

Presidential Perspective
John A.S. Dow – SEG President, 2006

Connecting with Communities

A recent series of anti-mining articles in the *New York Times* and other U.S. media illustrates the problem the minerals industry continues to have with wider community perceptions of its business. This should be a real concern to SEG as a learned society, as two-thirds of our members are employed within the mining industry.

Outside the United States, in other communities where mining is an important aspect of the economy, we are frequently portrayed as an industry which is dirty, distant, and dangerous. Until the recent boom in mineral commodity prices we were regularly cast as a sunset industry whose time was up.

It amazes me how these images, mostly the product of an earlier era, continue to haunt the modern mining industry. It shows how easy it is to get a bad reputation and how hard it is to turn things around.

Today, exploration and mining are high technology industries; there have been orders of magnitude improvement in safety performances over the past 10 years, and most miners got their environmental house in order years ago. In more remote locations the switch to fly-in/fly-out operations has removed some of the disincentives of distance. Mining will rarely be a big-city business, but as a career it by now should have improved its appeal to top talent.

It is easy for knowledgeable insiders to condemn the crusading nature of investigative journalism with its factual errors and emotive language and wonder at the motives of the authors. But in an age when the media is as much about entertainment as it is about reliable reporting, this stuff sells newspapers and in the process perpetuates the popular prejudices and negative stereotypes of mining.

Why, then, is there this continuing unfortunate public perception?

There are several reasons, but let me suggest three.

1. Miners and explorers have not always seen themselves as an integral part of wider society. It is easy for them to work in isolation in remote locations and have little daily contact with the wider community. They hold strong views on the economic value

they contribute to society but can have an otherwise shallow perception of mining's other social impacts. Remember the bumper stickers "Earth first—we'll mine the other planets later" or "If it can't be grown it must be mined"? That level of in-your-face intellectual hubris is what used to pass for community debate.

2. Communities nearer to mines perceive this disdain, too. They ask, not unreasonably, what benefits will flow to them after the neighborhood is mined out?

3. Indigenous communities, stirred up by anti-mining and anti-global non-governmental organizations, and now linked globally to the internet, have waged very effective media campaigns against miners large and small. The viewpoint of responsible miners can be lost in the clamor.

Since the Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development project first galvanized the world's leading mining companies in 2001, the notion of leaving something sustainable after mining is over has gathered widening support. Sustainable development is what communities are now demanding, and leading companies are seeing that engaging constructively with their community stakeholders is not only the right thing to do but also makes smart business sense, as well. This is probably the best opportunity for miners to win back their credibility with the wider community.

What Can SEG Members Do?

Developing improved community attitudes and awareness requires the commitment of all of us who make our living from earth science. We have a role to play and values and opinions to share with friends, neighbors, our children's schools, and elsewhere. If we avoid the public debate it is no wonder that public attitudes towards the minerals industry have become so unbalanced.

There are many good things being done by the professional bodies that speak for our industry. However, if we expect our communities to take more notice of the personal and corporate values which guide exploration and operational decision-making and why these are important for all of society, then we need to personalize the issues and stand up and speak about them ourselves. My sense is that most of us have personal values not that different from those of our strongest critics.

SEG itself can be more proactive in fostering debate and improving social and community awareness and understanding among all of our members. We should encourage senior managers in the minerals industry and our leading academics to be more visible socially and politically. And we should be more forthcoming on our website in advancing ethical behavior in the minerals industry and in recognizing the strong community connection to our profession.

There are other practical developments in the pipeline. For example, there will be a keynote address on sustainable development at the Society's "Wealth Creation" Conference at Keystone, Colorado, in May this year, as well as a workshop on the same topic. We need to become more aware of this critical aspect of our business.

Another very useful source of information on sustainable community development has just been published by the International Council of Mines and Metals (ICMM) in conjunction with the World Bank. A practical toolkit and handbook with a wealth of information, as well as the social and economic rationale for community development, can be downloaded from the ICMM website, www.icmm.com/library_pub_detail.php?rcd=183.

Finally, as an example of an article which does provide a better balance, take a look at Patrick Moore's report from the Ntotoroso mine development project in Ghana (*Rocky Mountain News*, February 4, 2006). Moore, one of the original founders of Greenpeace, concludes, "Since my entry into the global environmental movement in 1971—and especially in the last decade—mining has contributed to a more sustainable world economy, and key beneficiaries of this progress are mining workers, families and communities. How unfortunate the media is missing such an important part of the sustainability discussion".