

FP COMMENT

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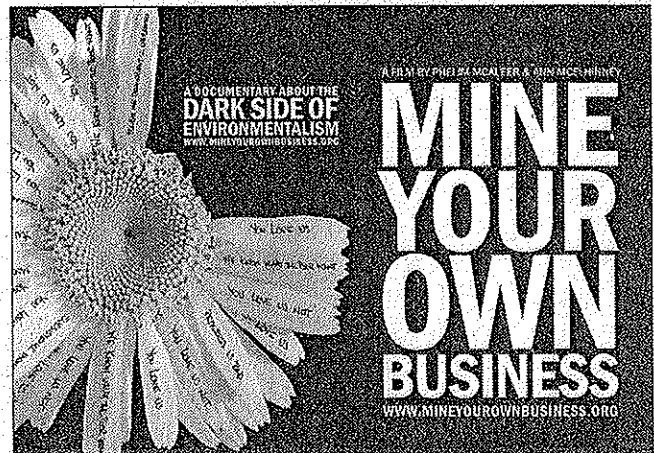
Documentary puts activists in their place

Robert Redford's Sundance Film Festival has always been at the bleeding edge of liberal causes. The event of this year's festival was Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, the documentary about the former veep's moral crusade to fight climate change with all the disinformation that he could muster. Next year it could well be *Zoo*, a film based on a "humanizing look" at the 2005 case of a Seattle man who died after attempting to copulate with a horse. One movie that will definitely not appear at next year's Sundance is *Mine Your Own Business*. The glaciers will reach L.A. before Robert Redford is associated with any movie that threatens to expose "the dark side of environmentalism."

Mine Your Own Business is the brainchild of Irish filmmaker Phelim McAleer. It started with his coverage — while a reporter for the *Financial Times* of London — of opposition to a mine proposed by Toronto-based Gabriel Resources at Rosia Montana in Romania. The fight was spearheaded by a Swiss journalist-turned-environmentalist named Stephanie Roth. Ms. Roth — who refused to be interviewed for the film — claimed that Gabriel and other mining companies are "modern day vampires" (after all, Rosia Montana is in Transylvania). In 2005 she was awarded the Goldman Environmental Award, the alleged Nobel Prize of "grassroots activism."

Mr. McAleer exposes what grassroots activism is often all about: well-funded multinational environmental groups such as Greenpeace descending on impoverished villages and depriving them of jobs and a future. Mr. McAleer discovered that many, if not most, NGO claims were greatly exaggerated or entirely false.

Rosia Montana is not an idyllic community whose traditional lifestyle needs to be preserved. It is a desolate and polluted village whose streams run literally red-brown with toxic chemicals. The vast majority of its dwindling population are desperate for



This film would be an unlikely Sundance Film Festival entry.

GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS OFTEN DESCEND ON IMPOVERISHED VILLAGES AND DEPRIVE THEM OF JOBS AND A FUTURE

the good jobs that Gabriel would provide. The local unemployment rate is around 70%. Moreover, Gabriel's project would reclaim much of the area polluted by state-owned mining operations. Gabriel CEO Alan Hill's favourite — and accurate — sound bite is, "This is a mine to clean up a mess"

Mr. McAleer set out to make a film (with financial support but no editorial input from Gabriel) and wound up on a picaresque adventure that took him to other proposed mining sites in Madagascar and Chile. He took along an unemployed young Romanian miner named George, which was a stroke of genius. George turns out to be a real-life but highly sympathetic and uncynical Romanian version of Borat.

The film is devastating because it combats prejudices and fantasies with pictures that refute thousands of weasel words. Images spun from afar about Rosia Montana's happy-family small holdings are contrasted with the reality of decrepit homes with no running water, craggy soil and crumbling outhouses.

The most egregious example of the overweening stance of environmentalists comes in the shape of the World Wide Fund for Nature's Mark Fenn. Mr. Fenn is building a luxury home in Fort Dauphin, Madagascar, where he has a US\$35,000 catamaran, but where he is also fighting a mining proposal by Rio Tinto.

George is here at his most devastatingly useful as Mr. Fenn tells him that a mine will ruin the town's "quaintness," and that poor people are happier, smile more and have less stress in their lives. "I live in poverty," George tells Mr. Fenn. Mr. Fenn then suggests that if the locals acquire money, they will "just spend it" on fripperies such as beer, stereos and jeans. He claims that they don't value housing, nutrition and education.

In Chile, at the site of the Pascua Lama mine proposed by Toronto mining giant Barrick, McAleer again finds a community desperate for jobs but being manipulated by the distant forces of organized environmentalism. An English environmentalist declares from the depths of London's darkest Islington that mining damages "sacred mountains." He utters disinformation about the proposed Chilean mine's impact on glaciers. Local opposition to the Chilean project, meanwhile, comes significantly from big landowners, who are concerned about losing their employees to higher-paid jobs.

Noted development economist Deepak Lal is left to deliver the bottom line: Much of environmentalism is effectively an attack on the world's poor.

I had never heard of *Mine Your Own Business* until last Friday, when I caught a segment about the movie on the CBC's *The Current*. Mr. McAleer said in an interview that he had discovered that environmentalists had little regard for the truth and didn't like to be questioned. He also noted that he had received two death threats since he started promoting the movie.

The point of the film was dramatically brought home when a Greenpeace representative named Herwig Schuster was interviewed from Vienna. Mr. Schuster, who sounded like the classic movie villain Peter Lorre (of *Maltese Falcon* fame) at his most sinister, proceeded to spout effluent that entirely supported Mr. McAleer's thesis. He suggested that Gabriel's project was only for 10 years and was thus "not sustainable." In fact, the project is for 17 years. Mr. Schuster suggested that the area would be left with a cyanide-impregnated catastrophe, but Gabriel has provided the most comprehensive assurances that it will leave the site better than when it arrived. Asked to respond to Mr. McAleer's claim that organizations such as Greenpeace are fundamentally anti-development, Mr. Schuster claimed that poor people didn't need air conditioning and "big cars." *The Current's* guest host, Rick MacInnes-Rae, asked him if it was not up to them what they did with their money. Mr. Schuster self-imploded in a barrage of blather about non-existent local tourism and skiing projects that would be harmed by all that cyanide in the area.

What was particularly refreshing about the segment was that it was in marked contrast to a piece on Rosia Montana that aired on *The Current* three years ago, and which largely swallowed the environmentalists' party line about destroying communities and forcing people out of their homes.

So far, *Mine Your Own Business* has received limited exposure in Canada, although it can be purchased online. It deserves to be seen by anybody who wants to understand the impact on poor people of radical environmentalism. Gabriel Resources, meanwhile, after years of frustration, is expecting a decision on the mine in the first quarter of next year. One can only hope — for the sake of the people of Rosia Montana — that it gets the nod.