

The Sensible Environmentalist

Mining Companies Must Think “Sustainably”

(NAPSA)—DEAR DR. MOORE:

You promote the use of renewable materials, but what about iron and copper? Can mining be environmentally friendly?



Dr. Moore

I try to use renewable energy and materials where I can but I certainly recognize the importance of iron, copper and other mined products. As for whether the industry can be environmentally friendly, the answer is yes.

By its nature, mining has a significant impact on the environment and, let's be honest, it hasn't always had the greatest track record. But, as with any industrial process, there are ways to operate that are environmentally better than others. The last few years have seen a noticeable shift, particularly in North America, where an increasing number of mining companies are focusing on the principles of sustainability as a way to improve their practices.

Some people laugh when the term “sustainability” is applied to mining. At best, it seems way off the mark, at worst like an obvious PR ploy. But nothing lasts forever, including the earth and sun themselves. If companies operate responsibly—in a way that balances environmental, economic and social priorities, without taking the same possibilities away from future generations—they'll be a lot more welcome in communities. This is the core of sustainability.

One concern is biodiversity, which is a term for all the living things in a given ecosystem. In the past, miners tended to treat biodiversity as something that stands between them and the good stuff underground. Some early prospectors burned entire mountains of

forests to see the rock underneath. Fortunately, more companies are incorporating the principles of conservation, habitat protection and ecological restoration from the early planning stages. Biodiversity cannot be an afterthought. It isn't good enough to spray grass seed on barren rock. Native plants and habitats must be restored or, if that isn't possible, there must be an effort to create new habitats that are diverse and productive.

Many of the concerns associated with mining involve water. The most problematic mines are those that dump tailings (waste) directly into rivers. This is unacceptable in all circumstances. But there are hundreds of examples where dams have failed or acid has leached from waste rock piles into waterways. With the engineering expertise that's out there, it is reasonable to insist that companies figure out how to dispose of or provide long-term treatment for their toxic waste—before any mine is built.

It is also reasonable to expect companies that operate in developing countries to provide assistance for community and health care programs and for all mining companies to develop closure plans to reduce the shock to the community when the mine inevitably shuts down.

Mining is a necessary industry and provides important products. Given the environmental knowledge and technical expertise that exists in the world today, there is every reason that companies can and should follow the rules of sustainability. It just makes sense.

Dr. Patrick Moore has been a leader of the environmental movement for more than 30 years. A co-founder of Greenpeace, he holds a PhD in ecology and a BSc in forest biology. Questions can be sent to Patrick@SensibleEnvironmental.org.