

GREEN AMERICAN

FEATURE ARTICLE - MAR/APR 2005

By: *Liz Borkowski*

Diamonds, rubies, and other gems have long been prized for the beauty they bring to engagement rings and other fine jewelry—but in recent years, more and more people have become aware of the ugly story behind some of the world's most precious stones. Read on to learn more about the concerns associated with precious gems, and what you can do to reduce gems' cost to workers, communities, and the Earth.

Worker and Community Hazards

Gemstone mining can be hazardous to the health of workers and communities alike. Diamond miners often work in cramped and unsafe conditions in tunnels, and dust from the mines can cause respiratory (breathing) issues in workers and residents of nearby communities. Mining of colored gemstones, such as rubies and emeralds, is generally done on a smaller scale than diamond mining, but still holds risks. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), many small-scale miners are unable to afford the tools and equipment that could prevent accidents. Because mining involves moving large amounts of earth, it can also alter local ecosystems and damage watersheds. And, although many of the countries where gems are mined have laws setting a minimum age for workers in hazardous occupations, the ILO has also documented child labor in mines. Child labor is also a problem in the cutting and polishing phase of both diamond and colored gemstone production, much of which takes place in Asia; according to the ILO, India alone polishes 70 percent of the global diamonds yield.



The human suffering linked to gem production doesn't end with those who mine and cut the stones. In Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, profits from diamond sales have funded weapons purchases for armed resistance groups such as Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front, which commit human rights abuses.

Conflict Diamonds

The nonprofit human rights group Global Witness first brought international attention to the issue of 'conflict diamonds' fueling and prolonging violent conflicts in 1998. Along with Physicians for Human Rights, they raised consumer awareness of diamonds' link to war and called on diamond dealers to stop buying stones from countries where diamond sales are used to fund wars. The United Nations Security Council officially recognized the role of conflict diamonds in continuing violent conflicts in some countries, and then urged the diamond industry to develop a global tracking system that would confirm the origins of uncut stones and establish a paper trail of ownership.

Members of the diamond industry began meeting about the issue in 1999, and in 2002, the industry launched the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme. The Kimberley Process requires countries exporting uncut diamonds to ship them in tamper-proof containers along with certificates guaranteeing the packages' origins and contents. Countries receiving the shipments must certify that they have not been tampered with. Only countries that belong to the Kimberley Process can legally trade in uncut diamonds.

What You Can Do

- **Seek out alternative gems**
- **Support campaigns**
- **Ask questions**
- **Spread the word**

Name: _____

Period: _____

Article Questions

1. Describe three ways mining can be hazardous (harmful) to the health of the workers in the mines.
2. How does mining harm the land around the mine?
3. Why do you think child are used in the mining process?
4. Where are the profits of diamond sales used to fund weapon purchases?
5. Which nonprofit human rights group brought attention to the issue of conflict diamonds?
6. What does the Kimberley Process require countries to do?
7. What are some things you can do about this issue?