



Why the COROMANDEL should not be MINED

By Gary Taylor and John Morton

A radical platform it could indeed seem: to oppose mining altogether on the Coromandel Peninsula. Many will want to ask why. What would have happened to the world's technology and economy if environmentalists had wanted to conserve the Rand of South Africa, or the copper belt of Montana, or Broken Hill?

Without doubt there are precious and useful metals the world needs (... though in a rational world gold might not be one of them). These metals have been able to be won from land-masses that were huge, and arid, and generally uniform. With the earth's crust scraped for metals, there was little danger that water or land-slips would carry away tailings, or kill or poison fertile landscapes, or fill up the valleys or the arms of the sea.

But most of New Zealand is a different sort of terrain: small, narrow, diverse and coastal. Its landforms constantly change. Some are unique to the world: most are fragile and unstable.

The land has a living skin too, that is thin

and vulnerable. It is also green and self-renewing, with the farms and forests and natural communities, running off to shallow waters with productive fisheries.

If the whole of New Zealand is beautiful, the Coromandel is precious to the highest degree. An hour's distance only from crowded Auckland, it is a scenic joy: with its high-forested range, its pohutukawa-lined coasts, its sand and boulder beaches, its little farmed valleys, and its shallow Firth of Thames. The last is one of our richest commercial fishing grounds, and an unsurpassed habitat of wading birds. All these are at risk today as never before. One third of the Coromandel Peninsula is covered by exploration or prospecting licences from multi-national mining companies.

For almost 100 years the Peninsula was mined, by tunnelling along quartz reefs to extract the gold by pick and shovel. But the transnational giants of today are looking to open-cast mining: digging enormous pits several hundred metres deep. Even a

single open pit mine might move as much rock as 1,000 companies shifted by pick and shovel in 100 years. Modern mining depends for its availability on its giant scale. From a big enough mine, gold can be as thin as 2 gms. per tonne of ore processed. Huge quantities of tailings will result, a fine powdery material difficult to control, from ores containing lead, zinc, mercury and other toxic metals. Ground-water when acidified mobilises these toxic elements. Cyanide used in extraction is present too. All these things enter the streams, the coastal seas and the food chains: of plankton and shellfish: of snapper, of birds and of people!

The effect on forest landscapes is also immense. Whole landscapes will be altered or removed, turned into craters, internally terraced to provide access for 50 tonne vehicles. Valleys can be suffocated beneath millions of tonnes of overburden and tailings.

Some present ventures in the pipeline will greatly affect or obliterate communities