



SUSTAINABLE OR INSATIABLE

By

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The term *Sustainable Development* provokes or invokes a myriad of feelings and opinions. In a dictionary, the word *sustain* is defined as “continuing for a long time”. The issue of course is defining the word *long*. The word *develop* is generally defined as “growing larger”. It is doubtful that “continuing to grow larger for a long time” is exactly the definition everyone had in mind as it relates to the mining industry. In theory, sustainable development translates into extracting and consuming natural resources at a rate that leaves something for future generations. Each and every new mineral deposit would not be developed immediately, and we would not mine merely for the sake of mining. This is a difficult concept for the mining industry to embrace. It is contrary to the time-tested manner in which mining is conducted.

In the public's mind, sustainable development to the mining industry means exploiting each deposit as quickly as possible to maintain cash flow and increase investor return. But sustainable development can also mean improving the quality of life in an emerging nation by providing jobs, education, health care, and basic infrastructure. We must live with the issue of producing more than we need, and in the process occasionally generating costly and unnecessary environmental damage. As the smaller mining companies and houses cease to exist through failure, acquisitions, and mergers, the remaining larger ones are taking on the opportunity and responsibility of considering the implications of mining and sustainable development. The negative public perception of the mining industry will not change overnight. Regardless of the number of mining companies and houses supporting an initiative or code, one disaster negates the entire effort.

The mining industry is aware that signing onto an initiative or a code that is violated by even one signatory reflects negatively on the industry as a whole, and eliminates all pretenses of credibility.

The environmental groups have gone global and maintain international communication networks with budgets of hundreds of millions of dollars to counter any attempt by the mining industry to change its image. They actively respond or passively reply in silence. The mining industry must turn to the local community directly in order to win the peoples' hearts and minds, and to identify their cultural needs and desires. The delay or abandonment of projects usually results by taking the local community for granted and by not engaging them respectfully and repeatedly.

The mining industry must reestablish the connection between its products and the people that use them through a comprehensive public outreach effort. There is a need to reexamine each mining operation and improve or maintain their community relations programs and environmental management systems. There is a need to increase the professional staffs for these programs and systems in lieu of expensive and ineffective global campaigns, which are only seen by the public as propaganda. And finally we must come to grips with the economic, environmental, and ethical consequences of closure. These are the challenges we face as an industry. But by engaging our minds and getting them working collectively, we can meet the challenges and once again take hold of our own destiny.