



Development at Any Cost: A False Premise



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A new age of mining has dramatically expanded in recent years. Open pit, extensive, corporate, and multinational operations threaten the Mexican landscape. The prospect of ecological disasters looms across one of the world's biodiversity hotspots.

This shadow is darkest in the Sonoran Desert. This is evident not just in the recent mining spill in the Bacanuchi, the Sonora, and the San Pedro Rivers – the worst environmental disaster in the history of the State of Sonora. The expansion of mining is also evident in the newly approved mining concession Los Cardones in the natural protected area of the Sierra de la Laguna in Baja California Sur. The new age of mining is evident across all of Northwest Mexico.

Mining as currently practiced and authorized under Mexican environmental regulations is changing the face of the land. The Sonoran Desert is often mischaracterized as a barren wasteland. Yet, this desert has an intimate relation with the Gulf of California – one of the most productive marine ecosystems in the world. It is the most diverse arid land in North America. More than 2000 species of plants, 1000 species of bees, and 450 species of vertebrates. This same region has enormous economic importance. The financial benefits of agriculture, 70% of the Mexican fishing industry, and ranching reach far beyond the regions arid boundaries that span the international border.

The deregulation of the mining sector in recent years has led to a dramatic increase in mining concessions. From 2000–2010, national and transnational mining corporations have been granted concessions to 56 million hectares (a quarter of the Mexican territory).

Article 6 of the Mexican mining law states: "...[mining activities] are given preference over any other use or benefit derived from the land...". This doctrine has guided recent political decisions.

Single handedly, this act puts the mining law above environmental protection, the rights of indigenous communities, agrarian villages, and workers. The very lands deemed a national and international priority are now in jeopardy. Actions supported under this mining law are a clear violation of the fundamental rights given in the Constitution.

The spill of 10 million gallons of copper sulfate, sulfuric acid, arsenic, heavy metals and possibly other contaminants from the Buenavista del Cobre mine, owned by Grupo México in Cananea, Sonora demonstrates the danger. Over 20,000 people were left without clean water, and lasting environmental impacts remain unknown. Abhorrently, this calamity continues. Given this legal framework, we can only expect the continued expansion of mining concessions, multiplying the chances that an event like that of Buenavista del Cobre be repeated.

In a climate of development at any cost, environmental impacts are the price of growth. Increasingly, environmental impact statements represent a mere formality and not the tool to guide regional development and avert social and or environmental disasters they were designed to prevent.

Next Generation Sonoran Desert Researchers (N-Gen) urges federal, state, and municipal governments to redesign the way that mining projects are developed. They must assess and incorporate socio-environmental risks and rigorously apply existing environmental laws. A paradigm change is urgently needed to avoid environmental, economic, and humanitarian tragedies. Without environmental oversight the recent reforms that open Mexico's oil reserves to private and foreign exploitation, and development projects approved at the margins of environmental law will continue to undermine Mexico's natural heritage. Conservation needs to be an integral part of development. The toxic spill that has tainted the Río Sonora for decades to come reveals the absence of effective regulation. It highlights the false premise that we need to choose between human wellbeing and the environment.

Decisions need to prioritize the environment as they have development. A properly employed legal framework can allow for economic productivity and a healthy environment. To realize this vision the highest levels of research needs to be connected to environmental impact statements. This can balance environmental protection with local, regional, and global needs. At the same time, the application of justice, scrutiny, and/or serious revision of environmental laws as they concern the granting and monitoring of mining activities are sorely needed.

A vision of prosperity can emanate from a conservation ethic. Economic development initiatives can incorporate the natural wealth of the region. This premise can allow us to collectively pursue a prosperous future for our communities that matches the grandeur of the northern Mexican frontier.

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