

BIODIVERSITY

building a relationship

Rio Tinto has partnered with 14 non-governmental organizations to help realize its policy objective of putting the group's global operations on a more sustainable footing. We profile its work with one of these NGOs – BirdLife International

As anyone who has ever visited a flooded gravel pit knows, where miners have been, birds tend to follow. And so, in turn, do birdwatchers, who will often stay in the area to spend their tourist dollars.

Building on this simple observation, a grouping of more than 100 conservation bodies and the world's third-largest mining company have come together in a partnership that seeks to achieve objectives common to both organizations.

Each party had very different reasons for becoming involved in the Rio Tinto-BirdLife Birds and the Environment Programme. BirdLife saw it as an opportunity to harness the power and reach of a global company to improve biodiversity and protect threatened species. For Rio Tinto the partnership, which will initially last five years, is part of a wider policy to put its operations on a more sustainable footing.

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'Successful partnerships are all about realizing the mutual benefits', says Jonathan Stacey, project manager of the Rio Tinto-BirdLife Programme. 'That principle underlies all partnerships and makes them sustainable.' For its part, Rio Tinto has entered into partnership agreements with 13 other environmental, indigenous and educational non-governmental organizations, including Earthwatch,

Fauna & Flora International, the Centre for Appropriate Technology, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew and WWF-Australia. From northern Canada, where it is involved with local communities, to Victoria in Australia, where it has supported efforts to conserve the platypus, Rio Tinto has entered partnerships to tackle issues ranging from biodiversity through water management to human rights.

Sustainable development is easy to talk about, but hard to put into practice, especially when you are a mining giant with a substantial ecological footprint. Partnerships are a useful way of realizing opportunities that would simply not be available to an organization acting alone.

John Hall, Rio Tinto's corporate relations manager, says: 'This is about policy development. A company that is serious about sustainable development has to take partnership seriously because it is through genuine partnerships that change happens.'

The relationship between BirdLife International and Rio Tinto began three years ago, when birding events were held at 21 of the company's 66 operations around the world. The Rio Tinto Birdwatch is now an annual global event – last year, there were 43 Birdwatch events and more than 1400 people were involved, among them many of the company's employees – but they are only one element in a much wider programme of work.

Rio Tinto has set ambitious sustainable development objectives: developing biodiversity best practice at Rio Tinto sites; ensuring the company's programmes take biodiversity into account at the outset of a project, and involving



PETE OUTHWAITE/RBM

■ the relationship between BirdLife International and Rio Tinto began with an international birdwatching event, but has since grown to include wider sustainable development objectives

communities near sites in biodiversity management. The partnership programme is an important element of this strategy.

'We are seeking to influence how a multinational with a global presence incorporates nature conservation objectives into its core operating activities', says Stacey.

Rio Tinto typically operates sites for between ten and 30 years and has been mining at some for more than a century. Its operations affect people at least as much as wildlife. At one site, Richards Bay in the KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa, the Rio Tinto-BirdLife International Programme began work last year to establish a sustainable ecotourism network for the area. The R2million (£160,000, \$251,000) four-year programme involves BirdLife International South Africa, the Rio Tinto-managed subsidiary Richards Bay Minerals and other stakeholders working together to develop the area for ecotourists. An information centre has been set up, hides built and guides trained, while work has begun to develop a long-term plan to conserve the area.

Richards Bay is globally important for birds, particularly wildfowl, and also attracts rarities such as the crab plover. But many of the areas popular with birds are being damaged by pollution and industrial development.

'Richards Bay has the potential to be the hub for bird-based ecotourism in northern KwaZulu-Natal, which is already a well-known area for ecotourism in South Africa, and the idea is to develop the resource to the point where local businesses are able to sustain themselves', says Stacey. Richards Bay is already part of a green tourist trail and 'avitourism' now forms one part of Richards Bay Minerals' work to build up the local economy well in advance of when the mine eventually closes. The local business advice centre, set up by the company in 1986 to promote local enterprises, has helped to create more than 2500 jobs and establish 900 firms.

'The Avitourism Project is placing birds and biodiversity at the core of Richards Bay's developing economy,' says BirdLife. 'By identifying locations and sites of biodiversity value and developing them as economic assets to local communities, this initiative is cultivating a model for sustainable development in the true sense of the phrase.' In Madagascar, Namibia and elsewhere, the company operates in the vicinity of important birding areas where there is similar potential for avitourism to provide jobs for local people and help biodiversity.

The relationship between Rio Tinto and BirdLife is complex, with social, environmental and commercial interests all jostling for space. This makes trust an essential ingredient in the partnership mix. As Stacey says, 'Trust allows the programme to challenge the view that businesses and conservation organizations operate exclusive and polarized agendas.'

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BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL

■ The African fish eagle is one of the many attractions for birders at Richards Bay, where a Rio Tinto-managed subsidiary is working in partnership with BirdLife International South Africa to develop the local economy by improving biodiversity

the company

Rio Tinto mines and processes aluminium, copper, coal, gold, iron ore and other minerals in more than 20 countries, has 36,000 employees and a market capitalization of \$26billion (£16.6bn, €24bn). It:

- heads the mining sector in the Dow Jones Sustainability World Index, which rates a company's social and environmental activity alongside its economic performance
- is the best-performing mining company in Business in the Community's Corporate Responsibility Index, launched in spring 2003, which scores companies on how well they measure and integrate responsible business practices
- is a founder member of the Global Mining Initiative, an industry programme that seeks to identify how mining can help society become more sustainable
- gives company staff volunteers paid time off work to carry out conservation research in partnership with Earthwatch, an environmental non-governmental organization.



comment RIO TINTO

As a giant in its sector, Rio Tinto clearly has role model potential for other companies, and not just those in the mining industry. In its partnership policy, the company displays a clear commitment to letting its operations be informed and influenced by some of its hardest critics. Their knowledge and skills are employed to help establish sustainable solutions to complex challenges.

features of particular interest:

- partners focus on mutual benefits of the partnership at least as much as on the gains for the individual organizations
- there is recognition of the need for change within the partner organizations, which challenges all partners and encourages them to review their internal structures and ways of working
- the partnership is not merely remedial with a narrow focus on the local setting, but takes account of the wider impacts on communities.

FLEMMING SCHULTZ, THE COPENHAGEN CENTRE