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Ok Tedi river a sewer

ONE hears little of the river whose name was borrowed when the giant Ok Tedi Mining Corporation was formed. But the Ok Tedi River has played an important role in the development of the mine, for it has been the company's dumping ground since production began. Not only has the Ok Tedi River been ecologically destroyed by the mine, but the landowners and people living along the river, the Yonggom and Awini, have never been compensated for the damage to their environment.

The sediment released into the Ok Tedi River has turned it into a 75 kilometre long sewage canal. The water is super-saturated with sediment. Particulate copper glitter in the sun on top of once-white sand banks where turtles come to lay their eggs. Many of these sand banks are blocked off from the river by ten and twenty metre long stretches of knee-deep mud. After a heavy rain in the mountains the Ok Tedi River overflows its banks, depositing sediment along what was the most fertile area for gardens, the river banks.

Copper glitter in the sun on top of once-white sand banks.

Instead of enriching the soil so that crops could be grown almost continuously along the edge of the river, the sediment from the mine prevents the crops from growing at all. The Yonggom people along the river report that soon after the mine started production, the fish in the river died and floated up to the surface of the water. When there are heavy rains, the backwater effect causes sediment from the mine to wash into the small creeks and streams that feed into the Ok Tedi.

Other riverine life, including prawns, lob-

sters and bivalves, are threatened as well. The birds that depend on fish, the egrets, the riverine kingfishers, and the Brambling Kites, have left the Ok Tedi for better hunting grounds. The entire Ok Tedi River ecosystem has been destroyed.

Stuart Kirsch is a cultural anthropologist from the University of Pennsylvania who has just completed 21 months of research among the Yonggom people of Western Province.

In addition to the environmental horror of the situation, there are many practical consequences for the Yonggom and Awini people living in the dozen villages along the Ok Tedi River. They can no longer drink from the river, nor can they even wash clothes or swim in it.

The high levels of sedimentation and subsequent formation of sand banks in navigation channels have made travelling the Ok Tedi by motor canoe - their one available route for transporting produce to local markets, rubber to buyers, and food and medicine back to the villages - very difficult.

Diets have suffered from the loss of protein formerly provided by aquatic resources. New gardens must be made every few years in the rainforest instead of using the land along the riverbanks.

Ecologically the situation is complicated by the presence of large numbers of West Papuan refugees living in border camps along the Ok Tedi River and just below the

function of the Ok Tedi and the Fly River. Despite the efforts of the Papua New Guinea Government to encourage the movement of refugees from the border area to the United Nations sponsored resettlement center in East Awini, close to 4,000 refugees still remain in the immediate border area. In the past year the refugees have re-organized themselves into a small number of densely-populated camps, some of which have more than 1,000 inhabitants.

Traditional agricultural techniques - slash and burn horticulture combined with agro harvesting - are suitable only in areas with relatively low population densities and already scarce resources are becoming even scarcer.

Every large-scale development project takes a toll on the environment, and the mining industry is certainly no exception. Environmental impact has to be estimated and acceptable levels of damage established. It is obvious that a number of years ago there was an agreement made to write off the Ok Tedi River, to accept the fact that it would suffer considerable ecological damage.

Yet despite the awareness of this situation, no effort was ever made to directly compensate the Yonggom and Awini people affected. The Falvool people in and around the mine site have benefited from royalties and compensation, the Ningrum people to the south through employment at the mine, and the Awini through business opportunities created by the Klung-Tabubil highway.

The Yonggom people - despite bearing the brunt of the mine's negative impact - have not received their share of the mine's benefits, nor have they been compensated

for the devastation of their river. It is possible that in the near future the extent of the damage caused by the mining operation could increase dramatically. If current plans to increase the amount of sediment and particulate copper released at the mining site are carried out, existing damage to the Ok Tedi River could be replicated further downstream.

What is at stake is nothing less than the future of the entire Fly River and possibly parts of the Papuan Gulf and Torres Straits as well.

One potential solution to this threat to the Fly River and its watershed is to construct a tallings dam to retain the bulk of the sediment and other waste products that

would otherwise be released into the river system.

The proposition is currently under consideration and pressure from involved and concerned parties would increase the likelihood that such a dam would be constructed. Plans exist for two different size dams, each with its own potential ecological consequences.

Regardless of the success of conservation attempts in the future, effort should be made to establish a fair and reasonable compensation plan for those people who live and own land along the ecologically-damaged Ok Tedi River. As the present and future impact to the Fly River is better understood, a similar plan could be developed for those people living along the Fly.