

Rio Tinto



The Earthwatch Institute

Rio Tinto Partnership

“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.”

Herschel Post, chairman, Earthwatch Institute (Europe)

Cover: Volunteers measure leaf sizes of mangrove plants at Kinondo, Gazi Bay. The Rio Tinto – Earthwatch partnership enabled volunteers from Africa and Sri Lanka to participate in Earthwatch’s ongoing research programme, investigating methods for helping to regenerate and protect Kenya’s mangrove swamp ecosystem.

Sound scientific data for effective conservation

Earthwatch is an international environmental charity that engages people in scientific field research and education to promote understanding and action necessary for sustainable environment.

Earthwatch works with scientists, individuals, corporations, the education sector and local communities to support global research projects and raise awareness through publications, lectures and seminars.

The partnership between Earthwatch and Rio Tinto began in the mid-1990s and since that time it has been a flagship partnership for Earthwatch, informing its approach to working with the private sector. In turn, it enabled Rio Tinto to develop its approach to working with the international NGO community.

The partnership has given substantial support to Earthwatch field research projects. These 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.

The field projects Rio Tinto supports have been selected because of their geographic relevance to Rio Tinto operations or because of 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 employees have provided technical support to the continual improvement of risk assessment procedures for Earthwatch field projects. In turn, Earthwatch has worked closely with Rio Tinto to develop and test the processes and tools needed to implement its biodiversity strategy.

Developing future conservation leaders

The Earthwatch capacity building programme provides opportunities for early career conservationists and scientists from developing countries to build their knowledge, skills and professional networks by participating in Earthwatch projects. Throughout 2008, Rio Tinto had enabled over 180 people to participate in the Earthwatch African programme alone.

The Tidal Forests of Kenya

In 2008, Rio Tinto supported a capacity building team to participate in Earthwatch's Tidal Forests of Kenya project, which focuses on techniques for restoring and evaluating the ecology of mangrove forests. Mangrove forests are in decline globally, yet support rich and diverse ecosystems and provide services essential to the health and wellbeing of local communities. They also act as "carbon sinks" and reduce coastal erosion and the impacts of extreme weather events.


Participants were drawn from six countries in Africa and Asia and all have the opportunity to apply their learning on their return home through their areas of work or study. Rio Tinto's Simandou project in Guinea helped identify three candidates to join the team as part of the company's commitment to working with local stakeholders.

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 and is recognised as an area of exceptional and threatened biological diversity.

Earthwatch undertakes critical scientific research in the Pantanal. Through the Earthwatch – Rio Tinto partnership, local employees, government representatives, community members and environmental organisations have met and worked together in the field as part of this project.

This has not only strengthened understanding of the importance of this unique habitat, but has also provided an opportunity to develop new relationships and understanding between participants.



Amadou Yansané, an Earthwatch volunteer from Guinea, cuts around the base of a new mangrove seedling before replanting an area of forest that was previously destroyed in Mwache, Kenya.

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 savannah terrain. This will enable sustainable management of the region, taking account of mining, agriculture, fishing and other forms of development.

The future

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 is working towards greater participation for Rio Tinto's communities and a more specific operational focus.

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