

Benchmarking the responsible approach

Environmentally responsible mining is on everyone's lips: yet in some cases it remains lip service. The winner of the Nedbank Capital Green Mining Awards' in the environmental category: Rio Tinto Madagascar has taken the commitment to responsible mining further than this though.

The QIT Madagascar Minerals (QMM) heavy minerals mine was awarded for its Biodiversity and Sustainable Management programme.

The mine, situated in southern Madagascar, faced initial difficulties in the form of mounting international opposition.

Rio Tinto at the time put the project on hold due to the opposition on the one hand, and the unstable political environment on the other, yet the initial investigations confirmed its feasibility.

Dual-listed Rio Tinto, the fourth largest publicly-listed mining company in the world, recently took stock of its corporate stance and in particular its attitudes regarding the environment and adopted the stance "protector of the environment". This company wide stock take led to the development of its new environmental

policy the company call "the way we work" – which was first implemented at QMM. Since the pioneering project has been so successful, the policy has now become the Rio Tinto benchmark and is being implemented in all operations across the globe. Although African operations constitutes only 3% of the group's assets, it is clear that the lessons learnt at QMM hold value for others. Rio Tinto has a global asset value of US\$81bn.

At QMM the comprehensive social and environmental impact assessment (SEIA) embarked upon between 1998 and 2001, led to two volumes, 17 appendices and 25 supporting documents being lodged with the Madagascar government in 2001, after which an environmental permit was issued. This was only after a comprehensive technical review was conducted in a process that included both international experts and a public consultative process.

The groundbreaking research undertaken during this process included studies into all pertinent aspects of the biophysical as well as the social environments, done in collaboration with globally recognised experts in the respective fields.

In Madagascar the research has also contributed to the existing knowledge and understanding of the threatened littoral forests, previously under researched and consequently little understood.

A team of 85 employees are currently still working on the project at QMM. Their efforts are undertaken in projects such as ecological restoration and reforestation of already mined areas, the creation of a non-invasive fuel wood plantation and the creation of new protected areas inside and outside of the existing mining areas. The outside projects are treated as offsets against the negative impacts of mining. At the same time, monitoring and management of more than 15 environmental indicators are ongoing. Small mammals, primates, invertebrate populations, corals, vegetation and forest areas are all part of the programme of keeping everything under the magnifying glass in order to responsibly maintain the environment.

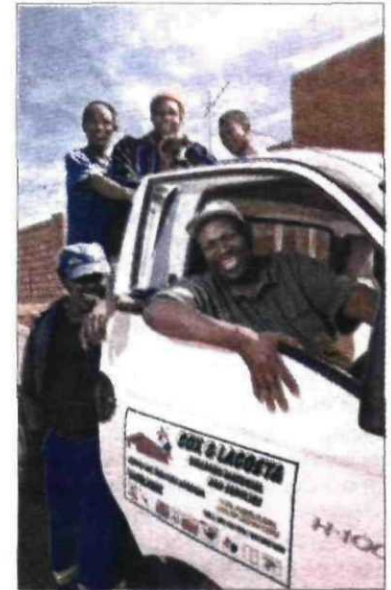
This programme, which represents a seismic shift in corporate mind-set regarding environmental issues, has impressed because of the fact that it is a truly collaborative approach, linking

numerous international partners. Furthermore, it clearly shows that environmental management can be integrated into mining companies' core business strategy – and play a major role in future business endeavours.

According to the judges' report, the concept of Net Positive Impact, devised by Rio Tinto and pioneered at the QMM operation, has set both a national and international benchmark for environmental best practice in mining, with its ecosystems approach rather than a species-based approach to solving environmental problems caused by mining operations. This integrated approach further reaches the divide between the environment and the community, managing the linkages between sustainable ecosystems and community health and wellbeing.

The judging panel pointed out that the commitment by the company to a long term research and monitoring programme 15 years prior to commencement of mining was laudable, since it ensured that all decisions taken are backed by solid scientific principles.

As such, the QMM programme has reached the goals it set out to achieve. The ongoing management and research



not only protect and conserve the unique biodiversity around the mining site but also identify opportunities to enhance biodiversity conservation. At the same time, the system allows for the building of capacity in the local communities for the better, more sustainable use of natural resources in the area.