sacred Lands in San Luis Potosí

by Carlos Navarro

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Indigenous-rights and environmental activists scored a major victory when the Mexican government denied a permit for Canada's First Majestic Silver Corporation to develop a mine in the ancestral lands of the Huichol Indians, also known as the Wixárika. The decision was symbolic because the Canadian company had already announced its intention not to proceed with the mining project. The move opened the door for the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) to declare the area known as Wirikuta in San Luis Potosí part of a wider protected area for the Huichol. The specific location designated for protection is known as Cerro Quemado, a mountain where the Huichol believe the sun was born. The Huichol, who are scattered across several states in central Mexico, still conduct ceremonies and make an annual pilgrimage to the Wirikuta reserve near the town of Real de Catorce.

First Majestic Silver's plan to develop a silver-mining complex in the Real de Catorce desert had met with strong opposition from the start, with Huichol activists objecting to the project because of concerns about the impact on the land that has been part of their cultural patrimony. A declaration signed by 10 Huichol leaders from Jalisco, Nayarit, and Durango states in the fall of 2010 demanded 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 ([SourceMex, May 4, 2011](#)).

Canadian mining company cedes land back to government

First Majestic—which operates mines in Coahuila, Durango, and Jalisco states—had lobbied the Mexican government to allow the company to proceed with the project. As part of its argument, the Canadian company had pointed to its awards for safe mines, clean industry, and socially responsible business practices. Furthermore, the company had promised that its operations at Real de Catorce would be "totally undetectable by human settlements on surface" and that all work carried out would follow "strict standards that will be eco-friendly and subject to all environmental rules and regulations."

In the end, First Majestic heeded the objections of indigenous-rights and environment activists and agreed to abandon efforts to develop mining projects in 22 of the properties in San Luis Potosí in areas that are sacred to the Huichol. The Canadian company then ceded those concessions to the Mexican government so it could declare them a protected area. Juan Carlos González, an attorney for First Majestic's Mexican subsidiary Minera Real Bonanza, said the Canadian company was not asking for any compensation for the land it was ceding to the Mexican government. "We are very happy that we are able to reach this agreement," González said in a radio interview. "We ceded 761 hectares in this area, by which we can guarantee the protection of these sacred sites."

The decision by the Canadian company to surrender its concessions and the government's announcement that the area will be protected came just days before a planned protest concert in Mexico City urging the preservation of the Huichol's sacred lands.

The Huichol have faced other violations of their ancestral lands, including the construction of hydroelectric dams on their territory ([SourceMex, Sept. 14, 2005](#)).

"Rather than attribute the move to the social sensibility of the Canadian government or the good intention and commitment of federal authorities to cancel mining concessions in Wirikuta, the move is a reflection of the power of pressure, mobilization, and public opinion [to effect change]," the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada said in an editorial.

Wide area to be protected

The Wirikuta is part of a wider area of 140,000 ha that the government has declared a protected region (Reserva Ecológica Natural y Cultural). The area includes the municipalities of Catorce, Charcas, Matehuala, Villa de Guadalupe, Villa de La Paz, and Villa de Ramos.

Interior Secretary Alejandro Poiré Romero said the decision guarantees that the entire region will be protected from any future mining. "This is a historic and significant step in the effort to defend the rights of the Wixárika communities of our country and, at the broader level, all indigenous peoples in Mexico," said Poiré. He said there are 15.7 million people who belong to indigenous communities in Mexico.

The government formalized the designation of Wirikuta with a document presented to Eleuterio de la Cruz and Rodolfo Salvador López, representatives of the Huichol communities in Jalisco, Zacatecas, Durango, and Nayarit.

The Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) will continue to oversee the process, coordinating efforts by all federal, state, and municipal agencies to maintain protections for the sacred land of the Huichol Indians. But other government ministries, such as the Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria (SRA) and the Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT), are contributing to the preservation efforts. The SRA has conducted extensive mapping studies that support the area's historic and cultural patrimony, while SEMARNAT will monitor environmental protection and preservation of the region's natural habitat.

While lauding the move by First Majestic and the government, La Jornada called for authorities to go a step further and examine the policies that allowed concessions of these lands in the first place.

"We cannot delay a review of the legal framework that made it possible to turn over millions of hectares of national territory, in return for almost nothing, to the predatory mining companies," said the newspaper. "We need to prevent a repeat of situations like Wirikuta."

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