



# THE SUKUNDIMI WALKS BEFORE ME

SIX REASONS WHY THE FRIEDA RIVER MINE MUST BE REJECTED

SUMMARY



# THE FRIEDA RIVER MINE

The Frieda River is a tributary of the mighty Sepik River, the longest river in PNG, 1,126 kilometres long. The Sepik winds in serpentine fashion like the Amazon and is renowned for its rich connection to its people and its outstanding biodiversity.

The proposed Frieda River mine would be the largest ever mine in Papua New Guinea's history and among the world's largest mines. The Sepik – its wild environment, which is rich in biodiversity, and the Sepik people's vibrant culture - is under threat by the proposed mine.

## DETAILS ABOUT THE MINE

**Location:** The mine and its associated infrastructure have been proposed to be built across East and West Sepik (or Sandaun) Provinces, in an area that has been Tentatively Listed for World Heritage Status by the Government of Papua New Guinea for both environmental and cultural reasons.

**Minerals:** Gold and copper

**Size of mine:** 1600 square km

**Project status:** Proposed. The mine is currently being assessed by PNG's environmental authority, Conservation and Environment Protection Authority (CEPA). CEPA could potentially grant the environmental permit needed for the Mineral Resources Authority (MRA) to grant the license to operate.

**Mine life:** 33 years to > 45 years

**Company:** Frieda River Limited. The company is a wholly-owned subsidiary of PanAust Limited, an Australian incorporated company. PanAust is wholly owned by a Chinese state-owned company, Guangdong Rising Assets Management (GRAM).

**Relevant government actors:** Conservation and Environment Protection Authority (CEPA), Department of Environment and Conservation, Mineral Resource Authority

**Potentially affected population:** 400,000 people living in the Sepik region

**Groups mobilising:** Project Sepik, local communities and CELCOR, with the support of Jubilee Australia.

## POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

**Environmental:** Waste overflow, destroyed forests, destroyed food gardens, flooding, mine tailings spill, loss of landscape/degradation, biodiversity loss, water pollution, noise pollution, deforestation, damaged ocean floors and seabeds due to DSTP, chemical pollution.

**Health:** Mental health problems for the local communities, such as depression and suicide, chemical pollution bleeding into the food chain and/or impacting skin via the waterways

**Socio-economical:** Loss of livelihoods, loss of traditional knowledge and culture, displacement, militarisation and increased police presence, growth of migrant workers that could lead to community tensions.



**THE INTEGRATED STORAGE FACILITY WOULD BE AROUND 2 TIMES THE SIZE OF SYDNEY HARBOUR. IT WOULD BE REQUIRED TO PERMANENTLY STORE TAILINGS WASTE AND MINE WASTE ROCK FROM THE MINE UNDERWATER.**

# THE SIX KEY REASONS WHY THE FRIEDA RIVER MINE SHOULD NOT GO AHEAD

## 1: THE ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE OF THE SEPIK ARE IRREPLACEABLE

The mighty Sepik River is the longest river in Papua New Guinea and one of the world's great rivers. It has been described as the 'soul of Papua New Guinea' and is often compared with the Amazon. Its biodiversity is incredible and globally significant.

The catchment area is one of the least developed areas in PNG, home to more than 400,000 people, who depend almost entirely on the river and forests. This is perhaps the most linguistically and culturally diverse area on the planet, with over 300 languages in an area the size of France. All of this, the environment, the Sepik peoples' home, and their identity stand to be threatened by the Frieda River mine.

## 2: THE EIS IS COMPLETELY INADEQUATE

In November 2018, PanAust prepared an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) regarding the proposed project and provided it to the Conservation and Environment Protection Authority (CEPA). The EIS was not publically released until October 2019.

In March 2020, PNG's Centre for Environmental Law and Community Rights Inc. (CELCOR) and Project Sepik provided ten expert reports to CEPA about the Sepik Development Infrastructure Project, including the Frieda River Mine. The independent expert reports found several insufficiencies in the EIS, most seriously concerning a lack of evidence about the proposed tailings dam's reliability. The reports also found that the EIS underestimated the risks associated with groundwater contamination, surface waters such as lakes and rivers, and the surrounding environment.

## 3: THE TAILINGS DAM WILL NOT BE SAFE.

The mine would produce 2.9 billion tonnes of waste, including waste rock and tailings. The EIS currently proposes to store the waste at a tailings dam near the river. According to the expert reports, there is a risk of tailing dam failure due to the following: (1) The extremely large amount of mine waste and tailings that will be produced, (2) The terrain is rugged, and has an extremely high annual rainfall, (3) The mine is in a seismically active area, and (4) The tailings storage facility is also expected to double as a hydroelectric facility.

One of the experts concluded that the current design meant that it would require inspection and maintenance not just for the life of the mine, but for the rest of human history. He further stated that the dam break analysis was 'unquestionably the most important component of the EIS' and yet was not included in it.

## 4: DEEP SEA TAILINGS PLACEMENT IS NOT AN ALTERNATIVE

Recently, there are reports that given the controversy surrounding a tailings dam on the Frieda River, and alternative arrangement for disposal of the tailings is being hatched. This plan would see that tailings would use a Deep Sea Tailings Placement (DSTP) to dispose of the waste rocks and tailings directly into the sea at Vanimo or Aitape, in West Sepik Province.



***The river is the gateway to the afterlife. Where the Supreme Sukundimi glides through the water, fish multiply in numbers. Where the Supreme walks on the banks, the sago palms spring forth. I am one with the river, she takes care of me and I take care of her.***

DSTP has been in use since the 1970s, but it is currently only in operation in a few countries due to its controversial practice, including PNG. The many risks posed by DSTP include smothering of seabeds, chemical reactions that release toxic metals into the ocean ecosystem and tailings upwelling and contaminating inshore marine environments that locals rely on for subsistence and livelihoods.

## 5: THE COMMUNITY DOES NOT CONSENT

The Sepik people do not consent to the mine. This position is one that they have now held for many years. Community members were concerned about the impact that the mine would have on the river's health, the source of their livelihood. In October 2018, Project Sepik visited 23 villages on the Sepik and found that their legitimate concerns about the mine's impact on their river were not seriously considered. All the villages opposed the mine.

In May 2020, a total ban on the mine was unanimously proclaimed by the traditional clan leaders of 28 Haus Tambarans along more than 1,000 kilometres of the Sepik River. The Haus Tambarans issued the Supreme Sukundimi Declaration, a powerful document that is a first-ever in PNG, which would be admissible in a court of law. The Supreme Sukundimi represent approximately 78,000 people across 25 villages.

## 6: WE'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE

The two biggest environmental catastrophes in PNG's history, at Panguna and Ok Tedi, are also copper-gold mines located in inaccessible mountainous terrains. Both projects saw catastrophic failures in connection with tailings management.

The comparisons between the problems that led to Panguna and Ok Tedi's failures and what could happen at Frieda River are chilling. The Ok Tedi mine, located near the headwaters of the Ok Tedi River in Western Province, shares the most similarities with the Frieda River mine. The environmental similarities between the two mines include:

- incredible biodiversity values and ecological heartland;
- high seismic activity;
- high rainfall;
- remoteness; and
- the size of the river.

# OUR RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that PNG's CEPA and MRA should reject the Frieda River mine. We submit that it would be more appropriate for the Government of PNG to instead take the next steps required to formally nominate the Upper Sepik River Basin for World Heritage Status.



## DOWNLOAD THE FULL REPORT

[www.savethesepik.org/resources](http://www.savethesepik.org/resources)

## THE SAVE THE SEPIK CAMPAIGN

The Save the Sepik campaign is fighting to protect the Sepik River from the Frieda River Mine. It is a collaboration between Project Sepik and Jubilee Australia Research Centre.

For more information, visit [www.savethesepik.org](http://www.savethesepik.org)

Follow the campaign on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter: @SaveTheSepik