

Don't let Natives end up paying the cost of Biden's EV goals



After the Biden administration pushed through the biggest climate package in American history, Native communities in North America are concerned with how the administration's incentives for domestic mining could impact their ancestral lands.

The Inflation Reduction Act passed in August includes roughly \$400 billion for health and climate change-related measures, and among those, tax credits for the purchase of electric vehicles. These incentives will help automakers accelerate their shift to electric vehicles and phase out internal combustion engines. To build a domestic supply chain for electric vehicle batteries, the IRA incentivizes both domestic mining and manufacturing.

The International Energy Association stated in a July 2022 [report](#) that the greatest obstacle to reaching the Biden administration's climate goals is global supply chains, and a need for more nickel and lithium for battery production. According to the IEA, battery and mineral capacity will need to expand tenfold over the next decade to meet this goal.

The majority of nickel and lithium resources in the continental U.S. are located on or near Native lands. Morgan Stanley Capital International, an investment research firm, notes that Native American reservations are within 25 miles of 97% of U.S. nickel resources, and 79% of its lithium resources.

When policies concerning domestic land are moved forward, Indigenous perspectives must be included. Even before environmental reviews could be conducted, industrialists like Elon Musk have already made promises of lucrative contracts to companies that can domestically mine these needed materials as efficiently and sustainably as possible. Of note, however, is that sustainable mining is as greenwashed a term as there has ever been. The world has yet to see the existence of an environmentally-friendly mine.

Many Indigenous leaders are strongly supportive of federal climate action on grounds of both nature-stewardship and climate justice. But the expansion of domestic mining driven by both tax incentives and streamlined permitting has the potential to sacrifice the health of Native lands and communities. Historically, mining projects have inflicted displacement, land destruction and water pollution on Native peoples.

Mining also carries the risk of cultural devastation. Hundreds of miles away from hedge funds and the IEA, a loon flies overhead, gliding onto the Big Sandy Lake in northern Minnesota. The lake, sacred to the Anishinaabeg, is one of the last locations where the culturally important wild rice is grown and hand harvested by the local tribes. For hundreds of years, this land has been mutually managed by interconnected communities and tribes, ensuring this region remains one of the most ecologically diverse in the state.

Northern Minnesota, aside from being a consistent destination spot for tourists, remains an important carbon sequestration site and contains the headwaters of the Mississippi River. To say the least, this region is culturally and environmentally important to locals and the entire 2,340 miles of the Mississippi River. Talon Metals, a British Virgin Islands-based mineral exploration company, has very different plans for this sensitive region — plans that have yet to take into consideration the importance this watershed holds for people near and far.

Talon Metals' parent company, the international mining giant Rio Tinto, is exploring the potential for construction of a new nickel mine in Tamarack — just miles from these sacred lands — to help "meet the growing demand for nickel," poised to be used in electric vehicles the residents of Tamarack would likely be unable to afford.

Rio Tinto has made extensive promises to the communities that will be impacted, about the "sustainability" of its proposed mining operation. Along with promises that "green nickel" operations won't disrupt the environment, Rio Tinto has also promised green energy for an electric mine fleet, no tailings dams, community development and carbon capture and storage — which the region already provides naturally.

Historically, concerns from Native communities in proximity to mining operations are well founded. Rio Tinto has an established track record of disregarding the ancestral sites of Indigenous groups. In 2020, Rio Tinto was ordered to rebuild a [46,000-year-old Aboriginal cave system](#) the company destroyed while searching for iron ore. The destruction of the Juukan Gorge Caves in Western Australia isn't the only [example](#) of Rio Tinto's disregard of people and the lands they hold sacred.

Mining operations have often times left once-thriving communities struggling and subject to the economic and environmental repercussions of short-term corporate interests. Rio Tinto has promised that the Tamarack mine is "not your grandfather's mine," alluding to environmentally friendly aspects of their plans. However, plans for Indigenous consultation, partnership, or a conversation to hear Indigenous concerns prior to prospecting are found nowhere in their proposals. A vibrant and environmentally just future can only exist when Indigenous communities are valued and included in every aspect of the process. Without that we lose the opportunity for an equitable and just energy transition.

At the crux of the concern with sustainable mining practices are their novelty, with the long-term impacts of such operations looming somewhere in the future at an Indigenous community's potential expense. Talon is experimenting here, taking a step into a new frontier, without first acknowledging how their actions could impact Indigenous families and entire communities, not to mention critical habitats and water sources.

That phrase "grandfather's mine" is worth examining, considering how our grandfather's mines were run, and how our grandfathers were treated. Mining companies have a dismal reputation in human rights and a long history of disregarding the environment that yields them their profits.

As the United States commences its domestic electric era, it faces a critical juncture in sustainable equity. The majority of Americans are in agreement that our reliance on fossil fuels must end. Whether Indigenous voices are included in the conversation will determine if the path forward is just.