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London Report: A Bit of Undermining

The day before Good Friday 1973 was one of the best days yet for the British environmental movement. However, since there were no newspapers the following day, hardly anybody noticed. Only gradually in the following week did the word spread that Rio Tinto-Zinc (RTZ), one of the world's largest mining companies, had announced on Thursday, April 19 - in small print - its decision not to tear the heart out of one of Britain's most beautiful national parks. The news astounded and delighted not only the residents of Capel Hermon, the threatened community in Snowdonia, but also those many others for whom RTZ had become the most notorious initials in Britain. It also marked the end of a classic environmental battle - although the victors insist that winning one battle does not end the conflict.

The battle had commenced in 1970, with newspaper articles culminating in an attack in the *New Scientist*, November 12, 1970, by Jon Tinker, one of Britain's most outspoken environmental journalists. Tinker described how RTZ had surreptitiously moved into North Wales, buying up mineral rights in Snowdonia National Park and carrying out exploratory drilling, much of it without the knowledge of the local county council. When told that it needed planning consent, RTZ in effect raised its eyebrows and said "Sorry, we didn't think we did." Tinker forecast that RTZ's ostensible interest in alluvial gold in the Mawddach estuary would prove to be a facade - that what RTZ really wanted was the copper in Cwn Hermon nearby. In a rebuttal to Tinker's article, also in the *New Scientist*, Lord Byers, RTZ director in charge of exploration, made one of those statements destined for environmental immortality: "RTZ policy is crystal clear. We are conservationists. We are also miners." It was only one of a series of public relations miscues that were to make RTZ a byword for ham-fisted crassness.

Then, on February 20, 1971, the *Evening Standard* reported that "If fighting to preserve Snowdonia involves a political rally or action in the High Court there are now people prepared to go to these lengths." Those in question were the recently formed British unit of Friends of the Earth (FOE). In the months that followed, FOE United Kingdom, mainly through the efforts of four determined people, developed the campaign that ultimately undermined the miners. The FOE Snowdonia campaign should be documented at length. As a demonstration of environmental pressure at its most effective it had everything: technical thoroughness, economic sophistication, sociopolitical astuteness, and - above all - a flair for brilliant public presentation of the issues.

FOE's collaboration with television teams led, in September 1971, to a Granada TV production entitled "A Subject Called Ecology in a Place Called Capel Hermon," and, in May 1972, to a BBC Horizon production called "Do You Dig National Parks?" In the discussion which formed the latter half of the Horizon program, FOE spokesmen Graham Searle and Amory Lovins, manifesting a grasp of open-pit mining technology and economics at least equal to that of their adversaries, methodically dissected the arguments put forward by RTZ Vice-Chairman Roy Wright and one of his colleagues. Suddenly it began to be conceivable that FOE and its allies - who now included many of the local people in Snowdonia - might have a chance of winning.

Meanwhile, FOE had submitted evidence to a "Commission on Mining and the Environment" set up by RTZ under the chairmanship of Lord Zuckerman. The FOE evidence, subsequently published in the *Ecologist*, May 1972, was called "Rock-Bottom: Nearing the Limits of Metal-Mining in Britain"; it presented a rigorous analysis of planning legislation, planning procedures, resource-use policy, and the technology of open-pit copper mining, its side effects and after effects. By the time it appeared, RTZ had formally announced - as foreseen by Tinker - abandonment of its perfunctory

gold rush in the Mawddach. It was clearly copper they had found. But RTZ stressed that it would not decide to mine if the Zuckerman Commission said it should not. However - again as foreseen by Tinker, FOE, and their allies - when the Zuckerman Commission published its report in September 1972, it said nothing whatever as to whether RTZ should or should not mine in Snowdonia.

By this time the matter of metal mining in Britain had become a major issue. The government had set up a committee under Sir Roger Stevens to hear evidence about the planning control of mineral developments; FOE submitted some 45,000 words of testimony. Lord Sandford headed another committee to report on the status and circumstances of Britain's national parks - which have far less legal standing than do those of the US. FOE once again offered detailed evidence. The toe-to-toe fight over a small Welsh valley between a huge corporation and a handful of dedicated opponents resulted in a major government reappraisal, taking in the whole question of resource-use policy in Britain.

Then, as quietly as they had come, RTZ tiptoed back out of Cwm Hermon. Was it a famous victory? Friends of the Earth, its Welsh allies, and its media colleagues have kept their celebration low-key. The copper is still there, and Snowdonia National Park is still a national park in not much more than name only. As a headline in *Built Environment* put it: "RTZ delay mining in Snowdonia."