



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Esquel community opposes to gold mining, Argentina, 2002-2006

*Time period notes: June 2006 is marked as the ending date for this campaign because that is when the 3-year moratorium on mining was passed. As of June 2009, the end of the moratorium, the Esquel residents have continued their work to prevent the gold mine.*

December

2002

to: June

2006

**Country:** Argentina

**Location City/State/Province:** Esquel

**Goals:**

To stop Meridian Gold from creating an open-pit gold mine less than 7 km outside of Esquel, Argentina

### Methods

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 048. Protest meetings
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 154. Severance of diplomatic relations

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 048. Protest meetings
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 154. Severance of diplomatic relations

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 026. Paint as protest

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 154. Severance of diplomatic relations

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 048. Protest meetings
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 154. Severance of diplomatic relations
- 170. Nonviolent invasion

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 048. Protest meetings
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 154. Severance of diplomatic relations

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 048. Protest meetings
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 154. Severance of diplomatic relations

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Defense

**Cluster:**

Economic Justice

Environment

**Group characterization:**

- Esquel residents

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

### Leaders:

Pablo Quintana, leader of the Asamblea de Vecinos Autoconvocados, or “Self-Organised Assembly of Esquel Residents”

### Partners:

Earthworks, a non-profit environmental advocacy organization based out of Washington, D.C., took on the campaign as one of their advocacy projects.

### External allies:

Greenpeace Argentina and the Mineral Policy Center funded the environmental impact study and report by Dr. Robert Moran.

Local politicians and judges

The Environment and Natural Resources Foundation (FARN), lead by Daniel Sabsay

### Involvement of social elites:

Guillermo Hughes, the top provincial mining official in Chubut, and his wife Joyce Owens, the provincial director of environmental protection, rejected Meridian’s environmental impact assessment (EIA).

Dr. Robert Moran of Greenpeace Argentina wrote a report in response to Meridian’s inadequate EIA.

Anonymous source of Meridian’s meeting recording, probably an employee of the Buenos Aires firm providing audio for the meeting

Gustavo Macayo acted as lawyer for himself and the other five Esquel residents in the 2005 case against Meridian.

Daniel Sabsay, constitutional lawyer and leader of the Environment and Natural Resources Foundation (FARN), acted as “amicus curiae” (friend of the court) in the case to stop the mining project, where he discussed Meridian’s neglect to fulfill the regulations for environmental impact studies and mechanisms for social participation.

Governor of Chubut Carlos Maestro supported the residents.

The Supreme Court of Argentina has decided to uphold the rights of provinces to locally regulate and restrict mining activities in response to the Esquel campaign.

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

### Groups in 1st Segment:

- Asamblea de Vecinos Autoconvocados
- External environmental nonprofit organizations
- Local politicians and judges

### Groups in 2nd Segment:

### Groups in 3rd Segment:

### Groups in 4th Segment:

- FARN

### Groups in 5th Segment:

- Provincial government

### Groups in 6th Segment:

- National government

**Segment Length:** *About 7 months*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### Opponents:

Minera El Desquite S.A. (MED), a subsidiary of Meridian Gold, a Canadian company based out of Reno, NV

### Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

### Campaigner violence:

Not Known

### Repressive Violence:

Not Known

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

### Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

### Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

### Notes on outcomes:

The goals were met in the short-term, but the moratorium on mining was set to end in June 2009, and the struggle is now continuing

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In 2002 the provincial government of Chubut granted a gold mining concession to Meridian Gold, a Canadian mining company based out of Reno, Nevada, for a large open-pit gold mine just 7 kilometers from Esquel, Argentina. The local population was strongly opposed to this, due to the environmental impact that the mine would have, and decided to protest the action.

The main environmental impact about which the people of Esquel were concerned was that of cyanide, a chemical used to leach gold from ore. 180 tons of cyanide would be used at the mine every month. The mine being 7 kilometers outside of Esquel, as well as uphill from it, meant that the town's water supply would become contaminated. Also, the cyanide would possibly contaminate the water supply for a national park only 32 kilometers away in which a very rare tree species had been preserved, along with the multitude of other natural wonders found in the Patagonian rain forest.

In addition, the growing nature-based tourism industry in Esquel would be irreversibly affected by the presence of the gold mine. Meridian Gold promoted their project by saying that it would bring more jobs to the region. Due to those job offers, Meridian would have been able to get special privileges and billion-dollar funding from the Argentine government by taking advantage of the Argentine National Network of Ecologist Action (RENACE). However, the residents believed that the loss that would be experienced over time environmentally as well as economically would far outweigh the gain from the additional jobs that would

be brought in, as the mine would only last 8-9 years, while investments in the tourism industry would be much more sustainable.

Meridian said that they would bring in 1,500 new jobs, guaranteed that any cyanide runoff would be directed away from Esquel and the national park, and that a new and safer method of using cyanide would be employed, but the townspeople and geologists were not convinced. They also argued that the mine would not have a large impact on Patagonia as a whole, to which many Esquel residents took offense.

In response to the threat of environmental and economic damage to their community, more than 3,000 of Esquel's 31,000 inhabitants formed the Asamblea de Vecinos Autoconvocados, or "Self-Organized Assembly of Esquel Residents," to oppose Meridian. The residents held marches on December 4

th

, 2002, January 4

th

, 2003, and they marched and invaded a town council meeting on February 6

th

, 2003. This convinced the council to schedule a "nonbinding referendum" on March 23

rd

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2003, at which point the community would vote on whether or not to allow the mine, and to pass 3 bylaws prohibiting the use, transport, and disposal of cyanide in the area.

By February 21

st

, 2003, a judge had ruled in Esquel's favor, ordering Meridian Gold to stop clearing the land outside of Esquel on which they planned to build the mine until the provincial environmental and mining officials had ruled on Meridian's environmental impact statement (EIA), which had been prepared by Meridian employees in October 2002. The provincial officials ruled that the EIA was insufficient due to its exclusive focus on immediate benefits and solutions, at which point Dr. Robert Moran from Greenpeace Argentina wrote an independent supplementary and very influential report on the long-term environmental, economic, and social consequences that Meridian's proposed mine would have on the community of Esquel.

On March 23

rd

, 2003, 75 percent of the city's population showed up to vote on the referendum, on which 81 percent voted "no" to allowing Meridian to continue with the project. The work was suspended, but Meridian refused to abandon the project. The original concession from the provincial government was not revoked, although the community of Esquel refused to honor it. Meridian continued maintaining its offices and storage space in Esquel, and took actions to demonstrate their determination to go through with the mining project.

In 2005, the "Self-Organized Assembly of Esquel Residents" held a press conference to release recordings, which they had allegedly obtained through illegal means, of a meeting between Meridian shareholders, members of the board, and consultants.

The confidential meeting, which had occurred in September of 2003, (six months after the referendum was held in March,) was a strategy meeting at which the present parties discussed ways of manipulating the residents' unfavorable opinions by hiring respected community members as "opinion leaders." Other strategies discussed included providing "social benefits" to the residents, as well as "going around" the community by communicating with national and provincial political leaders and non-governmental organizations, such as the Wildlife Foundation, instead of trying to win over the residents and their allies, such as Greenpeace Argentina.

Meridian sued the residents, targeting six leaders of the press conference, but their attempts to quiet the protesters failed and in fact had the opposite effect, as the trial made more people aware of the residents' struggle and brought more allies to the campaign, including the provincial governor of Chubut Carlos Maestro, who had been discussed during the recorded meeting as a target of strategic manipulation.

Governor Maestro enacted a three-year metal mining moratorium in the province of Chubut in May 2006, marking a victory for the residents of Esquel, if only temporary. The community now has widespread public support, however, including the Supreme Court of Argentina, who decided in June of 2008 to uphold the rights of provinces to locally regulate and restrict mining activities.

## Research Notes

### Influences:

Not Known

### Sources:

Esquel Argentina: Predictions and Promises of a Flawed Environmental Impact Assessment, Prepared by Dr. Robert Moran for Greenpeace Argentina and the Mineral Policy Center, March 2003

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Local Opponents of Mine Sued by Meridian Gold, by Marcela Valente, Inter Press Service News Agency, <http://ipsnews.net/print.asp?idnews=36592>, February 2007

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### Additional Notes:

The date of the referendum is inconsistently reported as March 23rd, 24th, or 29th, 2003.

### Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Hannah-Ruth Miller, 28/02/2010

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