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Multinational Rio Tinto opens nurseries to reforest mining tracts.



By Adam Jadhav — Special to GlobalPost
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TOLAGNARO, Madagascar — At first glance, the nursery here in the Mandena forest seems ordinary: Seedlings bask in a sunny clearing, where they are watered and studied.

Grey sand dampens the sound of footsteps and birds chirp furiously as Johnny Rabenantoandro points out species that exist nowhere else in the world. The nursery sits inside more than 500 acres of reserve that protects some of Madagascar's last remaining coastal ecosystem.

But Rabenantoandro is no crusading environmental activist. He's a company biologist for multinational mining giant Rio Tinto. The nursery is part of the company's ambitious — some say impossible — environmental agenda promised in exchange for permission to mine thousands of acres for titanium.

"We have a huge nursery for a mining company, no?" Rabenantoandro said with a laugh during a tour.

Rio Tinto aims to use the Mandena preserve here in southern Madagascar to regrow the forest it cuts down for the mine. But activists say the efforts aren't enough and some local villagers argue they're being hurt at the same time.

What's not disputed is that Madagascar's forest has been dwindling for decades. Villagers live in poverty — per capita income is less than \$1.25 a day — and trees are a primary resource, used for everything from construction material to charcoal fuel.

So the potential boost to the regional economy and the government's 20 percent stake in the \$940 million venture could be a windfall. Add in the conservation efforts and Rio Tinto believes it has a model for mining in developing nations where commerce is often at odds with environmental protection.

"We think if there is no economic development, there is no biodiversity conservation, and there will be no forest at all left along these coasts," Rabenantoandro said.

The company began planning in the Tolagnaro area in the late 1980s and now its biodiversity department has 80 full-time employees. Mining is already underway near the Mandena forest location and planning is ongoing at two other locations nearby.

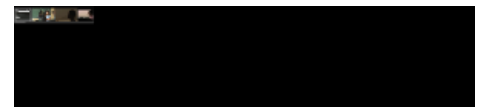
Rio Tinto has set aside some 2,500 acres in conservation zones at the three mine sites and is pledging to work with NGOs to protect thousands more acres not in the mining path.

Even more ambitiously, Rio Tinto is promising to literally regrow the forests it destroys with seedlings from its nursery.



In Madagascar's Mandena forest, nursery chief Pascaline Rasolovaorimanane tends to seedlings at Rio Tinto's nursery near its titanium mine. The mining company has pledged to replant with seedlings the forest it destroys for the mine. (Adam Jadhav/GlobalPost)

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In the Mandena preserve, researchers study seed dispersion and growing conditions. They harvest seeds and track thousands of seedlings sprouting from little back plastic bags.

They also work with community members to police the new conservation zones and prohibit further cutting by local villagers.

At the mine, bulldozers clear land and a dredge digs beneath a manmade lake for ilmenite, which contains titanium dioxide, used in products ranging from paint to aircraft engines.

As the mine gobbles green space, it leaves behind sand dunes that Rio Tinto plans to restore to forest.

“It’s a huge challenge and people say it’s impossible,” Rabenantoandro said. “But we are going to put back the forest.”

Rio Tinto has repeatedly drawn fire from environmental groups that suggest the conservation efforts are little more than window dressing. The World Wildlife Fund’s Niall O’Connor said the company should update its plans to protect more than the forest fractions currently set aside.

Rio Tinto does have support from the Missouri Botanical Garden, which conducted species inventories of the plants that will be destroyed. Also, Britain’s Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew is storing seeds for the future.

Last fall, Rio Tinto’s efforts won a “green mining” award from the South African capital firm Nedbank.

“The company has had about two decades to get things right,” said Chris Birkinshaw of the Botanical Garden. “If any company has a chance of succeeding [in rebuilding the forests], it really is Rio Tinto.”

But some groups still argue the community is losing out. A primary complaint from villagers, detailed in a book published in October by two NGOs, the Andrew Lees Trust and Panos London, is that Rio Tinto has cut off locals from their primary resource: the remaining pristine forest stands.

The company has planted fast-growing eucalyptus for villagers to eventually use in place of the forest, but locals say that the tree is not a suitable substitute. And area fishermen allege Rio Tinto ruined a prime fishing ground, turning it from brackish to fresh water for mine use. NGOs say company-offered job retraining is hardly compensation for lost traditional livelihoods.

Even Rio Tinto’s higher than average employee salaries came with a downside — inflation. The mine employed more than 4,000 people during construction and prices at markets doubled. Now that the mine is operational at Mandena significantly fewer people are employed, yet prices have yet to fall, activists and community members said.

And while Rio Tinto has built schools and clinics, at least one school was unfurnished and a hospital remained unstaffed by the government, said Brett Massoud, the former head of Azafady, a prominent community group in Tolagnaro which is now working with the company on conservation plans.

“In some ways they will create benefits to the region that wouldn’t have otherwise occurred,” Massoud said. “But, I think, in other ways people are being adversely affected in ways they wouldn’t have otherwise been.”



In Madagascar’s Mandena forest, nursery chief Pascaline Rasolovaorimanane tends to seedlings at Rio Tinto’s nursery near its titanium mine. The mining company has pledged to replant with seedlings the forest it destroys for the mine. (Adam Jadhav/GlobalPost)

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