

The company has been looking forward to this for some time. For an outfit found wanting in dealing with inhabitants of a land whose culture it eviscerated in a matter of hours in May last year, Rio Tinto could think grandly about another future. The Anglo-Australian mining giant could add its name to a sounder, more environmentally sensitive programme, join the responsible future gazers and stroke the ecological conscience. Forget [the destruction](#) of the Juukan Gorge Caves in Western Australia. It was time to control the narrative.

Eyes have shifted to the Balkans. The company is [promising](#) \$2.4 billion for the Jadar lithium-borates project in Serbia provided it gets the appropriate permits. In the coming weeks, it will transport a pilot lithium processing plant in four 40-foot shipping containers, suggesting a sure degree of optimism. From its science hub located on the outer parts of Melbourne, the company's research team claim to have identified an economically viable method of extracting lithium from the mineral jadarite.

A [statement](#) from the company outlined the importance of the Jadar project. "Jadar will produce battery-grade lithium carbonate, a critical mineral used in large scale batteries for electric vehicles and storing renewable energy, and position Rio Tinto as the largest source of lithium supply in Europe for at least the next 15 years. In addition, Jadar will produce borates, which are used in solar panels and wind turbines".

Those at the company are already anticipating a nice public relations coup. The project "would scale up Rio Tinto's exposure to battery materials, and demonstrate the company's commitment to investing capital in a disciplined manner to further strengthen its portfolio for the global energy transition".

In terms of [schedule](#), Rio Tinto hopes to start construction of the underground mine in 2022, with saleable production commencing in 2026. Full production is anticipated three years later. The complement will comprise 58,000 tonnes of lithium carbonate, 160,000 tonnes of boric acid and 255,000 tonnes of sodium sulphate.

The company hopes to win over the Serbian authorities by promising rich additions to the local economy and stroking the ego of strategic significance. "It's not a huge mine", Sinead Kaufman, Chief Executive of Rio's Minerals division, [told reporters](#), "but from a lithium perspective, it's going to be the largest producer in Europe for at least ten years and bring lithium to the market at scale". Estimates are put at 1% of gross domestic product coming directly from Jadar itself, with 4% being the indirect contribution to the Serbian economy. The mine will come with [incidental additions](#): relevant infrastructure and equipment, electric haul trucks, a beneficiation chemical processing plant dealing with dry stacking of tailings. In all, enough lithium will be available to power a million electric vehicles.

All this rosiness cannot detract from the issue of environmental sustainability. Rio [promises](#)

that a commissioned environmental assessment impact will be made available for comment “shortly”. “We are committed to upholding the highest environmental standards and building sustainable futures for the communities where we operate”, [states](#) the company’s CEO Jakob Stausholm. “We recognise that in progressing this project, we must listen to and respect the views of all stakeholders”.

These statements are at odds with reality, both current and historical. Rio Tinto’s Serbian subsidiary firm Rio Sava Exploration is currently [facing charges](#) by two Serbian NGOs, the Coalition against Environmental Corruption and the Podrinje Anti-Corruption Team, PAKT, citing violations of environmental regulations since 2015.

In fact, Rio’s conduct has produced something of a green awakening in Serbia. A disparate number of environmental groups, academics and politicians have found rare common ground. In June, the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences [sent a letter](#) to Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Zorana Mihajlović outlining the grave implications of permitting the project to go ahead. “The mine would cause great and irreversible damage not only to the area where it would be located, but to the entire country.” The location of the mining complex would threaten agricultural land, forests, meadows and the water supply areas in Mačva“. Tailings with toxic residues from ore processing would span over 160 hectares”.

Last month, protesters gathered at Loznica to vent their concerns. At the gathering, Marijana Petković of the Ne Damo Jadar initiative [gave an insight](#) into the way Rio dealt with locals. “They came in 2004, they never answered us as people on three key things: what to do with the noise; with the water; what is the minimum amount of pollution”.

An [online petition](#) against the mine has also attracted 125,685 signatures. It describes the Jadar Valley as having “Serbia’s fertile land” marked by “thousands of sustainable multi-generational farms”. It speaks to fears about the imminent poisoning of water sources. “The process of separating chemically stable lithium from jadarite ore involves the use of concentrated sulphuric acid”. The process would be undertaken some 20km from the Drina River using 300 cubic metres of water per hour, with the chemically treated water returned to the Jadar River. Entire basins of water, and water sources beyond Serbia, risked being contaminated.

The petitioners also take issue with the lack of transparency on negotiations between Rio Tinto and the Serbian government, fearing “potential corruption on the government’s behalf”. Some homework of the company’s sketchy record on the environment was also recounted, including “the destruction of a 45,000 year old sacred Australian Aboriginal cave”.

Rio Tinto is a company loose with figures, selective in its consultative process (some call it

bribery) and its accounts. The London Mining Network [documents](#) a record replete with ruthless indifference, environmental crimes, and human rights abuses. At the company's 1937 annual general meeting, chairman Sir Auckland Geddes [expressed](#) his gratitude to the fascist forces of Spain's General Francisco Franco, who had crushed a mining revolt that threatened the smooth operations of the company. "Miners found guilty of troublemaking are court-martialed and shot," he noted with approval.

The company is currently the subject of an [investigation](#) by the UK Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) on suspected breaches of disclosure rules on the value of Mongolia's Oyu Tolgoi mine, the company's biggest copper growth project. The expansion of the mine, coming in at \$6.75 billion, is \$1.4 billion higher than Rio's own estimate in 2016.

Serbia's president Aleksandar Vučić, sufficiently troubled by the indignation, is floating the idea of putting the project to a referendum. This is unlikely to trouble Rio Tinto, whose promises of economic manna for Serbia through jobs and placing it at the forefront of the lithium-electric car revolution is bound to mask potential environmental depredations. As with its record in other countries, this mining giant's understanding of consultation and accountability is estranged from that of a local populace treated as nuisances rather than citizens.

Source: Scoop