

Mining Companies present themselves as benign scientific and technological institutions which bring economic development and jobs to the particular regions where they decide to open a mine. Many have a long history of mining and other heavy industries. Indeed BHP, the largest mining company in the world, proudly displays its history as a timeline on the company website. Naturally, the narrative is one of progress. The present day mining giant would be unrecognisable to those supposedly plucky early prospectors who risked all over a hundred years ago to set it up. But it is not difficult to find that there are other, much more controversial stories to be told. BHP's own timeline simply leaves out those events that are detrimental to its reputation and which tell of violence and damage to people and environment for which the company can be and is still being held accountable.

So, we at LMN thought we would help to fill these gaps by presenting you with our own timeline of BHP's history. This is not an exhaustive history of BHP but just a few examples of the controversies they avoid mentioning. It is also not completely linear as we do sometimes jump back and forwards in time. Some mining projects run for a long time creating problems throughout their lifetime of operation and beyond. Sometimes it takes decades to resolve a problem that started when the mine began; twenty or thirty years of the life of the people bringing the complaint. We owe it to them to make sure their stories are told.

The story of BHP is also complicated by the fact that it began its life as two separate companies, BHP and Billiton. Many decades later, they merged to become BHP Billiton and then Billiton disappeared altogether, absorbed into the company that reappeared as BHP.

BHP and Billiton
<p>Billiton 1851</p> <p>Dutch explorers discovered tin at Billiton Island (Belitung) in what was then the Dutch East Indies which had been claimed for the Dutch by the government-backed military-commercial enterprise, the Dutch East India company, even bigger than the British East India Company and just as rapacious in extracting wealth from other people's lands.</p> <p>https://www.bhp.com/our-approach/our-history/ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch_East_India_Company</p>
<p>Billiton 1860</p> <p>The Billiton company was established and acquired the right to mine on Billiton and Bangka Islands. Billiton continued to mine at Bangka island until 1958.</p> <p>Tin mining is a lucrative but destructive trade that has scarred the island's landscape, bulldozed its farms and forests, killed off its fish stocks and coral reefs, and dented tourism to its pretty palm-lined beaches. The damage is best seen from the air, as pockets of lush forest huddle amid huge swaths of barren orange earth. [Picture?]</p> <p>This remote island of the Indonesian archipelago continues to be stripped of its forests and dug up for tin used in millions of mobile phones, tablets and laptops. The mining is often illegal and hazardous and yet few of the leading brands have control over where the tin is sourced from and how it is affecting nature and people who mine it.</p> <p>https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2012/nov/23/tin-mining-indonesia-bangka https://www.theguardian.com/environment/gallery/2014/may/29/tin-mining-on-bangka-island-of-indonesia-in-pictures</p>

BHP 1883

Charles Rasp, a former German officer who deserted from the Franco-Prussian war and then worked as a boundary rider on a sheep station in western New South Wales, [discovered](#) silver and lead in an area known as Broken Hill. Certain that he had made a rich find, he paid for one of the biggest mining leases taken out in Australia at the time - on land that had been [taken from](#) the [Wilyakali, Barkandji and other First Nations](#) who had lived there for over 45,000 years. The creeping violence of settler colonialism was already decimating their population and destroying their way of life based on access to the water systems and the ability to travel over a large area of land when Rasp claimed his find.

<https://www.bhp.com/our-approach/our-history/>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paakantyi>

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/bioregions/BrokenHillComplex-RegionalHistory.htm>

<https://londonminingnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Martial-Mining.pdf>

BHP 1885

The Broken Hill Proprietary Company Ltd or BHP was floated, that is to say, shares in the company were offered for public sale. Over the next hundred and thirty five years it was to become one of the world's biggest mining companies. As a consequence of farming, mining and urban settlement of the region where the mining company began, the Darling River has [virtually dried up](#). Children have been exposed to [high levels of lead](#), arsenic and cadmium for over a hundred years, despite the fact that the dangers of exposure were recognised as early as 1893.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2019/04/05/death-darling-colonialisms-final-encounter-barkandji-1>

<https://theconversation.com/australian-children-exposed-to-toxic-mining-metals-do-worse-at-school-48343>

BHP 1968

Mt Newman Iron Ore Mine started production. In 2009, Kerry and Diana Robinson, representatives of the Marapikurrinya people, began the process of [successfully challenging](#) a government attempt to deregister a sacred site at Port Hedland where the iron ore is shipped out. Mr Robinson said, "We have been fighting so hard for our lore and land not to be destroyed... From the beginning when the Mt Newman mining company came to Port Hedland in the 1960's we have had too many problems... [our clan heritage] getting destroyed every time a mining company comes here hammering and dredging".

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-01/aboriginal-heritage-test-case-port-hedland/6366250>

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/lore-of-the-land-as-aborigines-take-on-bhp-20090803-e6a6.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2011/sep/30/western-australia-rock-art-hard-place>

In October 2020 the company's own environmental report, acquired by ABC news but not made available to the public, [revealed that it had exceeded its licence limits](#) for dust levels at Mount Whaleback on 45 days in 2018-19, putting the health of residents in the town of Newman 5km away repeatedly at risk.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-12/dust-levels-bhp-newman-iron-ore-mine-exceed-licence-limit/12732272>

BHP 1981

BHP began construction of Ok Tedi copper and gold mine in Papua New Guinea. Operations began in 1984 and the company [dumped untreated](#) mining waste into the river system. More than 2,000 square kilometres of forest has been damaged or destroyed by mine tailings (waste). The hunting, fishing and garden areas of an estimated 40,000 local and Indigenous people have been damaged or destroyed. Fish populations have declined by 95 percent in the Ok Tedi River compromising people's livelihoods, food security and forest based culture. Mount Fubilan, the site of the Ok Tedi Mine, has been reduced from a

peak of over 2,000m, to a 3km wide open pit, the bottom of which lies at sea level. ***Ok Tedi is noticeably absent from BHP's own timeline***

What happened next? See BHP 2002 below.

<https://londonminingnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EMBARGOED-Cut-and-run.-How-Britains-top-two-mining-companies-have-wrecked-ecosystems.pdf>

BHP 1990

The Salar de Atacama and Punta Negra (salt flat and high-Andean wetlands) are two ecosystems located in the middle of a desert in Chile. These have been damaged by over-exploitation of water and pollution caused by Minera Escondida, BHP's biggest mining project in the country and the highest producing copper mine in the world. The mine has also harmed the livelihoods of indigenous communities in the Atacama Desert, especially the Peine community, in the locations nearest to where the company draws water.

[Anti-union](#) practices mean that BHP also shows scant respect for the rights of workers.

<https://theecologist.org/2020/feb/21/bhps-divide-and-conquer>

<https://www.mining.com/chilean-watchdog-charges-bhp-for-water-misuse-at-escondida/>

<http://www.industrial-union.org/major-strike-at-escondida-mine-chile>

<https://finance.nine.com.au/business-news/strike-at-largest-copper-mine-into-day-6/63686715-ebdd-4983-bd88-ad8658d5dbd8>

BHP 1997

BHP acquired full ownership of the Cerro Matoso ferro-nickel mine in Colombia but was involved in extraction from the start in 1982. In the 1990s evidence started to emerge of the devastating health impacts on local indigenous (Zenú and Embera) and African-descent communities which was subsequently confirmed by the Colombian Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Science and presented to the Colombian Constitutional Court. Alarming high rates of miscarriage, birth defects and cancer were found to be widespread in nearby communities and have been linked to the heavy metal contamination found in local air, soil and water.

https://terra-justa.org/dc_2017/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/BHP-Fine-Words-Foul-Play-Sept-23.pdf

See BHP 2015 below for further developments and legacy issues.

Billiton 2000

Billiton [acquired the Colombian Govt company's 50% share](#) in El Cerrejon mine in consortium with Anglo American and Glencore. This is one of the largest open-pit coal mines in the world. Mining operations began in 1985, at exactly the same time as the underground coal mines in the UK were closed and Cerrejon became a major supplier of coal to the UK.

<http://www.minesandcommunities.org/article.php?a=6676>

What happened next? See BHP 2001 and 2020 below

2001 BHP and Billiton merged to become BHP Billiton, combining the mines they own into a huge portfolio.

BHP Billiton 2001

Cerrejon Mine is now partly owned by BHP Billiton. *See 2020 below.*

BHP Billiton 2001

The company acquired Antamina in Peru, the world's third largest copper producer. It is majority owned by BHP Billiton and Glencore.

In 2012, about 45 tonnes of [mineral slurry leaked](#) at a pumping station after a joint in the pipeline broke. About 3 tonnes, roughly the capacity of a tanker truck, escaped an area designed to contain leaks, according to Antonio Mendoza, environmental manager of Antamina. More than 200 residents of Cajacuy, [a village with no running water or sewage system](#), complained of headaches, nausea, irritated eyes and nosebleeds more than a week after the spill. 47 were hospitalised. The company claimed the spill was not toxic but according to a company document made public by the Peruvian newspaper La Republica, the mix is “very toxic” and as well as copper and zinc it contained sulphur, arsenic, silica, lead, iron sulphide, and crystalline silica.

<https://www.peruviantimes.com/07/environmental-watchdog-monitors-antamina-mine-spill/16466/>

<https://in.reuters.com/article/peru-antamina-pipeline-idINL2E8J688V20120806>

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/peru-bhp-spill-devastates-community>

BHP Billiton 2002

Ok Tedi - BHP [walked away](#) (LMN Report: Cut and Run 2020) from the environmental disaster it had created and which was generating huge amounts of bad publicity for the company. It is yet to be held fully accountable and pay for the extensive damage it has caused. ***As mentioned above, 1981, the Ok Tedi mine is noticeably absent from the company's own timeline.***

<https://londonminingnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EMBARGOED-Cut-and-run.-How-Britains-top-two-mining-companies-have-wrecked-ecosystems.pdf>

BHP Billiton 2005

Olympic Dam mine is a large poly-metallic underground mine in **South Australia**. It is the fourth largest copper deposit and the largest known single deposit of uranium in the world. It is mired in controversy. Conservationists want BHP to stop using evaporation ponds at Olympic Dam that kill hundreds of birds, including threatened species. Despite the fact that storage of the tailings, which include radioactive materials and acids, has been controversial since Olympic Dam's previous owner, Western Mining Corporation, confirmed in 1994 that 5 billion cubic metres of the tailings fluids had leaked out of the storage facilities and into an aquifer underground, the company plans to expand the height of the tailings dam walls and increase the volume of radioactive tailings stored. Work is expected to be completed by 2023 despite strong opposition. The consequence of potential failure of Olympic Dam tailings dams is rated "extreme."

<https://nuclear.foe.org.au/olympic-dam/>

<https://www.wise-uranium.org/umopauod.html>

<https://theecologist.org/2020/sep/15/bhp-betrays-international-safety-efforts>

BHP Billiton 2008

Approval to mine nickel and cobalt (Hallmark Nickel Project) in Davao Oriental, Mindanao, was given by the Philippines government in 2004/05 to a joint venture between BHP Billiton and AMCOR (Asiaticus Management Corp of the Philippines). Two large protected key biodiversity areas could be affected and many local people feared that the mine would also destroy their livelihoods as farmers and fishermen.

In 2008, UK organisation CAFOD (Catholic Agency For Overseas Development) accused AMCOR of imposing the mine on Philippine villagers by bribing community leaders to agree to it, and stated that BHP Billiton applied insufficient due diligence over its joint venture partner. It also accused the company of giving communities insufficient information about the potential impacts of the project.

In 2009, BHP pulled out of the partnership, selling its forty percent share to AMCOR

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7684860.stm>

<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/against-the-hallmark-nickel-project-philippines>

<http://www.piplinks.org/system/files/Mining+or+Food+Case+Study+4.pdf>

***Kept in the Dark: Why it's time for BHP Billiton to let communities in the Philippines have their say
CAFOD Report 2008***

2014

BHP and Rio Tinto (in a joint venture called Resolution Copper) sought for years to access the underground copper deposit in the Tonto National Forest, next to the San Carlos Apache reservation. The San Carlos Apache and other tribes have always been opposed to mining at Oak Flat, Arizona, a sacred site used for religious ceremonies. However there are no federal laws giving **Native Americans** control of ancestral lands that are outside reservation boundaries. The tribes were blindsided in 2014 when a proposal to exchange federally owned Oak Flat for private land owned by Resolution Copper was included, at the last minute, in a defence spending bill at the behest of four Arizona members of Congress who supported Resolution's mining plans; the bill was signed into law by the president, Barack Obama with the caveat that the swap could not occur until an environmental study was published which was due to be in 2021 (see 2020 below).

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/nov/24/trump-mining-arizona-holy-land-oak-flat-tribes>

<https://www.earthworks.org/stories/oak-flat-apache-leap/>

<http://apache-stronghold.com/index.html>

<https://news.trust.org/item/20201207050319-2de9k>

BHP 2015

To continue the story of Cerro Matoso from 1997 above, in 2015 a new company, South32, was spun out of BHP and took over the Cerro Matoso operations, allowing BHP to distance itself from an operation laden with liabilities. Despite BHP's denial of its role in the deteriorating health of nearby communities, in March 2018 the Colombian Constitutional Court found South32 (the new company) responsible for irreparable damage to local communities and ordered it to compensate those communities. After South32 appealed, the compensation order was nullified by the court in September 2018. The company was allowed to continue its mining operations whilst at the same time responding to the Court order to re-apply for its mining licensing as its operations did not meet environmental standards.

Local communities have been targeted by paramilitaries, threats and violence being directed at critics of the company's operations.

https://terra-justa.org/dc_2017/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/BHP-Fine-Words-Foul-Play-Sept-23.pdf

<https://newint.org/features/2016/11/01/we-are-slowly-being-killed-by-this-mine>

BHP Billiton 2015

The Fundão tailings dam at an iron ore mine at the Samarco Mariana Mining Complex in Minas Gerais, Brazil, suffered a catastrophic failure, resulting in flooding that devastated the downstream villages of Bento Rodrigues and Paracatu de Baixo (40 km (25 mi) from Bento Rodrigues), killing 20 people. The extent of the damage caused by the tailings dam collapse is the largest ever recorded with pollutants spread along 668 kilometres (415 mi) of watercourses.

<https://londonminingnetwork.org/2020/11/lmn-statement-for-5th-anniversary-of-the-samarco-disaster/>

<https://londonminingnetwork.org/tag/samarco/>

BHP Billiton is facing a \$5bn (£3.8bn) claim for damages over the dam collapse in Brazil.

In November 2020, the District Council of Mariana in Brazil (and other Brazilian claimants) sought leave to pursue a claim in the UK courts from the BHP Group for damages caused by the collapse of the Fundão tailings dam. This was rejected.

<https://londonminingnetwork.org/2020/11/a-barmecide-feast-legal-action-against-bhp-for-the-samarco-disaster/>

BHP Billiton September 2015

The company announced that it had started mining at the Haju mine, part of the first stage of the IndoMet Coal project, in the forested Central Kalimantan province in Indonesia. This is the first in a series of planned

massive coal mines that would destroy primary rainforest, deprive indigenous peoples of their customary land, and pollute water sources relied on by up to 1 million people. The 7 concessions granted to BHP Billiton lie within the remote and largely undisturbed forests of central Borneo and at least 2 lie within the internationally recognised Heart of Borneo Conservation Area.

https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/resources/indo-met_project_factsheet_lowrez.pdf
<https://londonminingnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EMBARGOED-Cut-and-run.-How-Britains-top-two-mining-companies-have-wrecked-ecosystems.pdf>

BHP Billiton 2016

BHP sold its 75 percent share of the IndoMet project to Adaro Energy at a huge financial loss for US\$120 million, well below the US\$ 335 million Adaro had paid for their 25 percent stake in the project in 2010. Although the project is now fully controlled by Adaro Energy, one of the largest Indonesian mining companies, BHP's role in developing this 'extreme' coal project should not be forgotten - in particular because the mining industry now claims both community legitimacy and social and environmental responsibility, especially BHP, which for years has claimed good practice both in terms of stewardship of the climate and in their dealings with indigenous communities.

https://terra-justa.org/dc_2017/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/BHP-Fine-Words-Foul-Play-Sept-23.pdf
<https://londonminingnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EMBARGOED-Cut-and-run.-How-Britains-top-two-mining-companies-have-wrecked-ecosystems.pdf>
<https://newint.org/blog/2016/10/20/life-in-the-shadow-of-the-worlds-biggest-mining-company>

2017 BHP Billiton rebrands itself simply BHP and changes its slogan to "Think Big". What does this mean?

BHP 2017-2020

The company is publicly committing to a clean, green transition: promising to shift from one of the world's biggest carbon polluters to a top provider of resources for the renewable energy sector. What does this mean for local communities and the environment in Ecuador, rich in copper and gold? Communities have rejected and resisted proposed mining projects. Critics of these mining projects are worried that conflict will escalate and they will face death threats and attacks on themselves and their property.

<https://theecologist.org/2020/feb/21/bhps-divide-and-conquer>
<https://rainforestactiongroup.org/bhps-hopes-blighted-by-community-resistance/>
<https://theecologist.org/2020/sep/25/sanctuary-life-ecuador>

2020 After nearly 20 years of destruction of communities and livelihoods and persecution, the Indigenous Wayuu communities of the Provincial Reserve in la Guajira are making an urgent call for UN intervention, due to the increased COVID-19 risks they are facing as a result of their constant exposure to poor quality air and the violation of their right to water as a consequence of the mine. Critics of the mine face death threats and state harassment. *The Cerrejón mine is noticeably absent from BHP's own timeline despite 20 years of ownership.*

<https://londonminingnetwork.org/2020/06/un-asked-to-suspend-cerrejon-coal-mining-in-colombia/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXzg9VzCaoc&feature=youtu.be>
<https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/bhp-backed-coal-mine-in-colombia-rocked-by-human-rights-claim-20200617-p553n5.html>
<https://londonminingnetwork.org/2020/06/yet-another-mining-related-death-threat-in-colombia/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffWTT9Q69g8>

2020

U.S. President Donald Trump's outgoing administration is set to approve the controversial land swap later this month that would give Resolution Copper (BHP and Rio Tinto) more than 2,400 acres (9.7 square

kilometers) to build an Arizona copper mine (see 2014 above), even though the project would destroy religious and cultural sites sacred to the San Carlos Apache. The publication date of the environmental study on which this approval depended and which was estimated to be completed in 2021 was brought forward to December 2020. The US Forest Service agency said it had completed the study faster than expected.

<https://news.trust.org/item/20201207050319-2de9k>

https://www.earthworks.org/stories/oak_flat_apache_leap/

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/nov/24/trump-mining-arizona-holy-land-oak-flat-tribes>

<http://apache-stronghold.com/index.html>