

# Cultural Heritage and Environmental Protection Challenges: Case of Sakdrisi and Dakota Pipeline

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## Abstract

During the last several years Georgians and Native Americans, as autochthonous populations have encountered serious challenges in terms of the fight for their natural resources.

For example, in 2013, the government of Georgia deprived the site of a cultural monument status, which had been conferred on it in 2006, and gave permission to the mining company RMG Gold to extract gold in the wider area where Sakdrisi is located, sparking protests from academics and preservationists.

In 2016 similar challenge was faced by Native American community, particularly, the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota, thousands of Native Americans and activists brought the fight to the nation's capital to demand indigenous rights and raise awareness about issues affecting the communities. The Standing Rock protest against the Dakota Access pipeline became an international rallying cry for indigenous rights and climate change activism, drawing thousands of Native Americans to the rural area of North Dakota.

**Keywords:** Dakota Pipeline, Environmental protection, Georgians, Native Americans, Sakdrisi

## Introduction

The Sakdrisi Gold Mine had been one of the Georgia's most debatable issues since the Government approved private gold mining company RMG Gold to resume mining at the controversial site.

The Sakdrisi Gold Mine was discovered in the early 2000s and excavations began in 2006. It was initially given the status of cultural heritage site but this was revoked by the Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection in 2013.

On December, 2014 the Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection of Georgia and the National Agency of Cultural Heritage Protection approved RMG Gold's request to resume mining at the site. Some experts believed Sakdrisi Gold Mine was one of the oldest gold mines in the world, dating back almost 5,000 years.

Similar challenge was faced by Native Americans in 2016 when a once-small protest over a little-known pipeline in rural North Dakota captured the imaginations of people worldwide and erupted into a global protest action.

The fight against Dakota Access, a nearly 1,200-mile pipeline from the Bakken oil fields to Illinois, became this year's Keystone XL, a fossil fuel project rejected by the

Obama administration due to the opposition from environmentalists and landowners. However, in January of 2017, a newly elected President Trump signed an executive order and approved the Dakota Access pipeline, which would cross the Missouri river, the tribe's main source of drinking water and pass close to the tribal reservation (White, 2018).

## The Battle over the Dakota Access Pipeline

The debates concerning the Dakota Pipeline started in April of 2016 when the representatives of 200 Native American tribes and environmentalists had been camping out in North Dakota to protest against a pipeline. As they stated, the pipeline would run through a sacred burial ground and could pollute nearby rivers (Cullen & Reuters, 2016).

The controversial construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) gained national and international attention when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers accepted an application filled by a Texas based company - Energy Transfer Partners, which was behind this project.

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According to the representatives of Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, the Dakota Access Pipeline violated Article II of the Fort Laramie Treaty, which guarantees the “undisturbed use and occupation” of reservation lands surrounding the proposed location of the pipeline. In 2015 the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (operating as a sovereign nation) passed a resolution regarding the pipeline and discussed the risks that the Dakota pipeline would pose for the reservation and how it could destroy cultural resources (Cullen & Reuters, 2016).

To demonstrate their opposition to the pipeline, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe organized runs, horseback rides and marches. Many Native Nations, along with non-Native allies, celebrities and some politicians supported the movement and travelled to join protesters at the Sacred Stone Camp on the Standing Rock Reservation. Conditions at the camp became intense. North Dakota law enforcement officials and private guards hired by Energy Transfer Partners clashed with protesters, sometimes violently and made hundreds of arrests (Native Knowledge, 2018).

This pipeline dispute led Obama’s administration to tackle with this issue and during his tenure in office, his administration held seven meetings with tribal leaders and began drafting a report on how federal officials could consult with tribes; the administration planned to complete the report before Obama’s leave, despite the fact an incoming administration intended to reverse some of the president’s policies.

As for the policy of Trump’s administration towards the Native American Sioux tribe, it intended to complete the Dakota Access project, as well as the Keystone oil pipeline in order to spark a democratic ‘energy revolution’.

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### **Dispute over Sakdrisi Gold Mine**

Georgian people experienced similar challenge several years earlier on December of 2014 when an archaeological site in southern Georgia was destroyed by the Russian mining company RMG Gold.

According to the Professor Thomas Stöllner from the University of Bochum (Germany) who was conducting archeological research in Sakdrisi, ancient Sakdrisi site was belonged not only to Georgia but to the whole continent of Eurasia. It had been possessing the status of cultural monument for seven years, since Thomas Stöllner together with Georgian archeologists had discovered “Colchian Eldorado”. However, in 2013 due to the decision made by the Ministry of Culture of Georgia, status of Sakdrisi as a cultural monument was abolished.

In the summer and fall of 2013, the conflict over Sakdrisi made the news in Georgia; environmentalists became actively involved in this process. The activists started demon-

strations in Tbilisi and later hold in a protest camp at Sakdrisi.

However, the conflict remained unsolved. In spring of 2014, there was an increased pressure from environmentalists and from people abroad, and the campaign to save Sakdrisi became more intense. Georgian government created a commission, consisting of two foreign scientists – one mining archaeologist and one geologist – who concluded that there really was an important archaeological material there.

On December 12, 2014 explosions were heard from the site. The National Agency on Protection of Cultural Heritage issued a decree which permitted RMG Gold to resume work. In a statement, the company referred to the decree and stated that the decision was based on the fact that part of the site was fully researched by archaeologists and the rest of the area wasn’t possible to research due to the threat of collapse. Furthermore, according to the representatives of RMG Gold, international scientists had concluded that there was not likely to be found any more artifacts there.

The destruction, caused an outrage in Georgia, and even Patriarch Ilia II scolded the government for having allowed it to happen. The issue was also brought up in parliament, where a majority voted for an inquest into what happened (Staff, 2015).

### **Dispute over Mestiachala Hydro Power Plant Construction**

Sakdrisi is not the only cultural and environmental challenge faced by the Georgian society. From March 2018, local population from the town of upper Svaneti - Mestia, started protests against the construction of Mestiachala Hydro Power Plant (HPP), claiming that it would destroy unique nature and historical heritage of Svaneti.

The protesters blocked the construction area and did not allow heavy equipment to pass and continue the construction works. The situation became tense when the local police and the special force unit arrived at the site and asked the protesters to leave. However, Svan people refused to depart.

Later on, representatives from the Interior Minister of Georgia arrived in Mestia to negotiate with the protesters, however, the sides could not reach any agreement, as the authorities were not going to suspend the construction of the HPP. Svaneti residents had been protesting against the construction of HPPs for several months.

In early March, 17 communities of Svaneti released a joint statement, and condemned any dams in the region, “we categorically and eventually prohibit the construction of HPPs in the region of Svaneti, also gold production and other harmful and destructive works that damage intangible cultural heritage of Svaneti! From now on, dams will not be built in Svaneti, including Khudoni HPP, Nenskra HPP, Mestiachala HPP and other 50 HPPs planned in upper Svaneti” (Mariamidze, 2018, p. 1).

According to the Ministry of Energy, Austrian company RP Global, was building a dam on the Mestiachala river through a specially created company Svaneti Hydro. The ministry stated that it would be a 30-megawatt hydro power plant that generates more than 100 million kWh of power annually. According to the representative of the company Svaneti Hydro, the HPP is environment-friendly and very safe HPP, which uses only the energy of the river (Mariamidze, 2018).

Currently, as it is known, the residents of Mestia plan to launch a dispute against the construction of Mestia-Chala HPP. Afterwards, the final decision will be made regarding the construction of HPP.

## Conclusion

Taking into consideration all above-mentioned issues, it is clear that, due to specific private or public economic interests, the unique cultural heritage of populations and the living environment are endangered.

Accordingly, this is an issue that requires an important attention and a carefully planned problem-solving agenda to avoid the destruction of our cultural heritage and environment.

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