

## Citizen Action in the Americas

# Tambogrande Referendum Has Domino Effect in Peru

by Stephanie Boyd | July 16, 2002

“We bought the land, developed it, irrigated it, cultivating every day, and we invest and reinvest our capital to produce food... We’re not fly-by-nights. We live here and enjoy our days, and our children and grandchildren will continue living here because this is ours and no one will throw us out.”

These proud words express the roots of resistance to proposed mining operations in Tambogrande, Peru, a community that has inspired others around the country to take up the tactic of using democratic referendums against unpopular development projects. They were written by Godofredo Garcia, president of the mango growers association in Peru’s northern coastal province of Piura, and the mining industry’s No. 1 opponent in Tambogrande, until he was assassinated on March 31, 2001.

Officials have failed to solve the murder case of the charismatic leader, and his image has become a symbol uniting a broad range citizens groups opposed to the local mining development, which in turn has sparked grassroots actions nationwide, capturing international attention.

The Tambogrande-based movement includes youth groups headed by Garcia’s son Ulises, the Roman Catholic Church, local politicians, environmental activists, and artists. It has gone beyond conventional channels of public protest in Peru to challenge an influential transnational mining company with nonviolent protest, public polls, and artistic dissent.

### Fruit vs. Gold

Sixty years ago, an irrigation scheme financed by the World Bank transformed 150,000 acres of desert in Piura state into lush, subtropical orchards. Here in the San Lorenzo Valley, Garcia toiled and raised his family. San Lorenzo became Peru’s top

fruit producer. Its lime and mango exports contribute about \$150 million to the national economy. The valley exports 25,000 tons of mangoes each year, many to the United States. The fruit production has made adjacent Tambogrande into a bustling agricultural town of 20,000.

Local legend has it that about 25 years ago, when a French company discovered a multi-mineral deposit right under the town—rich in gold, silver, copper, and zinc—residents were so opposed to turning their farming town into a mine that the company decided to leave the minerals in the ground and go elsewhere.

But the Canada-based Manhattan Minerals Corp., which began exploration on the streets of Tambogrande about four years back, was not so easily dissuaded by opposition. The company estimates reserves under the town could be worth \$1 billion. It is planning a \$315-million open-pit mine, and it holds concession rights for other deposits in the San Lorenzo Valley, also bursting with minerals.

Although Manhattan has yet to complete its environmental impact studies, the company insists that the proposed mine will not have any negative impacts on local agriculture. An independent report written by U.S. hydrologist Robert Moran came up with quite different findings, however.

According to Moran, “The proposed Tambogrande open-pit gold mine, if approved, is likely to have negative, long-term impacts on water quality and quantity, the general environment, and possibly agriculture.” In order to construct the mine, the report says, a local river would have to be diverted and about 8,000 citizens relocated.

Contamination could have dire consequences beyond agricultural concerns because of the area’s

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importance for biodiversity, according to ecologists. Many rare and endangered birds are found in the valley's orchards including the Peruvian cortarrama, or *Phytotoma raimondii*. Jeremy Flanagan, a biologist with ProAves Peru, a local conservation group, says there are only 1,200 of these birds left, and they are all found in a reduced habitat on Peru's northern coast. The cortarrama is extremely sensitive to changes in its environment and would certainly not adapt to the noise and contamination generated by mining, he notes.

Ulises Garcia says his father's employees nicknamed the cortarrama "toothache" for its sorrowful, throbbing song. Godofredo, an ardent conservationist, felt the bird's habitat should be declared a protected area, and he was fond of proclaiming that "the lungs of Piura are in the San Lorenzo Valley."

### **Balloting Channels Message**

Manhattan has offered to pay top prices for residents' land and to relocate them to new, modern housing. The company has invested thousands of dollars in slick public relations campaigns, including a newspaper, free merchandise, and full-scale models of the relocation homes. On the darker side, mining activists have been slandered in pro-mining newspapers and Francisco Ojeda, president of the Tambogrande Defense Front, says he has received death threats and is often followed.

Despite the company's best efforts, an overwhelming number of residents say they prefer working the land and living in their family homes to the lure of gold. This June 2, about 98% of the town's eligible voters said "no" to mining in a referendum organized by the municipality.

Not surprisingly, Manhattan eschewed the election and its results, saying townsfolk lacked enough information to vote. Manhattan was scheduled to present the results of its environmental impact studies in mid-July.

"In developed countries, with educated people, such models may be able to work," said Roberto Obradovich, Manhattan's president in Peru. "But in our country, where the population is so easily

manipulated, I believe that if more of these types of referendum follow, the state will be paralyzed."

Obradovich's observations about Tambogrande's population were not shared by international observer missions from Europe and North America who monitored the referendum. Among them was Stéphanie Rousseau, an observer with Canada's Rights and Democracy Center, who has had ample experience with monitoring balloting. She participated in observer missions during former President Alberto Fujimori's 2000 campaign, which was marred by irregularities, corruption, and foul play. In contrast, Tambogrande's referendum merited a stamp of approval, says the Canadian Ph.D. candidate.

"People participated en masse. They were quite happy to vote," she notes. "I believe the people of Tambogrande have been able to express themselves through the referendum and I hope (the referendum) will help in lowering the level of conflict and finding a solution to the problems," she adds.

Tambogrande Mayor Alfredo Rengifo agreed with Rousseau's assessment of the referendum. It was Rengifo's idea to hold the vote, hoping it would channel local tensions and frustrations into a positive expression of grassroots democracy and provide an answer to the mining question in his town. The elderly, first-time mayor was an early supporter of the mine, believing it would bring economic and development opportunities. But massive public opposition, evident in marches and demonstrations attended by thousands of people, changed his mind.

Public protest came to a head in February of 2001, when a small contingent of participants in a peaceful march broke away and burned Manhattan's Tambogrande compound to the ground. The company says the incident is proof that the Tambogrande Defense Front, the strongest local group opposing the mine, contains "violent elements." Francisco Ojeda, president of the defense front, says he believes the vandals were "infiltrators" sent to disrupt the parade and smear his group's image. The company has not returned to Tambogrande since, and its local operations now are based about 100 kilometers away in Piura, the state capital.

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Rengifo, an admirer of pacifist Mahatma Ghandi, knew there had to be a nonviolent path. So he started a petition against mining development, which he presented to Peru's Congress with the signatures of more than 75% of Tambogrande's voting population. Manhattan accused him of using improper methods and the government refused to act.

So Rengifo dug deep into the country's municipal laws and found the "consulta vecinal," literally a neighborhood consultation, or referendum, which according to Peruvian law can be conducted by municipalities on issues of local importance.

Peru's Minister of Energy and Mines Jaime Quijandria has vehemently disagreed with the referendum, vowing it will hold "no legal weight" and promising to continue evaluating Manhattan's proposal according to national mining law. In response to the referendum's results, he says the government will hold public hearings on Manhattan's environmental impact statement in the municipalities of Piura, Tambogrande and the nation's capital, Lima. Ultimately, he says, the federal government will decide whether the mine goes ahead.

### **Question of Vested Interests**

Tambogrande's leaders say they will not attend the public hearings unless the referendum results are respected. They note that no mining company in Peru has ever been refused a construction permit on the basis of an environmental impact assessment. "I can not understand how a government that is trying to restore democracy to this country can ignore the will of the people," comments Rengifo.

The answer may lie in current President Alejandro Toledo's economic policy. Mining provides about 40% of Peru's export revenues, generating much-needed foreign exchange, and the Toledo administration views mining as a kind of industrial Superman: It can do no harm, is all-powerful, and will somehow save the country from rampant poverty and underdevelopment in a single bound.

Former President Alberto Fujimori had a similar love affair with transnational mining. But at the end of his rule in November 2000, a decade of privatizations and an open-door policy for foreign investors

had produced a handful of wealthy elites in Lima while nearly 50% of Peru's population lived on less than \$2 a day. Tax loopholes and corruption have kept mining's profits from trickling down to local communities whose residents say they suffer mining's social and environmental consequences without receiving the promised economic benefits.

There also may be a shadier side to the government's insistent championing of the Tambogrande project: Once the mine is approved, the Peruvian government will own 25% of the operation, making it both a regulator and stakeholder. This is unusual for the pro-privatization administration, which has been selling off government-owned industry to foreign companies. Even in less controversial circumstances, when the government has no direct stake in a project, Peru's mining ministry has been accused of weak and ineffective environmental monitoring. In this case, however, Tambogrande's leaders say the government's partnership in the mine constitutes an obvious conflict of interest.

As news of Tambogrande's successful referendum and resistance campaign spreads, the government is being backed into a corner and may have to decide between popularity and economic benefit. What began as a tiny movement of mango and lime growers has now matured to include nonprofit organizations and activist groups in Piura, Lima and even North America and Europe, with the power to sway public opinion both nationally and internationally.

### **Referendum Fever Spreads**

One of the most successful and creative of these joint endeavors is the "ceviche without limes" campaign, coordinated between young activists in Piura and Lima. Ceviche, or fish marinated in lime juice, is a national dish in Peru. So organizers equated the mining threat to the lime harvest with a blow to national pride in order to gain broader support for Tambogrande around the country. They dressed up in lime costumes and danced through the streets of Lima with posters warning of the impending doom. Likewise, they cautioned, the national beverage pisco sour, a brandy with lime juice, is at risk.

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That the strategy worked can be seen in Manhattan's counter-attack. The company is now striking out at Tambogrande's supporters in Lima, initially targeting foreign-based nonprofit organizations. Manhattan officials claim some international groups are trying to stand in the way of development by opposing the mine. Manhattan's Obradovich says the company enjoyed widespread support in Tambogrande before the NGOs got involved.

In particular, Obradovich blames Oxfam UK for donating funds toward the referendum, and he accuses Oxfam America of "misinforming" the local population. Oxfam America provided funding for the independent environmental report by Moran. But that claim ignores the fact that local groups in Tambogrande began organizing resistance at the first signs of the company's presence in town, without support from outsiders.

The anti-NGO campaign has been so successful that Peru's National Mining Society, an elite trade group, has come out with public statements against Oxfam, and the pro-mining news media are focusing on nonprofit involvement as well. Perhaps the most surprising attack came in the July 13 edition of *Caretas*, a highly respected weekly news-magazine. Columnist Augusto Elmore wrote that, "I suspect the hand or the fingers of Sendero (Luminoso, a Maoist-aligned terrorist organization) are behind the nongovernment organization Oxfam that has come from England to Peru to question foreign investment in our country."

Elmore's piece went on to criticize Oxfam's involvement in Tambogrande and ended by suggesting that Sendero has "infiltrated" Oxfam from Europe.

Oxfam UK rejected Elmore's attack, and Martin Beaumont of Oxfam UK in Lima wrote to the magazine pointing out that the mayor of Tambogrande requested funding for the referendum. Beaumont added that more than a dozen human rights organizations supported the process. Elmore remained unrepentant, devoting space the following week to ridiculing Beaumont's letter and reiterating his suspicions.

So far, these attacks have failed to influence public opinion. On the contrary, Tambogrande's resistance tactics are being exported to mining communities across the country.

After hearing about the vote, citizens of Cajamarca state, in Peru's northern Andes, called on authorities to hold a referendum on the fate of Mt. Quilish. The state government declared the mountain a protected reserve more than a year ago. But the Yanacocha mining company, which holds mineral rights on the mountain, has appealed the ruling, in order to pursue expansion plans there. Residents hope a referendum will convince the company—owned by Colorado's Newmont Mining, the World Bank, and a Peruvian firm—to shelve the plans.

Even non-mining communities have been inspired by the little mango-growing town's methods. The mayor of Arequipa, capital of the southern state of the same name, wants to hold a local referendum on the federal government's proposal to privatize a state-owned energy company. The administration's recent decision to sell the company provoked violent rioting in mid-June, and the city was placed under martial law, in a state of emergency, for nearly a week.

Ulises Garcia, Godofredo's son, closely followed events in Arequipa and has visited mining communities in Cajamarca, to learn and share campaign strategies. The young man is thrilled with the Tambogrande referendum, an idea that was close to his father's heart. He says he is proud that it is being copied by other communities. "This is my father's legacy," says Ulises. "He wanted a referendum and I know this would make him very happy."

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*Stephanie Boyd is a documentary filmmaker and freelance journalist living and working in Peru. She and her partner Ernesto Cabellos are currently finishing a feature-length documentary about the struggles of a small Andean village for health care and justice after a devastating mercury spill by a U.S.-owned gold mining company. (See links for more information.)*

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## LINKS:

“A Life Worth More Than Gold” | *Washington Post*, June 9, 2002

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A18830-2002Jun8.html>

“Peruvian Farmers Vote Against Gold Mine” | Friends of the Earth International Media Center, June 4, 2002

<http://www.foei.org/media/2002/0604b.html>

“Miner Sins” | *NOW* online edition, April 18-24, 2001

[http://www.nowtoronto.com/issues/2001-04-18/news\\_feature.html](http://www.nowtoronto.com/issues/2001-04-18/news_feature.html)

“Cyanide Uncertainties” | Mineral Policy Center Issue Paper, 1998

<http://www.mineralpolicy.org/publications/issuepapers.php3?nav=4>

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Web: <http://www.cooperaccion.org.pe/>

Lima-based NGO working with the Tambogrande Defense Front

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### Robert Moran

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### Environmental Mining Council of British Columbia (EMCBC)

Contact: Nedjo Rogers

Email: [emcbc@miningwatch.org](mailto:emcbc@miningwatch.org)

Web: <http://www.emcbc.miningwatch.org/>

Supports the Tambogrande Defense Front and Lima-based organizations

### Mineral Policy Center

Email: [mpc@mineralpolicy.org](mailto:mpc@mineralpolicy.org)

Website: <http://www.mineralpolicy.org/>

Research institute in Washington, DC

### Project Underground

Email: [project\\_underground@moles.org](mailto:project_underground@moles.org)

Website: <http://www.moles.org/>

California-based advocates for the rights of oil, mining, and gas communities

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### Recommended citation:

Stephanie Boyd, “Tambogrande Referendum Has Domino Effect in Peru,” Americas Program (Silver City, NM: Interhemispheric Resource Center, July 16, 2002).

### Web location:

<http://www.americaspolicy.org/citizen-action/focus/0207tambogrande.html>