

Red gold unearthed: Bauxite mining in Jamaica as ecocide and a new lens for the study of Canada

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Jamaica's global profile often highlights tourism, reggae music, and world-renowned coffee from the Blue Mountains. Less discussed, however, is the island's longstanding reliance on bauxite, the mineral ore from which aluminum is produced, and how its extraction over several decades has entailed significant environmental and social disruption. Bauxite mining in Jamaica dates to the mid-20th century, when colonial legacies dovetailed with new forms of North American—particularly Canadian—and later multinational corporate involvement (Bobb, 2014). By the 1950s, Jamaica had become a world leader in bauxite exports, despite major ecological and social sacrifices (Campbell, 1987). The Jamaican case underscores the urgent need to address accountability gaps that enable Canadian multinational corporations to perpetuate environmental harm with impunity, while also providing a new way of defining what objects of study fit the field of Canadian Studies, especially in transnational research.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND COLONIAL LEGACIES

Jamaica's modern economic trajectory is inseparable from the legacies of British colonial rule, wherein plantations of sugar and other cash crops dominated land usage. With independence in 1962, Jamaican policy-makers sought new avenues for export-led growth, including minerals. Bauxite, recognized by international aluminum conglomerates for its high quality and proximity to North American industrial centres, quickly became a cornerstone of the new Jamaican economy (Campbell, 1987). In the 1940s, companies such as Aluminum Company of Canada (Alcan), Reynolds Metals, and Kaiser Aluminum established a foothold, lured by Jamaica's favourable geology, pliable land-acquisition laws, and relative closeness to US and Canadian refineries (Girvan, 1971). By 1957, the island stood as the world's leading exporter of bauxite, fuelling national hopes that mineral wealth would foster structural transformation, stable employment, and modernization. Despite early optimism, the subsequent decades revealed that Jamaica's bauxite-dominated growth model was deeply inequitable and financially precarious. Owing to global economic shocks and the island's mounting debt, successive Jamaican governments in the 1970s and 1980s embraced structural adjustment programs designed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Bernal, 1984). These policies included reduced public spending, privatization, and liberalization of the mining sector, effectively incentivizing multinational corporations—including those headquartered in Canada—to expand extraction projects further.

Among foreign investors, Canadian companies—most notably Alcan—were decisive in shaping Jamaica's bauxite industry during its formative decades. Alcan spearheaded crucial early mining ini-

tatives, capitalizing on Jamaica's high-quality bauxite and proximity to Canadian smelters and refining facilities (Girvan, 1971). By establishing extensive transport, processing, and export infrastructures, Canadian corporations acquired significant influence in Jamaican mining regions, and over the years the consolidation of Canadian mining interests in Jamaica paralleled Canada's broader expansion into the Latin American and Caribbean extractive sectors (Clark, 2003). The Jamaican government's reliance on foreign direct investment to drive GDP growth—and the recurring cycle of debt—further reinforced Canadian firms' negotiating leverage. Thus, by the late 20th century, Canadian corporate involvement in Jamaican mining was firmly rooted. It left a defining imprint on the island's political economy, as well as on its landscapes and communities, who bore the brunt of open-pit extraction and related displacements.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS

The term “ecocide” is used to describe severe and widespread, or long-term, ecological damage that undermines the peaceful enjoyment of inhabitants or entire ecosystems (Stop Ecocide Foundation, 2021). Although not yet codified into international criminal law, there is work afoot to include ecocide as a crime analogous to genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The Stop Ecocide Foundation's Independent Expert Panel (2021) proposes that acts leading to extensive or lasting destruction of ecosystems, committed with knowledge of the likelihood of harm, be subject to international criminal jurisdiction. Unlike conventional “white-collar” or “environmental” crimes, ecocide focuses on harm of exceptional magnitude, emphasizing both objective measures of ecosystem disruption and subjective factors such as corporate knowledge, foreseeability, and reckless disregard. The framework inherently integrates ecological ethics, human rights, and global governance norms, offering a new vantage for analyzing how transnational corporations sometimes commit environmental harm that is functionally irreparable.

This is particularly relevant because the environmental toll of bauxite mining in Jamaica is extensive. Canadian and other countries' mining operations on the island have led to deforestation, destruction of agricultural land, and significant air and water pollution. Particulate matter, including PM10 and PM2.5, emitted by bauxite refineries, contributes to respiratory illnesses, including asthma and sinusitis, in communities near mining sites (Campbell & Beckford, 2009). Additionally, mining leaves behind degraded landscapes—pits, wastelands, and scarred ecosystems—that disrupt local livelihoods and biodiversity. Remediation efforts, such as covering pits with topsoil, often fail to restore land viability, leaving communities with unusable farmlands and greater vulnerability to natural disasters (Jamaica Environment Trust, 2015). Socially, mining has displaced rural and Indigenous populations, such as the Maroons, erasing cultural and historical ties to their ancestral lands (Lashley & Warner, 2015). Communities report inadequate compensation, health risks, and an overall decline in quality of life. The state's complicity, marked by weak environmental regulations and alignment with corporate interests, exacerbates these harms (Jamaica Environment Trust, 2015).

LEGAL AND ETHICAL GAPS

Despite these glaring issues, the regulation of environmental harm in Jamaica highlights systemic flaws. Environmental laws in general often prioritize corporate activity over ecological preservation. White (2013) argues that environmental offences are frequently undervalued in legal frameworks and treated as “white-collar crimes” rather than serious violations. This leniency reflects a broader tendency to compartmentalize environmental risks, allowing harmful practices to persist under regulatory limits. The Jamaican government's failure to monitor public health impacts and its reliance on mining company-affiliated medical professionals underscores this lack of accountability.

However, Jamaica is not unique in grappling with destructive mining. Across Latin America, Canadian and other transnational corporations have frequently been implicated in environmental and social harms (Clark, 2003; Birn et al., 2018). In Peru's Tambogrande conflict, residents voted over-

whelmingly to reject a Canadian mining company's gold and copper project, highlighting community-led forms of resistance (Caxaj et al., 2014). Although the Peruvian government initially disregarded the referendum, it underscored how local movements can challenge extractive frontiers. Colombia provides another parallel, where large-scale Canadian coal and gold mining dispossess Afro-Colombian and Indigenous groups. The government's priority to attract foreign capital for resource extraction has collided with rural populations' ancestral land tenure, echoing Jamaican experiences of marginalized communities facing forced relocation (Veltmeyer, 2013).

In addition to environmental harm, Canadian mining companies operating worldwide have been the subject of ongoing controversies around human rights (Bernaz, 2017). Numerous reports detail how communities from Guatemala to Tanzania have faced forced displacements, water contamination, and, in certain instances, violent repression linked to protests against large-scale mining projects (Deneault & Sacher, 2012). Civil society organizations have documented allegations of security forces hired by Canadian firms intimidating local activists, contributing to broader concerns about corporate complicity in rights violations. Such abuses are not purely accidental by-products of extraction; they often reflect systemic imbalances of power and a corporate strategy of cost minimization that disregards local well-being. Lawsuits in Canadian courts—initiated by foreign plaintiffs—have become a test case for whether Canada can hold its own companies accountable for abuses committed abroad. Although incremental legal precedents have emerged, activists argue that the broader regulatory environment still favours corporate interests and leaves many affected communities with limited recourse (Birn et al., 2018).

ADVOCATING FOR ECOCIDE CRIMINALIZATION

Successive Canadian governments have officially stated that they encourage responsible business conduct among Canadian extractive companies operating abroad. Mechanisms such as the Office of the Extractive Sector Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Counsellor were introduced to address grievances, though critics contend that these offices lack strong enforcement powers (Birn et al., 2018). Voluntary CSR frameworks remain the dominant policy tool, but environmental advocacy groups argue that such voluntary measures do little to deter repeated offences or systemic abuses. Jamaica has also failed to address the environmental harm; when Canadian mining companies have faced public criticism for environmental damage in Jamaica, official government statements often emphasize both the value of foreign direct investment for developing countries and the need to “balance” economic gains with ethical considerations (Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean and MiningWatch Canada, 2002). Binding obligations or punitive measures for corporate actors—particularly those engaged in resource extraction—have been slow to materialize. This perceived gap leaves Jamaican communities vulnerable when harmful mining practices persist without sufficient checks on corporate power.

The international criminalization of environmental harm as ecocide, prosecutable by the International Criminal Court (ICC) under the Rome Statute, would hold multinational corporations accountable for such harms, addressing gaps in domestic enforcement and creating deterrents for future violations. Fortunately, these policies and legislation are currently being prepared by the ICC (ICC, 2024). Lessons from existing frameworks, such as the Basel Convention and INTERPOL's environmental crime initiatives, also provide clear pathways for implementing international sanctions and enhancing transnational cooperation until ecocide is prosecutable.

TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH ON CANADA

Bauxite mining in Jamaica epitomizes the devastating consequences of extractive industries on vulnerable ecosystems and communities, in which Canada—by way of its mining companies—has an undisputable role and responsibility. Rethinking Jamaica's bauxite sector through the lens of ecocide sharpens our awareness of the gravity and irreversibility of the damage wrought by large-scale extraction. Canadian companies, among other multinational interests, have profited substantially from

Jamaica's rich bauxite reserves, frequently under conditions that externalize environmental and social costs. While these corporations have benefited from logistical advantages, tax concessions, and labour arrangements tilted in their favour, local communities have borne disproportionate harm, including displacement from ancestral lands, contaminated water sources, and long-term health risks. Such power imbalances highlight how corporate strategies in Jamaica can mirror those in other Global South contexts, where Canadian firms in particular have faced allegations of human rights violations, inadequate environmental oversight, and complicity in suppressing local dissent. As global conversations on climate justice and sustainability intensify, the Jamaican experience offers a stark reminder of the need for robust, enforceable mechanisms to protect the world's most at-risk communities and ecosystems from predatory exploitation. It also speaks of the ways in which the study of Canada must evolve through comparative and transnational frameworks to recognize the global role of Canadian stakeholders around the world. ■

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