

Manifest from the International Scientific Community against the “Montagne d’Or” mining mega-project in French Guiana

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Mr. President of the French Republic, the « Montagne d’Or » mining mega-project in French Guiana portends a genuine environmental and human disaster:

A gigantic project deep in French Guiana’s tropical forest

In the heart of the French Guianese forest, situated between two fully-protected biological reserves (Lucifer and Dékou-Dékou), the largest mining project ever undertaken in France is currently being developed by Compagnie Montagne d’Or (CMO, a Russian-Canadian consortium: 55.01% Nordgold S.E. and 44.99% Columbus Gold Corporation). The operator has announced that a pit measuring 2.5 km long, 400 m wide and 200 to 400 m deep will be excavated. 10 tons of cyanide and 20 tons of explosives will be required daily to extract approximately 20 kg of gold while discarding 80,000 tons of mining waste per day. The concentration of gold is low: between 1.6 and 1.8 g per ton of rock.

A strong citizen-led movement against the project

The project is currently the subject of a public debate, requested by its opponents, whose dates have been set by the National Commission for Public Debate – CNDP – from March 7 to July 7, 2018. The public meetings that have been held in French Guiana since April 3 have already revealed strong opposition within the French Guianese population to an environmentally destructive project from which French Guiana will derive practically nothing, except in terms of pollution and environmental impacts.

An economic mirage

While CMO hopes to earn more than 3.5 billion euros over 12 years, only 2% of that will go to French Guiana in the form of taxes. According to the WWF report , which speaks of an economic mirage (1), the taxes generated by the project will amount to 308 million euros over 12 years (241 M€ to the French government and 67 M€ in local taxes), but will swallow up at least 420 million euros of public subsidies, in exchange for the promise of 750 direct jobs, —or a preposterous cost of 560,000 euros of public money for each job.||

An environmental and human disaster

The environmental impact is truly disastrous : immediate damage caused at the site itself, through the destruction of a primary forest with high biodiversity (the forests of the northern French Guiana forest arc are the most ancient in the territory and named by the specialists as “relics forests”) (2); but also damage that would have a lasting impact on natural environments, including waterways, and human populations throughout the basin of the Mana river, the largest inland river in French Guiana. Its implementation will require considerable roadworks (120 km of road from Saint-Laurent du Maroni) and especially the construction of a new hydroelectric power plant, which will be larger

than the Petit-Saut dam: the mine's energy needs (20MW) are equivalent to the consumption of the greater Cayenne area. The project would increase French Guiana's carbon footprint by at least 50%, not to mention the risks generated by storing 350 million tons of mining waste spread out over 400 ha, part of which would be contained by a 57 m-high, 1.9 km-long tailings dam. Acid mine drainage and tailings dam failure would threaten the entire downstream part of the basin like a sword of Damocles. The impact on human health through contamination by heavy metals, which is already a source of concern in French Guiana, would be catastrophic.

Thousands of hectares of tropical forest and biological species destroyed

Located less than 500 m from two fully-protected biological reserves, Lucifer and Dékou-Dékou, the project would lead not only to a fragmentation of the forest (3), limiting essential exchanges between the two biological reserves but also to a significant edge effect. Daily detonations associated with dust, noise and light would inevitably cause fauna to flee and alter vegetation for up to several kilometers in the bordering forest. More than 1.150 plant species have been recorded at the site (4) (not exhaustive list). In French Guiana, the immense complexity of ecosystems and the variability of species composition are still relatively unknown, and plant and animal species continue to be discovered at each in-depth exploration (5). Any destruction of a tract of this ancient forest would lead to an irreversible loss of numerous rare or even unknown biological species (6) and would strengthen the 6th mass extinction already indicated by the scientists (7). No matter how technically elaborate it might be, no attempt to reforest could ever restore the site to its initial state.

A remarkable archeological site : high place of Amerindian memory

Moreover, there are a large number of archeological sites (8) in the area, with 15 « montagnes couronnées » (« crowned mountains » - name given locally to hilltop sites encircled by trenches), the largest number ever discovered in French Guiana, surrounding the valley coveted by the mining company. This site, which has been visited for at least 400 years, represents a veritable sanctuary for Amerindian populations, which are strongly opposed to the project.

Other models of development are possible

By authorizing this type of project, France also risks opening, like Pandora's box, the door to other multinationals that aspire to exploit French Guiana's coveted resources. On the other hand, it would be a source of tremendous pride if France preserved this French Guianese heritage, Europe's only tropical rainforest, by supporting development projects better suited to the needs of the population and to meeting the challenges of the ecological and energy transition.

Non-negotiable rejection of this project

For all these reasons, and in coherence with your call to « Make our planet great again », we urge you, Mr. President of the French Republic, in the name of the fight against climate change, of the biodiversity conservation and of the precautionary principle, to reject this project.

References :

(1) Montagne d'or : Un mirage économique ? Analyse du WWF France, Septembre 2017.

https://fr.slideshare.net/WWF_France/montage-dor-un-mirage-conomique

(2) Sabatier D. et al., 2018. Forçages environnementaux et anthropiques du turnover forestier, conséquences sur la diversité des communautés d'arbres en forêt tropicale (DYNFORDIV). Rapport final du Programme de recherche ECOFOR "Biodiversité, gestion forestière, changement climatique et politiques publiques" : 88-89.

(3) Soulignons que les effets de la fragmentation des milieux naturels s'avèrent beaucoup plus graves que prévus : ils sont considérés comme de véritables bombes à retardement
<http://www.futura-sciences.com/planete/actualites/foret-fragmentation-ecosystemes-effets-seront-pires-prevu-58248/>

(4) Dans le périmètre du site minier, de la piste et de la ligne :
<https://extranet.debatcndp.fr/index.php/s/UyO4mhQJKBi89MZ#pdfviewer>

(5) À titre d'exemple l'expédition "Planète revisitée" menée par le MNHN en partenariat avec l'ONG ProNatura et qui s'est déroulée pendant un mois en 2015 sur le massif du Mitaraka dans le Sud de la Guyane a permis la description de 66 espèces nouvelles pour la Science et 29 premiers signalements pour la Guyane.

(6) Biotope, 2017. État initial du milieu biologique du projet minier de Montagne d'Or ,Volet Mine. WSP, NORDGOLD.
<https://extranet.debat-cndp.fr/index.php/s/UyO4mhQJKBi89MZ#pdfviewer>

(7) Ceballos G., Ehrlich P. R. , & Dirzo R. , 2017. "Biological annihilation via the ongoing sixth mass extinction signaled by vertebrate population losses and declines" in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS)
<http://www.pnas.org/content/114/30/E6089>

(8) Mestre M., Rostan P. & al.,2016. Rapport d'opération. Étude d'impact archéologique, Projet minier de la Montagne d'or, INRAP, 2016
<https://www.extranet.debat-cndp.fr/index.php/s/fvGrkNB9hINj2Kx#pdfviewer>

For more information :

<https://montagnedor.debatpublic.fr/>
<http://ordequestion.org>

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First signatories

Cette liste sera mise à jour régulièrement

P.S.

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