

Ethical Crystal Jewellery: Because All Crystals are Mined.

If you're not sure what exactly most crystals are used for, we're in the same boat. But we've probably bought a piece or two before, invested in their general, happy promises to protect and heal. In this safe space, we're disconnected from the origin of many-a-crystal: that there's a fast crystal industry which exploits workers, under slave labour and widespread environmental damage, within low-income communities. *Hmm...things took a sharp turn downhill-* let's wind it back a bit and examine how crystals are mined.

Many store-bought crystals are the by-product of ore mining. In this process, the earth is drilled and doused in water to excavate minerals common to daily life (MIT 2016). The large-scale production may also indirectly uncover gems. Mining at this scale can greatly damage nature. So, the often multinational companies that operate at this level are tightly regulated (MIT 2016).

However, smaller operations, which you may see referred to as "specimen" mines, do not generally experience the same regulatory pressure. I've found many gemstone retailers referencing specimen mines as artisanal, suggesting the mines as more carefully excavated than in reality:

Largely unregulated mines in low-income countries, with a devastating impact on both the environment and its people (Wiseman 2019).

And, of course, where survival is key, specimen mines target both niche and popular gems.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is rife in cobalt and copper mines, two of the most globally employed minerals (Kara 2018). *Did you Know? Cobalt is used in all rechargeable lithium batteries.* Trendy minerals, think: Smoky quartz, think Citrine, are usually produced as a by-product of these mines (Kara 2018). But such "specimen" mines, often controlled at a national level, are usually not subject to the same regulations as multinationals (Wiseman 2019).

Unsurprisingly then, the mines ravage human rights and pollute the environment at large. Lacking adequate infrastructure, they leak industrial run-off, leading to unsustainable earth, soil and water damage (MIT 2019). And, local communities, who traditionally draw on their natural environment for livelihood, are also deeply affected (Wiseman 2019).

Miners, due to the infrastructure of poorly (read: cheaply) constructed mines, frequently endure collapsed shafts (Kara 2018). These collapses routinely result in gross injury or death, including of the young children frequently employed by site supervisors (Kara 2018). Indeed, the DRC employs many children, as young as six, for their ability to navigate small spaces otherwise inaccessible (Kara 2018).

It's impossible to know for certain, but it's estimated that around 40,000 human beings under the age of eighteen work in the mines (Kara 2018).

Essentially, gems traced to poorly managed mines, often born from the desperation of poverty, carry auras of extreme devastation.

But that's not to say your downtown crystal shop owner is corrupt. In fact, I, like many, find crystal shop owners full of good intentions, but like most of us, susceptible. Expanding, if crystal ethics is faint in the collective consciousness, it's likely to be glossed over with sparkling imagery.

All this to say, not every source mine abuses employees and Mother Nature. But! Where people can be easily exploited for profit, they don't stand a chance. Questions of profit usually amount to who's making moolah? The answer is not normally small businesses. Where natural resources drive national profit, gemstones can be weaponised at a federal level. Indeed, profit turned from the world's largest jade mines, in Myanmar, fund an ongoing, six-decade civil conflict (Taylor 2019).

However, Myanmar's jade miners remain crushed by poverty and poor working conditions, which is further exacerbated by the region's monsoon season (Taylor 2019). Monsoons, ripping through the area, are attributed to floods and landslides, which can collapse mine sites and localised lodgings (Taylor 2019). This is how innumerable, and often unaccounted for, miners perish (Taylor 2019). Harsh conditions also lead to rampant heroin use and addiction, caving local communities (Taylor 2019). And yet, warmongers benefit.

Side eye: Interesting that Naomi Campbell, who refused to co-operate in a blood diamond case, relishes in healing Goop crystals (Wiseman 2019). If the state of crystal trade sounds like an utter mess, it is. But we can choose to support ethical crystal mining. This will stop business at unscrupulous mines (Ivy & Light 2018).

In these dark waters, it's important to establish the conditions of the mine that your crystals were sourced from. Yep, the only way to buy ethically is to purchase crystals through crystal dealers who buy directly on-site. Unless a crystal peddler knows the mine's conditions, they can't claim their crystals as the highest ethical standard (Ivy & Light 2018).

And before you accept moral ambiguity under capitalism's guise, some human behaviour cannot simply be relegated to the grey. There are fundamental human rights, not to be ignored. Yet, slavery and severe environmental damage persist. "Ethical crystal jewellery" is advertised with poor consideration of the crystal supply chain, especially within low-income countries producing the lion's market share.

Please, consider your options. Don't blindly accept the abuse and deaths from large-scale exploitation of third-world mines. Establishing alternatives simply requires a bit more digging, so to speak, on the part of the vendor.

If business owners can establish ethical practices across the mines and associated supply chains they exploit, happy days. (Ivy & Light 2018). Relatedly, as a consumer, you may want to buy from countries with regulated transport systems, from mine to pocket. *If you're Australian, like me, that's one more reason to buy from our local multitude of precious-gem mines. Also, crystals from abroad increase transportation exhaust and associated climate change.*

At best, I hope that this article introduces the concept of bad juju to spiritual businesses. No, seriously. Not a bad joke. New Age proposes the way forward as "good vibes only", assuming an alternate path lacks righteous energy. But there's a whole lot of sh- in this world.

I personally believe in the power of crystals, but, for all their strengths, they necessitate supply chain transparency.

To this end, entrepreneurs must explain, using key accountabilities, how they've verified that their preferred mines are ethical. They should, at the very least, outline an environmental impact statement and employment conditions relevant to their source mines. ***Simple ethics in the cloud of New Age.***

References

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