

CRITICAL REVIEW ON OSISKO HAMMOND REEF GOLD MINE  
RELATIONS WITH ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

by

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## INTRODUCTION

In Northern Ontario, there have been many recent development plans in the mining sector. Among these is the Hammond Reef Gold Mine, which is being proposed by Osisko Hammond Reef Gold Inc. (OHRG), a subsidiary of the Osisko Mining Corporation. This project will be located approximately 170 km west of Thunder Bay, Ontario and approximately 30 km northeast of the town of Atikokan, Ontario (population of approximately 3,400) (OHRG 2012). More specifically, the Hammond Reef deposit is located mainly on a peninsula of land extending into the north end of the Upper Marmion Reservoir.

The Osisko Hammond Reef Gold project description, prepared by Golder Associates (2011) was accepted by the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency (CEAA) on April 28, 2011, which allowed the company to enter the first of their 6 phases of completion of a comprehensive study under the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act (Figure 1). Hammond Reef will be doing an ongoing review process to ensure the project is done in the most efficient and effective way possible. The mine is proposed to begin operation in 2016 and will be decommissioned in 2032. When the project is in operation, it will be extracting gold ore found in quartz veins from an open pit mine at a rate of 50 000 tonnes per day for 14 years (OHRG 2011). In order for this to occur, Osisko must first create an ore processing facility to produce pure gold from ore and create a tailings management system to safely contain waste product. During this process Mitta Lake will be drained due to the ore deposit being located directly under it (OHRG

2012). However, before the project can proceed, it must pass rigorous reviews and comply with the concerns coming from many interest groups in the area.

## INTRODUCTION TO FIRST NATION IMPACTS

The Hammond Reef project has many important groups to consider, although, the most important group to appease is the many First Nation communities in the surrounding area. Being that the Hammond Reef project is located on a vast watershed, the project may have direct or indirect effects on many First Nations situated along the watershed. The First Nations communities that may potentially be affected by the project have been identified as the Lac des Milles Lacs First Nation (the closest), Wabigoon Lake First Nation and the seven First Nations represented by the Fort Frances Chiefs Secretariat (OHRG 2012). Each of these communities has their own concerns and interests that Osisko will have to address throughout each of its six stages. This, however, is a more difficult task than it seems on paper; these communities have been with mining companies before and have had poor past experiences.

In the past, First Nation interests have been overlooked and people mistreated. These experiences have left concerns within the community that their voice once again will not be heard and that their interests will not be taken into consideration when profit affected. Another problem that First Nations are facing is the subjective meanings of policy; this creates mistrust towards companies and governments alike. As a participant at a Elder meeting in Mitaanjigamiing expresses: “Government documents can mean different things depending on how they are read. How many times have we been given contracts that have been broken?” (Elder Meeting 2011). Therefore, Osisko will have to

have build relations with the Aboriginal communities to ensure interests are met to the best of their ability.

This paper aims to take a critical view of the relationship between Osisko and the surrounding Aboriginal communities. The terms of reference for the project will be viewed and compared to the concerns voiced by the Aboriginal community in the Elder meetings and letters of concern. This comparison will illustrate whether the interests of the communities are being addressed or ignored. The Ontario Environmental Assessment Act will also be examined to better understand what policies are in place for impacts on Aboriginal and treaty rights. Once this is examined, alternative assessment methods like community-based or Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)-based approaches will be reviewed to see if they would better suit the needs of First Nation communities.

## DISCUSSION OF FIRST NATION IMPACTS

During phases 2-4 in Osisko's 6-phase plan, community meetings are being held to better familiarize the public with the project, as well as addressing any concerns of the public. These meetings are being held for each community that may be affected by the proposed project. To better understand the interests of the communities, the notes from the Elder meeting of August 17, 2011, as well as letters of concerns from 2011, were read and summarized as follows.

In the Elder meeting the most prominent theme was the effects that the mine will have on the environment. The Aboriginal people in this area are closely tied to the land and use it as a part of their livelihood. Their greatest concern is centered around the

processing plants and tailing ponds, more specifically that harmful chemicals from the tailing ponds will enter the watershed and have serious impacts on the surrounding environment. The proposed mine site is located along a watershed and the communities are worried that the chemicals will seep into the Seine River as well as upper and lower Marmion Lake. The communities would like to have it continuously tested, including methyl mercury, to ensure its safety. The Seine River will also be subjected to an increased water flow due to the diversion of other waterways; this raises a concern for the Raft Lake dam, which will become vulnerable to failure from the increased flow. If the dam were to fail or to overflow, it would result in the catastrophic flooding of many Aboriginal communities further down the river.

A common comment was that the excessive amount of sulphate entering the water system will have drastic effects on the wild rice production. The communities would like to see more regulation of sulphate emissions, at least during periods where rice is susceptible to sulphate damage. It is also of major concern that wildlife like birds or small mammals will be reduced, affecting trap lines and significant spiritual sites. The final environmental concerns voiced were inquiring how fish in Mitta Lake will be removed and how the area will be reclaimed after the project is over.

Not all concerns were based upon the environment; some were aimed at the economic benefit that the communities will receive. For example, what benefits will the mine have on the community or how many jobs will be allocated to the Aboriginal communities? Additionally, with the lack of forestry and mining in the past, the communities have restricted their economy towards tourism in their two provincial parks, Quetico and Turtle River-White Otter). What affect will extensive environmental damage

have on the current tourism industry? It is evident that the concerns of the First Nation communities are extensive and that more improvements are needed to address all interests.

The Terms of Reference (ToR) (OHRG 2012) for the Hammond Reef Gold Mine are lengthy (nearly 100 pages), composed of all aspects of the project. The main importance of this document is to illustrate how the project will be performed and what precautions are being taken throughout the development. Within the ToR the procedures are broad in comparison to the questions addressed by the Aboriginal communities; however, some aspects directly correlate.

Water quality was addressed directly in the ToR. Testing is being done in Marmion Lake and Mitta Lake, as well as in underground aquifers, to ensure that any chemical or flow change is detected and can be dealt with in a timely fashion. However, the ToR fails to test the Seine River and does not indicate whether or not methyl mercury or sulphate levels are being monitored.

The ToR is acting upon the concern about the Raft Lake Dam. Osisko is looking at the control sectors and trying to optimize the power generation from the river. On the wildlife aspect, Osisko is obligated to conserve habitat only for species at risk. The company has completed multiple wildlife surveys for bald eagles and other birds of prey, but have found no nests within the area. The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) is to be contacted if any species at risk are found. The fish species found in Mitta Lake will be electroshocked or netted and placed in Marmion Lake for the duration of the project.

In response to the communities' inquiries about economic benefits, Osisko states that job opportunities will be presented to the communities (12% Aboriginal), but most will go to citizens from Thunder Bay and Kenora. Unfortunately for Atikokan, tourism may be affected by the mine due to environmental degradation but economic gain from the project (through population increase) will outweigh the decrease in tourism.

When the project has concluded, the company plans on reclaiming Mitta Lake and leaving it larger than it once was and will fill excess pits. Upon closure the company aims to recover the land to its original state; all that will be left is small mounds that will be reseeded with native plants.

Although many of the concerns raised in the community meetings were addressed to some degree in the ToR, there were still many interests that were ignored. When viewing the potential effects of the project, it became clear that some aspects of the project were going to have considerable affects on the Aboriginal communities. The greatest threat that the project has on the integrity of the land is through water quality issues, due to increased runoff and/or seepage from the various processes. Water quality is a potential hazard at every stage of the process: open pit mining, water management systems, waste management systems, main access road and electrical transmission line and ore processing (OHRG 2012). Although these are only a 'potential hazard', the ToR makes the probability seem fairly high. Water quality is a very important issue, considering the dependence that the First Nations have on the watershed. Therefore, greater precautions should be taken to ensure that the potential for chemical seepage or runoff does not occur.

Throughout the history of environmental assessment, Aboriginal communities have been taken advantage of. Aboriginal culture and views are often overlooked or ignored in order to develop something that will benefit western culture. It is difficult to comprehend how Aboriginal rights are still not being met even with the continuous stride towards enhanced management and improved relationships.

#### FIRST NATIONS AND THE ONTARIO ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT ACT

To better understand the logistics of this dilemma, an examination of the Ontario Environmental Assessment Act was performed. The goal was to see how the Act classifies effects on Aboriginal and treaty rights and what is done to compensate communities that have been impacted. Upon further review of the Act, it was confirmed that there was no reference to any Aboriginal and treaty rights within the Act. The lack of policy towards Aboriginal peoples in the EA of Ontario gives insight into how their concerns are constantly being overlooked. A community-based approach should be used for all issues concerning Aboriginal communities. This involves collaboration between companies and Aboriginal communities to ensure all interest groups are being equally represented.

#### TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

A community-based approach also allows for Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) to be utilized within the project. TEK refers to the evolving knowledge acquired by Indigenous and local peoples over hundreds or thousands of years through direct

contact with the environment. This knowledge is specific to a location and includes the relationships between plants, animals, landscapes, including but not limited to hunting, fishing, trapping, agriculture, and forestry (Rinkevich et al. 2011). If community-based management was utilized for Aboriginal communities, there would be less confusion on project goals and concerns. Additionally, there would be a drastic decrease in mistrust since Aboriginal communities would be directly involved in all processes and decisions.

## CONCLUSION

The Osisko Hammond Reef Gold Mine is creating a large amount of interest in the Atikokan region. It is proposed to drastically increase the economy in the surrounding area and will allow Atikokan to once again be a resource-driven town. With the estimation of almost doubling the population and a production of an estimated 17.5 million tonnes of gold, Atikokan will prosper. However, with this mining success comes some costs. The mining process has the potential to have drastic effects on the livelihood of the Lac des Milles Lacs First Nation, Wabigoon Lake First Nation and the seven First Nations represented by the Fort Frances Chiefs Secretariat since they share the same watershed as the mining project.

Many potential hazards have been recognized, most commonly the contamination of various water sources, which will affect not only the flora and fauna in that area but the Aboriginal communities that rely on them for their livelihood. Without proper guidelines within the Ontario Environmental Assessment Act, this disregard for

Aboriginal concerns will continue. Policy should change to allow First Nations a greater voice since they are the individuals being directly affected by environmental degradation. Aboriginal peoples are unique peoples and they deserve a management type that reflects that. The planning process should incorporate the cultural values of Aboriginal peoples to the same extent as their western counterparts.

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