

# The Extraction of Natural Resources as a Source of Conflict

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## Purpose:

There are many places in the world today where the extraction of natural resources has either triggered or fuelled violent conflict. In 2001, for example, a quarter of all armed conflicts in the world involved the extraction of natural resources.

In many cases, these violent conflicts have led to humanitarian disasters, human rights violations, and environmental destruction. Global issues of peace, justice, environment, human rights, and development are tied to resource extraction in both “developing” and “developed” countries.

We are depleting non-renewable resources at a rate never before experienced, and the probability of future conflicts over natural resources seems high. Exploring peaceful possibilities and sustainable practices that place priority on local communities and ecological integrity when resources are extracted is an exercise in working toward a peaceful future.

The purpose of this lesson is to help students understand the connection between the extraction of natural resources and conflict between groups, and to encourage them to think about how to move toward peaceful solutions to such conflicts.

**Curriculum Connections:** This activity covers many expectations in grade 7 geography (natural resources), history (conflict and change), and language (drama) curriculum, as well as (with some modification) the grade 6 social studies topic “Canada’s Links to the World.”

**Time Needed:** 120 minutes

**Resources:** Backgrounders on areas of the world where natural resources have either triggered conflict or financed conflict between groups. Pieces of large newsprint/chart paper and markers.

## Procedure:

### Introductory Discussion

#### **Think Pair Share**

#### *Natural Resources and Conflict*

For each topic (natural resources and conflict) ask students to

- write down a definition independently
- share their definition with a partner and come to an agreement on one definition
- share their agreed upon definitions with the class.

If it does not come up in discussion, brainstorm with students what they know about natural resources – types of natural resources (renewable, non-renewable, and flow), examples of natural resources, etc.

Various forms of conflict may be discussed – between individuals, between small groups, and within countries or between countries.

### **Whole Class Discussion**

Ask students:

- What are the possible connections between natural resources and conflicts that arise between groups?
- Why would the extraction of some natural resources be the source of conflict?
- What conflicts currently occurring in the world were triggered by natural resource extraction?

If it does not come up in discussion, explain that sometimes conflicts between groups are *triggered* by natural resource extraction, and sometimes natural resources are used to *fuel* or finance a conflict. The following drama activity will illustrate examples of both cases.

## Drama/Role Playing

1. Participants are divided into groups.
2. Each group is given one of the backgrounders provided and a sheet of newsprint/chart paper.
3. With a marker, one of the students divides the newsprint into four sections, labelling the quadrants: *People/Groups Involved*, *Reason for Conflict*, *Significant Facts*, and *Possible Solutions/Next Steps*. Students summarize their backgrounder under the first three headings, and brainstorm possible solutions to the conflict (possible actions by those involved).
4. Students use their summaries and possible solutions to develop a three-to-five-minute drama. Students should take the roles of those listed under *People/Groups Involved*, and incorporate one of the *Possible Solutions/Next Steps* that they came up with.
5. Students present their dramas to the class. After each presentation, provide an opportunity for the audience to ask questions, and for those presenting to answer in role.
6. Discuss the following after each presentation:
  - Was the situation one in which the exploitation of resources triggered the conflict, or financed/fueled the conflict?
  - What type of resource triggered or financed the conflict?
  - Was the solution offered in the drama realistic? What are other possibilities?
  - What environmental impact did the resource extraction and the conflict have?
  - What role does the international community play in such a conflict? What role can it play?

### **Potential (Whole class debriefing)**

The dramatizations can generate impassioned feelings in favour of the victims of the conflict and against those who seem to be the perpetrators of the conflict. Students might be asked to reflect on and discuss their experiences both in role and as part of the audience in the following ways:

- How did you feel about the role you played in your drama?

- Was the conflict clear-cut in terms of right and wrong?
- Were actions by victims of resource extraction always acceptable?
- Are the conflicts easily solved? Explain.
- How did the groups involved try to gain power over other groups?
- What are the environmental costs of such conflicts?
- Should the international community get involved in such conflicts? Explain.
- What can individuals do to help end these conflicts?
- What other places in the world are currently experiencing conflict over natural resources? What resources?
- Do you foresee future conflicts over resources? Which resources? Where?
- What kind of things can be done to prevent possible conflicts over natural resources?
- Do you foresee Canada ever being involved in a conflict over natural resources? For what resources? Why?

### **Variations**

1. One backgrounder may be used to create a whole class simulation that could incorporate the international community (e.g., the United Nations) deciding on what to do about the conflict.
2. Students may prepare backgrounders on other conflicts over resources around the world.

### **Extensions**

1. Students write a reflection about their experience in the drama (in role).
2. Students do further research and write an essay on the topic they dramatized.
3. Students write to the UN regarding the conflict in one of the situations.
4. Groups can initiate an action and awareness campaign for one of the conflicts.



## Backgrounder - Democratic Republic of Congo: Coltan

Coltan, short for Columbite-tantalite, is a metallic ore found mainly in the eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). Coltan is refined to become a heat-resistant powder which has unique properties for storing an electrical charge. It is used to make products such as cellular phones and computers, and is also used in missiles and jet engines.

The Democratic Republic of Congo holds 64 per cent of global coltan and is the world's largest reserve. The demand for coltan and coltan-reliant products has created lucrative business opportunities for rebel movements in the Congo. Rebel groups involved in

the conflict include: the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF), the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), the Rally of Congolese Democracy (RCD), and the Congolese Liberation Front (CLF).

While the average Congolese worker earns \$10 per month, the average Congolese coltan-miner earns anywhere from \$10 to \$50 per week. Ugandan, Rwandan, and Congolese rebels have earned many millions of dollars in sales of coltan, which they have used to finance their war efforts in the Congo. Between 1999 and 2000, the Rwandan army alone earned at least \$20 million a month from coltan.

The continuing conflict fuelled by the exploitation of coltan has created an increasingly worse humanitarian situation in the eastern part of the DRC. DRC's 50 million people are less and less secure and their food supplies endangered. Rebels back by Uganda and Rwanda have attacked villages in order to establish their own rule of law. They force children into service for work in mines, in the army and as prostitutes. More than one third of the population lacks access to adequate medical facilities; 47 per cent have no safe drinking water and more than half have insufficient food.

There has also been significant environmental damage. The DRC is home to more than 50 per cent of Africa's forests. To mine coltan, rebel groups have cleared large areas of these lush forests, destroyed mountain gorilla habitat, and cut the gorilla population by nearly half.

Many international corporations have imported coltan from the DRC via Rwanda for use in Asia, Europe, and the United States. Like many other resources, once coltan reaches international markets, it is impossible to trace its source.

At least two coltan-manufacturing companies, Kemet Corp. and Cabot Corp., have asked their suppliers to certify that their tantalum does not originate in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. However, coltan currently lacks any sort of certification system.

*Prepare a drama that illustrates the impact of the conflict and mining of coltan on a rural Congolese family.*

### Sources for backgrounders on Columbia and Bougainville:

Renner, Michael. *The Anatomy of Resource Wars*, Edited by Thomas Prugh. Worldwatch Paper 162, October 2002.

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade, Parliament of Australia. *Bougainville: The Peace Process and Beyond*. September 27, 1999

### Sources for backgrounder on the Democratic Republic of Congo:

Adapted from: [http://www.warchild.ca/rocked\\_coltan.asp](http://www.warchild.ca/rocked_coltan.asp)

Supplementary source: Montague, Dena, *Stolen Goods: Coltan and the Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, SAIS Review vol XXII no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2002)

### Related websites:

[www.worldpolicy.org/projects/arms/news/22.1montague.pdf](http://www.worldpolicy.org/projects/arms/news/22.1montague.pdf)

[www.globalpolicy.org/security/natres/mineindex.htm](http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/natres/mineindex.htm)

[www.warchild.ca/rocked\\_wars.asp](http://www.warchild.ca/rocked_wars.asp)

[www.enviroliteracy.org/article.php/587.html](http://www.enviroliteracy.org/article.php/587.html)

[www.idrc.ca/en/ev-28110-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-28110-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)

## Backgrounder – Columbia: Crude Oil

Columbia has not seen full-scale civil war, but has had long-running, lower intensity violence that continually threatens to escalate. Conflict in Columbia has its roots primarily in the struggle for political change and in ideological confrontations that began in the 1940s. More recently a fight over cocaine and crude oil has fuelled conflict.

Repression against political dissent in the form of military action against small land-owners and peasant groups, along with the growing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small elite, spurred the rise of several leftist guerrilla groups in the 1960s. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) are mainly based in the coca-growing regions of southern Columbia. The National Liberation Army (ELN) operates mostly in the oil-rich northeast. Together, they have about 20,000 combatants.

Oil production accounts for one third of the country's total export earnings. For the gov-

ernment, oil is a critical resource, not least because Columbia has come under increasing pressure from the International Monetary Fund to accelerate oil development so it can pay its foreign debts.

The rebel groups have sought to get payments from oil firms and others, and have tried to cut into the government's oil income by obstructing the flow of oil. For example, they have attacked the country's key pipelines – jointly owned by the state and Los Angeles-based Occidental Petroleum – more than 900 times.

These attacks have caused 2.6 million barrels of oil to spill into lakes, rivers, and soil. Occidental Petroleum has successfully lobbied the US government to provide aid – \$573 million in 2003 – that allows the Colombian military to protect the flow of oil.

The conflict over oil most affects Columbia's indigenous populations, including the U'wa.



As a result of government expropriation of about 85 per cent of their ancestral lands their population numbers have dwindled from 20,000 in 1940 to 5,000 today. Since the early 1990s, the U'wa, with the support of solidarity groups worldwide, have resisted Occidental Petroleum's attempts to drill for oil on ancestral land adjacent to their current reservation, which is also a delicate cloud forest ecosystem. In 1999, the government granted a drilling permit to Occidental without consulting the U'wa.

*Prepare a drama that reflects what has happened to the U'wa and what you think they should do.*

## Backgrounder – Bougainville: Copper

Bougainville, an island that is part of Papua New Guinea (PNG), has the world's largest open-pit copper mine. Owned jointly by the mining corporation CRA (ConZinc Rio-Tinto of Australia Limited) – 80 per cent – and the Papua New Guinea government – 20 per cent – it started operating in 1972. The severe social and environmental problems caused by the mine fuelled demands for separation and independence of Bougainville first from Australia and then from Papua New Guinea. (Bougainville was governed by Australia from 1920 to 1975, when it was made part of a newly independent PNG.)

PNG declared that mineral rights belonged to the state, violating Bougainville traditions of land ownership and reinforcing the alienation inhabitants felt under the rule of a different ethnic group. Copper revenues of \$500 million per year went to the central government

and foreign investors, but the local population saw relatively few benefits.

The presence of an affluent foreign mining community and the influx of a large number of workers from other parts of PNG intensified local resentment of the mine. Local people were paid considerably less than other workers. The mine created major social disruptions, including the move away from the island society's matriarchal structure. Mine waste and chemical pollutants damaged about one-fifth of the total land area, forcing villages to relocate, decimating food and cash crops like cocoa and bananas, contaminating rivers, and depleting fish stocks.



Bougainville's residents complained and demanded compensation, but were ignored. In 1988, spurred by violent behaviour by PNG security forces, a rebel group launched a campaign of sabotage that quickly developed into guerrilla war.

The mine was forced to close in 1989 because of the rebel campaign. Faced with a major loss in revenue, the government launched many military campaigns, burning homes and villages and abusing the civilian population. Although the PNG government had made several attempts at a settlement with the rebel groups, the government also initiated simultaneous harsh military responses to rebel actions. Attempts at settlement have remained largely unsuccessful.

*Prepare a drama that reflects what has happened in Bougainville and how the conflict may have affected a village family.*