

Gold mining threatens the forests of the Eastern Arc

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Since October 2003, artisanal miners have been entering forest reserves in the Eastern Arc in pursuit of gold. The mining has disrupted life in nearby communities bringing many problems to local people. The mining activities have also caused considerable damage to water sources, natural vegetation and biodiversity.

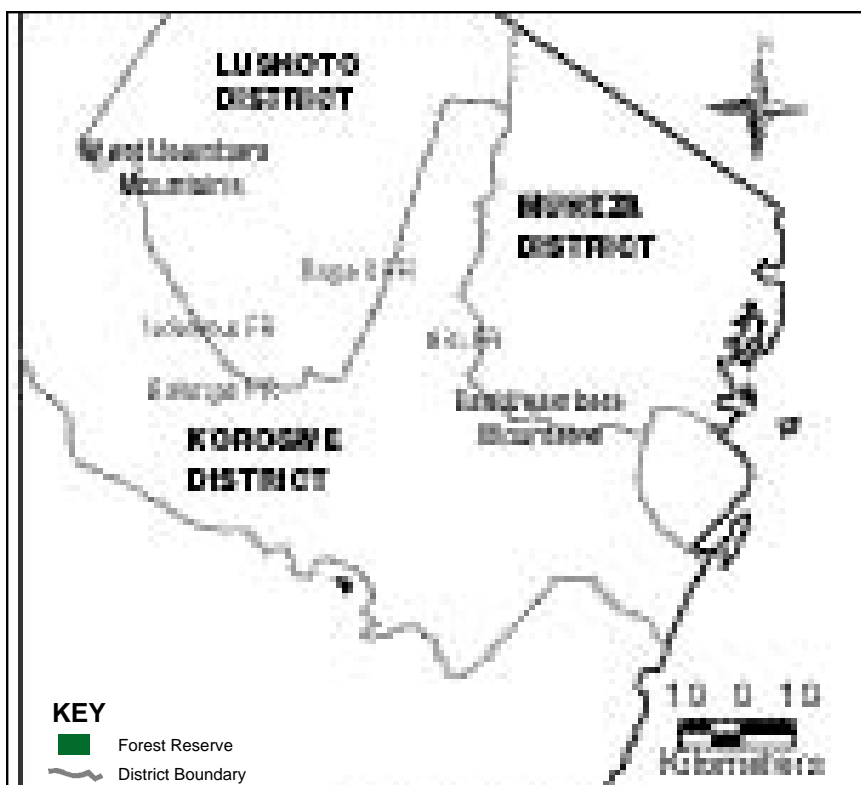
Background to mining in the Usambara Mountains

In June 2003 gold was (re)discovered in Semdoe Forest Reserve in the East Usambara Mountains. The amount found was small and the District Commissioner took decisive action to remove the miners from the area. In October more gold was found near Sakale Village near to the Monga Tea Estate approximately 10 km from the Amani Nature Reserve. The discovery was publicised in the newspapers and on the radio and as a result 12,000 – 20,000 people flocked to the area. Prospectors traveled to Amani from as far away as Arusha, Mwanza and Musoma, many from the tanzanite and gold mines of Mererani and Geita. Reports have also been received of buyers and miners entering Tanzania from neighbouring countries. These miners were joined by farmers from the Usambaras who left their farms and homes to join the thousands of people

camping out under temporary plastic shelters around the muddy gold pits.

As the amounts of gold on the public land near Monga declined, so prospectors started to dig in the Amani Nature Reserve and Nilo Forest Reserve. The Conservator of the Amani Nature Reserve, Mr Corodius Sawe explained that the miners were digging large pits around streams and along valley floors. The miners were entering the Nature Reserve at night, digging until the early hours of the morning before returning to nearby settlements by dawn. Despite the best efforts of the staff of the Nature Reserve they were unable to protect the delicate riverine habitats, many of which have now been severely disrupted.

As the quantities of gold declined around Sakale, some of the miners began to move to the West Usambaras and the Nguu Mountains. Between December and January it was reported that up to 40,000 miners were working in and around Balangai Forest Reserve. The miners were also in Ndelemai, Baga and Mfundira Forests in Lushoto and Korogwe Districts. In the East Usambaras mining continued and at the time of going to press, the number of miners in the vicinity of the Amani Nature Reserve was estimated to be 10,000 and the mining in the Nature Reserve was continuing.



Map showing the location of forests affected by gold mining in Tanga.

The Government's response

The response from the government has been varied. After an early visit by the Assistant Minister for Minerals, it was announced that the miners could stay but that conditions would have to be improved for them. In contrast the Regional Commissioner Captain Jaka Mwambi rapidly recognised the negative social, economic and environmental impacts that the mining was bringing to his Region. After warning the miners that they were no longer welcome, he organised a series of operations to remove them from the West Usambaras. With the assistance of the District Commissioner for Korogwe, Colonel Salum Nyakonji and the District Commissioner for Lushoto, Elias Goroi, the Regional Commissioner had persuaded most of the miners to leave the forest reserves by the

end of January 2004. (Although some are still staying in guest houses in Soni and Lushoto waiting for the government's vigilance to fall).



Gold is extracted from pits dug in the valley floors.
Photo by Heini Vihemaki

The impact on water supplies and biodiversity

The forests of the East and West Usambaras are nationally and globally important for their water catchment properties and high biodiversity values. These forests contain at least 14 strict endemic vertebrates and 24 Eastern Arc endemic vertebrates. The West Usambaras, particularly Balangai is the source of the Pangani River which feeds the Pangani Hydropower plant. Both the biodiversity values and the catchment values have been damaged by the recent influx of miners. The miners have destroyed the valley floor vegetation in many places. This poses particular threat to endemic amphibians many of whom are associated with the riverine vegetation. Water quality has also declined as a result of the high sediment load now in the rivers. This is problematic for people and wildlife alike.

The impact on the livelihoods of local people

The mining has also brought many negative social and economic problems to Tanga. Crime has risen including murder, rape and theft. Rapid immigration and the breakdown of normal social structures may accelerate the spread of HIV. Farmers have neglected their fields. The tea estates and the Pangani Hydropower plant have been affected by the

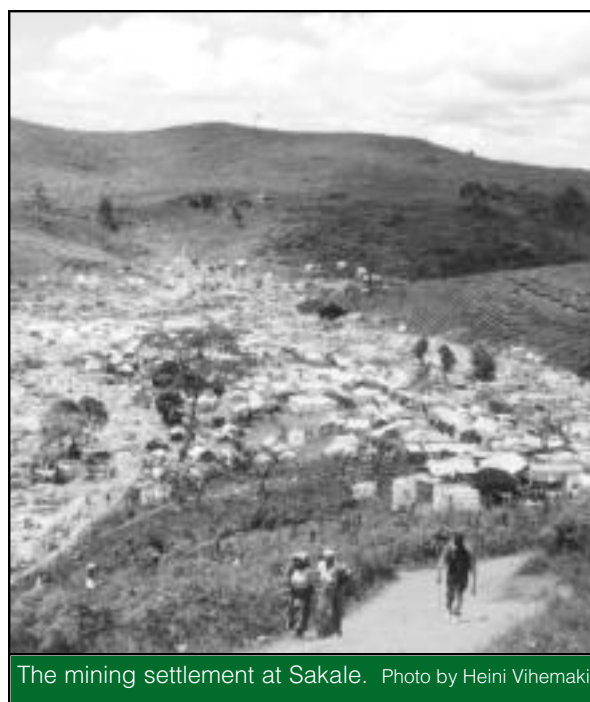
deterioration in water quality. The tea estates have also suffered from an exodus of workers. Children have been employed to bail water from the pits. There have been at least two outbreaks of cholera associated with the poor standards of hygiene around the mining camps. Water quality for many communities downstream of the mines has declined. Some miners are reportedly using mercury which has serious health risks for anyone using contaminated water. Prices of many products have doubled locally. Roads have deteriorated under the heavy traffic and road accidents have increased.

What Tanzanian law says

The law on mining in protected areas is clear. Prospective miners need to seek permission from the authority responsible for the management of the protected area before they can begin to mine. They also need a license from the Ministry for Minerals. These procedures are not being followed in Tanga

Conclusion

While some individuals have undoubtedly benefited financially from the gold, the cost to society and the environment has been high. Too high. There is clearly a need for more coordinated action between the Ministry of Minerals, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism and Local Government. The decisive action of the Regional and District governments in Korogwe and Lushoto eventually succeeded in halting the problem (at least temporarily). In Muheza, FBD staff in the Nature Reserve and elsewhere urgently need assistance in combatting the problem. Lessons from Tanga need to be shared with other regions and districts, particularly those of the Eastern Arc, to ensure that swifter action can be taken to avert the disastrous impacts experienced in Tanga.



The mining settlement at Sakale. Photo by Heini Vihemaki