

Contesting the “Noble Savage” on Sustainability:

Indigenous Politics, Industry and Biodiversity in New Caledonia

Saleem H. Ali, University of Vermont

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Environmentalists have recently come under attack for being unsympathetic to indigenous people and their aspirations. While earlier environmental narratives of indigenous people often followed Rousseau’s vision of a “state of nature,” there appears to be a departure from this in contemporary environmentalism. The Pacific island of New Caledonia provides an interesting test case of how environmentalists and indigenous people are struggling with revisionist perceptions of their identities. The island has the world’s largest nickel reserves and a diverse population comprising Kanak indigenous communities and a large European expatriate community. Mining of nickel has been the most important source of revenues for the economy for over a hundred years but is now being increasingly challenged on environmental grounds due to its impact on the island’s terrain and the surrounding coral reef, declared a biodiversity hotspot by Conservation International. This paper analyzes some of the recent critique of environmentalism offered by anthropologists, using this case, and shows that conflating indigenous rights and environmentalism is not always productive and can challenge moves towards sustainability of such systems. Hence the exhortation for environmentalists to necessarily follow indigenous ideals and vice versa leads to conflicts that can undermine each interest unless there is a collective consensus-building movement between indigenous and environmental activists.

Keywords: New Caledonia / Nouvelle-Caledonie, nickel mining, smelting, noble savage, Rousseau, Kanak, Inco, Falconbridge, nonrenewable, indigenous environmentalism

Introduction

The delicate relationship between environmentalists and indigenous people has been tested in recent years as strategic alliances begin to show fault lines. Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of a nuanced approach to indigenous environmentalism – avoiding both Rousseauesque assumptions about ecological nobility of natives and also rampant revisionism that might appear to demean indigenous values (Ali, 2003).

The discourse on sustainability often draws on the role of subsistence economies and societies that have been able to maintain a resource base while others have not. In particular ecological economists have tried to redefine the conventional capitalistic portrayal of human behavior of *homo economicus* to a more altruistic and sufficiency oriented notion of *homo sustinens* (Siebenhuner, 2000). To provide empirical evidence that such a concept is viable, sustainability scientists have relied on either psychological research to show that self-interested behavior is not inevitable but rather a normatively learned process (Kahneman et al, 1986). Perhaps more consequentially, sustainability researchers have also referred to anthropologists who have studied specific human societies and their relationship to the natural environment. For example, a notable doyen of sustainability, Jared Diamond has used anthropological studies and methods in his recent work *Collapse* to study particular societies and how they have succeeded or failed in achieving sustainability (Diamond, 2005). Conversely, anthropologists have also tried to embrace the methods and scope of sustainability research by seeking to incorporate how physical environmental constraints are addressed by societal beliefs and practices (Kottak, 2004). Yet, this reciprocal disciplinary engagement still needs to be contextualized in contemporary indigenous and environmental politics. This paper attempts to provide such a context by using the case of New Caledonia's Kanak indigenous community and their struggles for and against specific mining ventures. The case is particularly engaging since mining is often framed as being inherently "unsustainable" by many environmentalists. At best, using mining as a leading sector to provide initial livelihoods is considered by sustainability researchers as an exemplar of "weak" sustainability. However, many indigenous societies that might have formerly

been perceived as being vanguards of “strong sustainability” by virtue of their reliance on renewable resources are now willing to selectively engage in resource extraction projects. Tenuous alliances between environmentalists and indigenous groups that try to capitalize on any vestigial notions of a “noble savage” are thus being challenged on multiple accounts. In order to have effective conservation practice as well as sustainable development of indigenous communities these narratives must be reconciled.

Revisiting Rousseau

The Swiss political philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1788) is often credited with inspiring the French Revolution. It is thus ironic that his work can still be used to analyze the relationship between France and one of its last colonized communities. Borrowing the poet Dryden’s notion of the “noble savage,” as well as earlier expositions by French colonial writer Lescarbot, Rousseau made the relationship between natural versus material consumption one of the most pervasive themes of the Enlightenment. While some recent scholarship by Ellingson (2001), questions the veracity of such a myth to begin with, there is no doubt that in contemporary discourse such a perception has become quite real. This notion was largely sustained by the voyages of exploration to the Pacific in the latter half of the eighteenth century where explorers encountered indigenous communities living in relative harmony with the natural environment. Following the work of earlier philosophers such as Montaigne’s claim that man had been “depraved by his development from the natural state into the false environment of an artificial and complex society suggested that it should be possible to find in a simple society the happiness that men found it so hard to achieve in Europe.” (Inglis, 2005).

Most recently, large environmental organizations and their relationship to communities have come under attack once again from both sides of the political spectrum. On the one hand, pragmatic eco-revisionists have “attributed so many of environmentalists’ failures to the incuriosity about the human (read: social) sciences, like social psychology and their scientific fetishization of the ‘natural’ sciences” (Schellenberger and Nordhaus, 2005). At the same time, some anthropologists have taken this criticism a step further by challenging conservationists about their detachment with indigenous people. In a much publicized article for *Worldwatch* magazine, Mac Chapin critiqued the work of The Nature Conservancy, the World Wildlife Fund and Conservation International by asserting that: “as corporate and government money flow into the three big international organizations that dominate the world’s conservation agenda, their programs have been marked by growing conflict of interest – and by a disturbing neglect of the indigenous people whose land they are in business to protect” (Chapin, 2004). Sociologist Steven Brechin seconded Chapin’s criticism in a subsequent comment to *Worldwatch* by stating “close relationships with wealth extractive industries like oil and gas may prevent conservation organizations from critiquing or challenging their corporate donors” (Brechin, 2005). The magazine also gave an opportunity for the leaders of these organizations, as well as the Ford Foundation to respond and they collectively showed a measured exasperation with this criticism.

Anthropologists and conservation scientists have encountered this debate before in various guises. An article in *Conservation Biology* by Schwartzman et al (2000) that gave primacy to indigenous conservation practices had sparked a similar heated debate with responses from conservationists such as Redford and Sanderson (2000).

Interestingly enough the disagreement here was between staff scientists at major environmental groups – some of whom were more unequivocally sympathetic to indigenous concerns over conservation priorities. Such a divergence highlights the “varieties of environmentalism” that exist as with most social movements, despite their ostensibly common objectives (Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997).

Yet environmentalists are collectively also accused all too often by those on the Right of the political spectrum for being too positional and uncompromising in their approach to problem-solving and not interacting adequately with free-market interests. Even Conservation International, which is often accused by more traditional environmentalists of accepting large contracts and grants from oil companies and development donors (Chapin, 2004), is just as much criticized by industrialists for not willing to compromise enough on extractive projects in ecologically places such as Madagascar. Environmental and human rights groups are thus often lumped together by critics of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Sebastian Mallaby (2004) or Clifford Bob (2005) who decry their unwillingness to compromise on urgent development projects. While this “damned if you do and damned if you don’t” situation may lead many groups to remain sanguine, there are some areas of contention that clearly need to be addressed. The relationship between indigenous people and environmentalists is perhaps the most important manifestation of these contesting visions of conservation.

The Kanak-environmentalist relationship with competing industrial interests is an intriguing case to examine these interactions in a Rousseauesque setting. This paper provides an observational an interpretive analysis based on primary research conducted for a related project comparing two mining projects on the island (Ali and Grewal, 2006).

This paper attempts to follow a “praxis” framework for description and analysis of the problem in question in order to be useful for researchers and practitioners alike.

Nickel Mining in New Caledonia

Mining has been pervasive on numerous islands in the South Pacific, most notably Fiji, New Guinea, Bougainville and Nauru. However, nowhere else do we find such a high concentration of a single metallic mineral and its connection to European industrialization as we do in New Caledonia. Unlike other metals such as iron and copper which have many diffuse ore reserves, nickel is relatively rare and found in large quantities in only four key areas of the world: Norilsk (Russia), Southern Ontario (Canada), Ravensthorpe region (southwestern Australia) and New Caledonia. The use of nickel in steel manufacturing made it an indispensable resource during the high years of industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The nickel on Grande Terre, New Caledonia was originally mined by convicts and steeped in a history of colonial exploitation of prison labor as well as indigenous subjugation, reminiscent of many other parts of Austral Pacific.

The geography of New Caledonia makes it particularly interesting with reference to a study of sustainability issues. The main island is divided into a northern and southern province with very different demographics, particularly in terms of ethnicity (Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

The influence of nickel extraction is palpable throughout New Caledonia, either in terms of mining craters in the mountains, transportation infrastructure near the ports or processing plants near the cities. There is a large smelter in close proximity to the capital

Noumea that has frequently been a source of health concern for residents (Plate 1). The U. S. National Toxicology Program (NTP) considers nickel as being “reasonably anticipated to be carcinogenic.” The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has listed nickel compounds within group 1 (there is sufficient evidence for carcinogenicity in humans) and metallic nickel within group 2B (agents which are possibly carcinogenic to humans). The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has recently classified nickel as a “select carcinogen” as well.

Public health testing has revealed that household dust in Noumea contains three times as much nickel as the ore being mined nearby (Alailima 2002). Heavy metal pollution has also been recorded in the potable water supplies as well as in surrounding lagoons on Grande Terre, which are a source of primary food supply for the territory’s population, annually harvesting some 4,000 tons of fish (Coumans 2002).

Given these serious concerns about the health impacts of nickel, there has been far greater scrutiny of nickel mining projects in recent years. Furthermore, Grande Terre is surrounded by the world’s second largest coral reef (Plate 2) and the entire archipelago is considered a Global Biodiversity Hotspots by Conservation International because of its extraordinarily high numbers of endemic species. Visibly destructive impacts of mining on the island’s ecosystems have recently spurred reclamation efforts at older mine sites on Grande Terre (Plate 3). Approximately 500 million tons of tailings have already been cleared thus far, with 100 million of it originating from the mines at Thio, where mitigation efforts have just begun (*LNC*, 11 Dec 2002). However, a twenty-percent expansion of mining in New Caledonia is expected and ecologists believe that such a

scale of damage with current standards of mitigation might exceed the adaptive capacity of the land (Roberts 2001).

While chemicals used in ore processing are often the most publicized impacts, erosion is perhaps the most lasting impact of mining upon the New Caledonian environment (Plate 4), as millions of tons of arable soil are washed out to sea. Natural erosion is exacerbated by the mining process and especially during heavy rains, sediments pour into the coastal waters, suffocating the reef and destroying marine ecosystems (Hopquin 2002). Aesthetic effects on the air and water quality of coastal areas are likely to also have negative impacts upon the development of tourism on the territory's second largest industry.

Tourism is often considered the more benign development alternative to extractive industries in many contexts. While there are concerns about rapid tourism development and demographic pressures on some Pacific islands such as Oahu on Hawaii, New Caledonia's tourism potential is greatly underused. There has been a conscious decision on the part of France to develop the Pacific tourist market for French Polynesia rather than New Caledonia as there is a perception that New Caledonia has nickel as an alternative development trajectory. However, there is arguably even greater tourism potential in New Caledonia because of its closer proximity to the Australian and Asian tourist markets.

The significance of the island for tourists is also highlighted by the fact that UNESCO is reviewing a proposal prepared by the New Caledonian environmental group *Corail Vivant*, and subsequently submitted by the French government, to list parts of the coral reef that surrounds Grande Terre as a World Heritage Site (Serre 2005). However,

even if the coral massif becomes recognized as a World Heritage Site, this does not ensure any regulatory protection to the area as World Heritage listings are mainly symbolic.

Regulatory Framework

New Caledonia is not considered an incorporated part of France and therefore French regulations do not apply on the archipelago and no restrictions of any kind existed until about fifteen years ago, which allowed nickel to be recklessly extracted for decades. French legislation is applicable to all *departements* (the equivalent of US states), but only in overseas territories if adopted by the local territorial governments. New Caledonia has largely neglected enacting any French environmental regulations within the territory. Environmental regulatory authority is largely devolved to local provincial governments. These governments are free to adopt the whole or any part of French environmental legislation, but so far no province has adopted to do so.

Currently there is no specific government organization responsible for the conservation of the archipelago's coastal regions or extensive coral reef. Nevertheless, France is party to several international treaties such as MARPOL, that have some measure of relevance to the territory (Falconbridge 2002). Various impact studies must be compiled, at a minimum, in application for any *installation classée*, which includes everything from buildings to mines, but beyond that nothing is required of companies planning large projects. Environmentalists, such as Goldman-Prize-winner Bruno Van Peteghem, feel that an absence of any enforceable environmental regulation, combined with significant tax breaks offered by politicians in Paris in recent years, has made the rich New Caledonian nickel reserves even more attractive to large mining companies.

Two major mining projects on Grande Terre within the next five years have been granted their first fifteen years of operation entirely tax-free and the following five years at a fifty-percent tax reduction. Originally, both these projects had majority ownership by Canadian companies: the Goro project was initiated by INCO, while the Koniambo project was part of the portfolio of its rival Falconbridge. In July, 2006, INCO merged with the American mining company Phelps Dodge, while Falconbridge was acquired by the Swiss mining conglomerate Xstrata. However, these acquisitions have not had any impact on the plans to develop the projects in question. This paper, focuses on the environmental conflicts prior to these mergers but the management of operations in New Caledonia continues to be the same and the structural issues about the projects remain the same.

Construction is underway to develop an open-pit mine and a hydrometallurgical extraction plant at Goro on the Southern tip of Grande Terre, amidst widespread protests from both environmental and indigenous activists. The Koniambo project is being pursued in partnership with the Kanak company *Societe Miniere du Sud Pacifique* (SMSP), which is scheduled to develop the mine in the relatively impoverished and underdeveloped Northern province of the main island. Currently, this planned pyrometallurgical project at Koniambo has garnered support from both Kanak and environmental groups, who see it as a much more socially and environmentally sound endeavor than that at Goro. .

The Kanak Independence Movement and its Effects on the Nickel Industry

The extractive industries of New Caledonia have been the focus of organizational reform as well as political maneuvering, largely as a result of the continued independence

movement of the indigenous Kanak people. In the 1980s, New Caledonia was embroiled in civil conflict as militant, pro-independence Kanak groups fought with French forces that eventually led to new negotiations with the French government resulting in political and economic concessions. The *Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak Socialiste* (FLNKS) was the organization at the forefront of this struggle, claiming to represent the Kanak people, whose ranks include hundreds of tribal groups speaking twenty-four different dialects. The Kanak, were largely aggrieved at the flight of profits from natural resource extraction projects to France, leaving them an impoverished minority in their own land and sought independence. Their struggle continues to be recognized by the United Nations which has put New Caledonia on a list of states to be decolonized.

Numerous protests, boycotts, and strikes in the mid-1980s disrupted mining ventures and turned violent when armed Kanak insurgents took hostages and clashed with gendarmes. The Kanak resistance subsided with the signing of the 1988 Matignon Accords, which provided for a political restructuring of New Caledonia into three provinces: a Northern and a Southern province on Grande Terre and third comprised of the Loyalty Islands. Table 1 shows a general demographic profile of the provinces on Grand Terre:

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Devolution of authority at the provincial level was a major feature of the accords. The underdeveloped North and Loyalties also received increased funding from the central government. The Noumea Accords, which gave even further autonomy to the territory, were signed in May of 1998 by Kanaks and French loyalists and later overwhelmingly

approved by a November referendum (Downer 1998). These accords also superseded the Matignon Accords by postponing a 1998 independence referendum ten to fifteen years.

The results of such a vote, however, would not necessarily have guaranteed an end to French colonial rule of the islands since at present, the largely pro-independence Kanak only comprise 42.5 percent of the population (United Nations 2001, 11). The island's mainly pro-French European population accounts for about 37.5 percent of the people and the remaining population is made up of various minority groups including Polynesians, Chinese, and Vietnamese (CIA 2002).

The Matignon Accords, however, also set the stage for economic reorganization in New Caledonia, which began to concentrate more economic authority into the hands of Kanaks. The first change in the existing structure of the nickel industry was the sale of the SMSP in April of 1990. The Northern Province, home to a primarily Kanak population, bought the company for \$20 million (Fraser 2001), from Jacques Lafleur, the conservative president of the Southern province and current leader of the anti-independence, pro-French Rally for Caledonia in the Republic (RPCR) political group. Under Kanak control SMSP made remarkable progress under its head, Raphael Pidjot who, before his post at SMSP was an active independence leader, chief of staff for FLNKS, and later a close associate of the late Kanak nationalist Jean-Marie Tjibaou. Under Pidjot's leadership, SMSP moved in just five years from controlling only eighteen percent of the island's nickel exports to nearly seventy-two percent, quickly making it the one of world's top producers of nickel ore (Fraser 1998). Pidjot, who died in late November of 2000 in a helicopter accident, also successfully lobbied the French government, with the help of Kanak activists to grant concessions of nickel deposits to

SMSP. Koniambo was the largest of these deposits, an extraordinarily rich reserve where the company is beginning to develop a large mine complex and smelter in cooperation with Falconbridge (now part of Xtrata).

French officials, who had also restructured the ownership of Eramet's subsidiary in New Caledonia, also facilitated the acquisition of Koniambo deposit by the SMSP. By making such changes in favor of SMSP, which has been called "the economic arm of the independence movement" (Madoef 1996) in the territory, the former left-leaning French government attempted to coopt the growing agitation of Kanak nationalists who renewed their resistance in the 1990s. The government of France, which then owned fifty-five percent (Golding 1997) of Eramet through a holding company called Erap, was able to force an unfavorable swap which gave Koniambo to SMSP in exchange for inferior deposits near Poum, despite vocal opposition from foreign shareholders such as U.S. investment funds Fidelity and Templeton. In July, 1999 *Societe Le Nickel* (SLN), the oldest nickel company in the territory, was restructured to reduce Eramet's share of the company from ninety percent to sixty percent. Another ten percent was sold to Nisshin Steel of Japan and the remaining thirty percent was transferred to the Kanak through the new company *Societe Territoriale Caledonienne de Participation Industrielle* (STCPI). The SLN, which is seeking to expand its operations by twenty-five percent, currently operates four open-pit mines and the island's only active smelter at Doniambo near Noumea. However, if the two major projects—that of INCO at Goro and the joint SMSP/ Falconbridge venture at Koniambo—go ahead as planned, then the SLN smelter will only be one of three in the territory.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The Environmentalist Alliance

Based on the aforementioned ownership agreement between the Kanak and the Koniambo project through SMSP, it is tempting to believe that the Kanak were opposed to Goro for economic reasons. At the same time environmentalists might find it equally tempting to assume that Kanak opposition to Goro was primarily due to concerns about the sustainability of the project, particularly on grounds of biodiversity loss. However, the dynamics of Kanak opposition to Goro were more complex and question the linear model of either side. From the very early stages of deliberations between the Kanak and INCO, the community had been asking for an independent environmental review of the project as well as an extension to the one-month public comment period on INCO's lengthy project assessment in order to more fully examine the over 2100-page document (INCO 2002). On November 21, 2001 Kanak leaders from the *Djubea Kapune* area near the Goro site presented the French Secretary of State Christian Paul with a proposal to postpone final approval of the project in order to provide adequate time to prepare a comprehensive impact report. As work at the site was begun, Kanaks from the Goro area were still searching for a group of experts to provide independent and ongoing analysis of the expected impacts at the mine site.

The *Senat Coutumier*, which is a quasi-governing body of Kanak organizations, as well as the local Kanak tribes are opposing the project on the grounds that its traditional hunting and fishing will be threatened and the health of its members put at serious risk due to the pollutants generated by the nickel complex. Outside of the capital city of Noumea, many people, mostly Kanaks, continue to lead a quasi-traditional

lifestyle that is heavily dependent on fishing and subsistence agriculture, thus any threat to the marine and terrestrial ecosystems could have grave and widespread consequences.

The French government has agreed to finance \$350 million of the project's direct costs, which has led many Kanak to be suspicious of the project's political persuasion (Kuck 2004). However, it is unclear who will get the jobs created by the project.

INCO/Goro Nickel currently participate in a number personnel training projects, none of which is completely funded or operated by INCO/Goro Nickel, in which 179 students are currently enrolled (INCO S.A./Goro Nickel S.A 2004). There were many skilled teams from Australia and other foreign nations hired by Bechtel, Technip and Hatch (BTH), the contractor that was building the complex for Goro Nickel and its company planned to import approximately 3,000 foreign laborers. However, a labor dispute between BTH and Goro Nickel regarding the complexities and expenses of constructing the project led to a break up of this corporate partnership and INCO/Goro Nickel aims to re-hire all previous BTH employees (INCO S.A./Goro Nickel S.A 2004).

Goro Nickel has attracted further criticism since announcing its intention to import labor for the construction phase. Most of those employed in this capacity are expected to be Filipinos or other skilled laborers like pipe fitters and instrumentalists that are not prevalent in the New Caledonian workforce. These positions are also short-term lasting about three years and the company maintains it only wants to provide more permanent employment for the local people.

Sarimin Boengkih, the former FLNKS liaison in Sydney, Australia, indicated in an interview for this project that Goro Nickel had known for years that these jobs were required and had ample time to provide appropriate training to locals for these positions.

Boengkih was also quick to point out that the plan to import labor and even the operation of foreign companies in New Caledonia is in direct conflict with UN Resolution 35/118 called the Plan of the Action for the Full Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. While France is in violation of almost every provision of this resolution and other similar UN anti-colonial resolutions, annex six and nine are of particular relevance to mining in New Caledonia. Annex six declares that establishment and operation of foreign ventures in the territories should be prohibited, while annex nine provides that UN member states should “discourage or prevent the systematic influx of outside immigrants and settlers into Territories under colonial domination...” (United Nations 1980, 2). Furthermore the spread of diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, an unfortunately common phenomenon in closed industrial towns, can be exacerbated through migrant labor flows.

Environmentalists are also firmly against the Goro project due to concerns about the tailings disposal system being proposed which would allow for high levels of manganese and other metals to enter the coral reefs in the south. The three environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) that have been voicing their opposition to the project’s plans are *Corail Vivant*, *Point Zero*, (formerly *Action Biosphere*) and *Gondwana NC*. *Corail Vivant*, literally “living coral” is primarily concerned with the health and welfare of the coral massif that surrounds Grande Terre.

Corail Vivant compiled the report applying for World Heritage Site recognition for the reef that was submitted by the French government and is currently under consideration by UNESCO. Bruno Van Peteghem, an Air France flight attendant now based in Paris, co-founded *Corail Vivant*, *Gondwana NC*, and several other activist

organizations that continue to monitor and challenge the actions of the Southern Province government and mining companies. These groups believe that the toxic run-off from Goro could significantly affect the ecology of the reef, and have detrimental impacts on local people and tourism in New Caledonia. Recently, these environmental groups have joined with local Kanak organizations to form the Rheebeu Nuu committee that spearheads the opposition to the Goro project. However, despite the cohesion provided by Rheebeu Nuu, the members of *Corail Vivant* and *Gondwana NC* and the activists formerly of *Action Biosphere* who have founded Point Zero do disagree on how to proceed in opposing the INCO's planned development at Goro (Plate 5).

Ever since the United Nations established a Permanent Forum on the Rights of Indigenous people in 2003, an extensive network of peoples in communities affected by mining activities has arisen and has included many so-called groups like the Kanak. These groups are in contact with one another, support each other's campaigns, and write to politicians expressing this unity and opposition to potentially destructive ventures. In the case of Goro, groups from India and Indonesia have sent letters to officials in New Caledonia stating their solidarity with local Kanak chiefs and their disapproval of the project. The Kanak are also supported by the Innu of Canada, who ultimately reached an agreement with INCO to allow the company to begin mining activities adjacent to their homes near Voisey's Bay in Eastern Labrador. These activities are often coordinated by small foreign NGOs such as Mining Watch (based in Ottawa, Canada), or the Mineral Policy Institute (based in Sydney, Australia). Furthermore private citizens on Grande Terre, like Patrick de Vivies, have also been opposing INCO's development and

petitioned company officials expressing their concerns over the project proposal and the extremely brief public comment period.

While INCO has been active in nickel operations in the territory for decades and has operated on Grande Terre since 1982 at the Thiebaghi chromite deposit, of which it owns fifty-five percent, and since 1984 at the Pomalaa East nickel deposit. However, because of the minimal local stake in the Goro project, it lacks the legitimacy of its rivals SLN, which has been operating on Grande Terre for over one hundred years, and Falconbridge, which is partnered with the local company SMSP. The Goro project, however, continues to have the strong support of politicians in both Noumea and Paris.

Part of the company's woes can be attributed to a relative lack of transparency regarding its plans for the development. For example, INCO delayed the release of its project report, including an environmental assessment, and allowed only one month for the public response period to the paper, despite the fact that it is over 2100 pages long. In 2001, a group of concerned New Caledonians, including environmentalists and senior Kanak members of the *Senat Coutumier*, was denied a copy of the "Bankable Feasibility Study" that included an initial environmental impact assessment, even after traveling to INCO's Toronto headquarters. When in Toronto they were told that the assessment was only available in New Caledonia, but had originally come to Canada after having been informed by INCO that the document was only available at their Toronto head office and not on the island (De Santis 2001).

On the other hand, the Koniambo project group has held numerous sessions with local residents and even agreed to modify their plans for a port facility based on concerns from local residents. Often it is such gestures of respect and accommodation that are

more consequential to indigenous movements than simple economic determinants or idealized notions of environmental harmony.

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The Role of International Environmental Groups

International environmental groups have been involved at three levels in New Caledonia: i) through field research and conservation campaigns to protect the coral reef and endangered forest ecosystems, ii) to lobby for conservation efforts in France for enforcement of environmental laws and the listing of the coral reef as a World Heritage site under UNESCO provisions (the headquarters of UNESCO are also in Paris, iii) To campaign for corporate social responsibility of Inco and other Canadian interest operating in New Caledonia.

Conservation International has a keen interest in the coral reef system as well as the dryland forests in the interior of the Grand Terre. In this regard they have also partnered with local and regional organizations as well as Kanak organizations in a fairly effective alliance. This partnership has largely been effective because of leadership on the part of a local conservationist, Henri Blaffart who has been working since 2002 with the Kanak tribes of Province Nord as part of a collaboration between New Zealand's Maruia Trust Foundation and Conservation International (CI), and more recently with the Association Maruia Trust de Nouvelle-Calédonie (Tidwell, 2005). Unlike some of their more programs in South America that have competed with development interests or community ownership efforts, Conservation International did not get involved in conservation campaigns in the nickel mining areas of the province, largely because that would have meant direct opposition with the Kanak. Instead, Blaffart, who had built

strong ties with the Kanak leadership focused his efforts on a conservation area that was of significance to the Kanak as well -- Mont Panié which is a powerful symbol of Kanak heritage. The peak is also home to *Amborella trichopoda*, thought to be the closest living relative of the ancestor of all flowering plants. Close to the summit of the mountain *Agathis montana* conifers are old enough to have been known to the primordial ancestors of the Kanaks, hence the summit remains a taboo site. Blaffart, who also teaches at a tribal school, has set up a local office for his conservation project in the northeast's Hienghène valley, where he plans to start a breeding and reintroduction project for New Caledonia's endangered flightless national bird, the Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*).

The Kanak are generally supportive of mining in the North because of partial local ownership of the venture but are very discerning about where mining should not occur – in sacred sites such as Mount Panié. Furthermore, Bennart's has tried to make his efforts a collective learning experience – resisting the temptation to make the Kanak the elder teachers or vice versa. He praises the Kanak for their vast botanical knowledge while at the same time not shying away from trying to teach them modern alternatives to slash and burn agriculture. This collective learning approach appears to be paying off. Chief Wanguene, who commands respect across this area stated in a recent interview to reporter John Tidwell “Conservation International reminds us about our responsibility to the land and its creatures. It makes us remember our ancestral ways of respecting the animals and the environment. That's very important to us” (Tidwell, 2005)

It should be mentioned that the success of this particular effort has more to do with local planning and the willingness of CI leadership to devolve the effort to regional organizations more effectively. In other cases CI has had less success, particularly in the

cases highlighted by Chapin (2004) in South America, because of a less engaged process with the indigenous leadership.

The Worldwide Fund for Nature (a.k.a World Wildlife Fund -- WWF), another one of the “Big Three” conservation groups has had a connection with New Caledonia. At a local level there has been collaboration between WWF and the French industrial materials company LaFarge to develop a dryland forest restoration program in New Caledonia. This is part of a larger partnership between the two organizations (one of many business partnerships which WWF has initiated with international corporations), which LaFarge has committed \$1.1 million per year over 5 years to WWF programs (WWF, 2003). This partnership has been largely well-received in the areas where it is operating.

However, WWF-Canada has tried to engage in a similar partnership with the nickel mining giant Inco that has had a very negative repercussions in its relationship with many Kanak communities in the South of the island. In 2004, The CEOs of Inco and WWF-Canada, made a public display of their willingness to partner by doing a one-day corporate job-swap whereby Scott Hand, the CEO of Inco spent a full working office day as CEO of WWF and Monte Hummel, the CEO of WWF-Canada did the same at Inco. While this was a well-intentioned effort to show organizational empathy and promote learning of each other’s corporate culture and limitations, the move was perceived in New Caledonia as a mark of corporate cooptation of environmental interests. Goro Nickel, the Inco subsidiary operating in Goro project used this effort as a positive marketing tool and published English and French versions of interviews with both CEOs in their period publications *Actualite*. However, interviews for this project with the Kanak

establishment, particularly the *Senat Coutumier*, revealed that this greatly damaged WWF's image among the Kanak leadership, who wondered if WWF would do something similar with local community organizations.

Conclusion: Conservation and Conservative Politics

The conservative commentator Steven Hayward, remarked recently that “the deepest reason for conservative antipathy towards environmentalism is the distinct echo of Rousseau and his successors that one sees in popular environmental thought” (Hayward, 2005). Much of the recent criticism of environmentalists emanates from perceptions that stem from this perception. Ironically, even many liberal critiques of environmentalists (Chapin 2004), particularly around biodiversity conservation, stem from this focus on going back to some preconceived natural state of harmonious coexistence with other organisms, arguably at the expense of human communities.

The narrative of sustainability is also polarized between many environmental groups who seek to dominantly define it in purely ecological and physical terms and social justice activists and progressive anthropologists who seek to define it more dominantly on socioeconomic variables. In both cases there are assumptions made about what level of primacy should be given to indigenous communities in their decision-making power. No longer can nonrenewable resource projects be marginalized by either side as they may often provide the most direct means of empowerment for indigenous communities. Sustainability science is providing practitioners with useful metrics by which to choose between project alternatives and their implementation. The differentiation made between the Goro and Koniambo projects in New Caledonia on the

kinds of environmental technology being implemented coupled with the level of community engagement have led to divergent responses from the Kanak population.

Environmentalists are increasingly aware of the frequently fatal flaw in their lobbying efforts that marginalizes many communities in which they operate and are trying to address the anthropological critique of their work. Strategic alliance formation between indigenous interests, environmental groups and industry needs careful planning. No longer can we make assumptions about any “natural” proclivities towards conservation among indigenous communities, nor industrial antipathy among environmentalists. Contrary to some of the critiques of all three ‘stakeholders’ as being static, indigenous communities, environmentalists and corporations are struggling with complex behavioral responses to development and conservation imperatives. There is growing consensus that invocations to a primordial “natural state,” even in seemingly idyllic Pacific islands, are anachronistic and biodiversity conservation must inevitably accommodate human aspirations at some level. However, the constructive tension which may come from organizations trying to grapple with multiple and competing objectives is often misappropriated by politicians and positional commentators. The result is a marginalization of environmental causes at the expense of political posturing. Constructive engagement between corporations, environmentalists and indigenous communities must try to transcend such rhetoric and focus on building consensus around biodiversity conservation. There is indeed potential for biodiversity to be a common measure around which both ends of the political spectrum can unite similar to the way environmental conservation was a common neutral issue in US domestic policy in the early 1970s. However, in order for this to occur we need to move beyond Rousseau who

served us well in forming an environmental ethic. In contemporary conservation, what is most consequential is the ability to bring together disparate interests to envisage a “state of nature” that balances social aspirations with a realization for natural constraints.

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Table 1: A Comparison of the Northern and Southern Provinces of New Caledonia

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Northern Province</i>	<i>Southern Province</i>
Total Population	44,470 (2004 est.)	164,230 (2004 est.)
Area	9,582.6 sq. km.	7,012 sq. km.
Ethnic makeup (% Kanak)	77.9% (1996 census)	25.5% (1996 census)
Number of functional mines	10	4

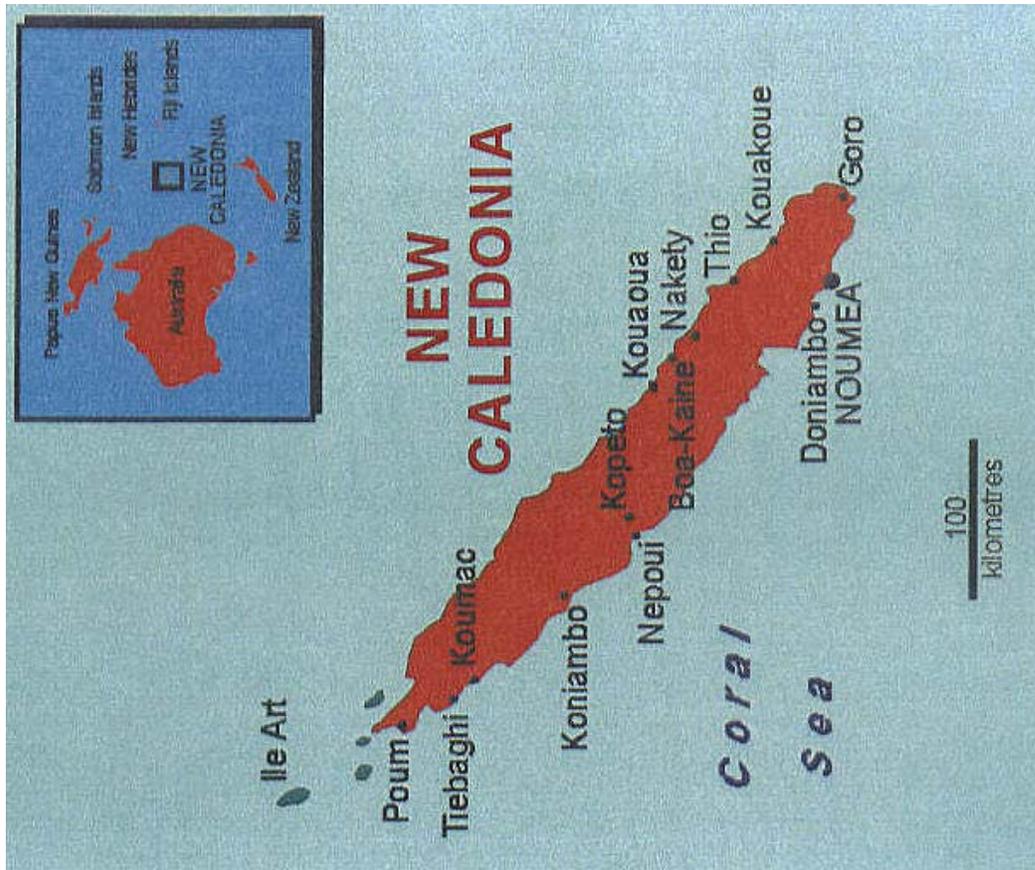
Table 2: A Comparison of the Goro and Koniambo Projects

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Goro</i>	<i>Koniambo</i>
Reserve	370 Mt	151 Mt
Ore Grade	1.6%	2.58%
Ownership	69% INCO (Canada) 21% Sumitomo/Mitsui (Japan) 5% NC southern province 2.5% NC northern province 2.5% NC loyalty islands province	49% Falconbridge (Canada) 51% SMSP (Northern Province)
Labor required and origin	803 local 3,000 (temp. contract) imported	850 local ~1500 (tentative) imported
Tax deal	15 yrs tax free, then next 5 yrs at 50% reduction	15 yrs tax free, then next 5 yrs at 50% reduction
Cost of Production	About \$1 per pound (estimates with and without the Prony concession)	\$1.20 per pound
Ore extraction process	Hydrometallurgical	Pyrometallurgical (for now)
Environmental concerns	Submarine tailings disposal	Emissions, water usage

Table 3: Environmental groups involved in New Caledonian conservation

<i>Name of Group</i>	<i>Focus of Activism</i>	<i>Sources of funding</i>	<i>Position on mining development in New Caledonia (“quotes” if possible on Goro versus Koniambo”)</i>
Point Zero (formerly Action Biosphere)	Opposing Goro Project and Prony Concession	Environmental Defense (US)	Koniambo poses risks like large CO2 emissions, but overall is much better than Goro since it is pyrometallurgical.
Corail Vivant	Listing coral reef as WHS, ensuring environmental protections at Goro, return of Prony Concession	Private sources in region	Koniambo is less of a threat to the environment than Goro. Goro poses great threats to the health of the terrestrial ecosystems as well as the coral reefs that surround Grande Terre.
Kone Avenir	Advocating development & environmental protection in Koniambo area	Private sources in region	Primarily concerned with increased development and environmental management in Kone area, although believes Goro is a dangerous project.
World Wildlife Fund (WWF)	Forests conservation, Global policy issues	Private (corporations, foundations), Govt. contracts	Willing to engage with companies. WWF-Canada and Inco established a partnership for conservation
Conservation International	Biodiversity conservation, dryland forests and coral reef	Private (corporations, foundations), Govt. contracts	Have not participated actively in mining activism on island, focusing instead on specific biodiversity projects with local and regional organizations

Figure 1: Map of New Caledonia and Mineral Areas



All photos taken by the author



Plate 1: The Doniambo Nickel Smelter



Plate 2: New Caledonian Coral Reef



Plate 3: Erosion from Historic mining Activities in Southern Province



Plate 4: High sedimentation in central river system due to erosion from mining in Northern Province



Plate 5: Construction of Processing Plant at Goro