

The Earthwatch Institute - Rio Tinto partnership



A deeper understanding of conservation issues

“Through our partnership with Rio Tinto, we have been able to increase our support for field research, particularly in the area of biodiversity. We have been able to build our own capacity and contribute to improved scientific capacity through training programmes for people working in research and conservation in various African countries and in Indonesia.”

Herschel Post, chairman, Earthwatch Institute (Europe)

Sound scientific data for effective conservation

Earthwatch Institute is an international non-government organisation (NGO) that engages people worldwide in scientific field research and education to promote the understanding and action necessary for a sustainable environment. It achieves this by actively engaging individuals, corporations, the education sector and community organisations in scientific field research and raising awareness through publications, lectures and seminars.

The partnership between Earthwatch Institute and Rio Tinto began in the mid-1990s and over the last nine years has been at the forefront of Earthwatch's work with the private sector, informing its approach to working in partnership. In turn it has also enabled development of Rio Tinto's own approach to working with the international NGO community.

The partnership has given substantial support to Earthwatch field research projects. Examples of projects supported include: research into the ecology and conservation of platypus populations in Australia; researching botanical diversity in the rainforests of Cameroon; examining Brazil's rainforest wildlife; and conserving rainforests in Indonesia.

The partnership has also provided training workshops for Earthwatch and Rio Tinto – sponsored scientists, supported environmental education events and involved Rio Tinto staff in scientific field research projects as volunteer field assistants – providing Earthwatch with valuable funding, labour and skills.

Field projects selected for Rio Tinto staff involvement and other support have been based either on their geographic relevance to Rio Tinto operations or the Group's interest in the research and conservation issues being addressed.

In addition to the ongoing core programme of capacity building and employee engagement, Rio Tinto has provided significant technical support to the development of Earthwatch's risk assessment procedures for its field projects. In turn, Earthwatch has been able to give valuable stakeholder input to Rio Tinto on biodiversity.

Describing the hidden species

Earthwatch has embarked on a project, supported by Rio Tinto since 2003, to collect data on the invertebrate populations of South Africa. Invertebrates range from ants, spiders and butterflies to worms and snails. They are vital to sustaining ecosystems, contributing to the efficient functioning of the ecology on which human survival depends.

The project represents a new approach to biodiversity conservation, altering the conventional focus on plants and larger animals. The aims are to address the need for sound data on invertebrate diversity and distribution in South Africa, highlight the conservation value and significance of invertebrates, and establish databases of species of special conservation value. The data can then be used by land use planners, conservation managers, and private land owners to develop sound management strategies for invertebrate conservation, both inside and outside formally protected areas.

The first year of the project has provided baseline data, previously not available, on the invertebrate diversity of the Mkhuze and Phinda game reserves. The data can already be used for identifying species with the potential for inclusion in ecotourism activities, and for identifying and highlighting those species of special conservation value (rare, endemic, or threatened).

Helping conserve the Pantanal

In west-central Brazil, eastern Bolivia and Paraguay, the Pantanal is the world's largest freshwater wetland, comprising lakes, waterways and islands equal in size to the state of Iowa, US. The area holds the greatest concentration of wildlife in South America, as well as many rare trees.

As one of the areas of the world of exceptional and threatened biological diversity, the Pantanal is home to one of Earthwatch's Conservation Research Initiatives. Conservation work is conducted with the support of partner organisations such as Rio Tinto, which has been involved since 2002, local community members, and environmental organisations. Working with these groups allows important information to be spread and researched effectively at both local and national levels.

Earthwatch and its partners are generating data to help create policies for the sustainable management and conservation of the Pantanal. Work is contributing to the creation of a network of reserves (public and private) for the consolidation of conservation corridors, connecting the Pantanal to the surrounding Cerrado savanna. This will enable sustainable management of the region, taking account of mining, agriculture, fishing and other forms of development. Wildlife tourism may be the best way to generate a sustainable income for local people, but it clearly needs to be well planned.



The partnership's next phase will look towards providing a forum for the development of programmes to support biodiversity conservation in line with the partners' strategic objectives.



The partnership has plans for greater participation for Rio Tinto's communities and a more specific operational focus.

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