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REPORT NAMES MOST TOXIC PLACES ON THE PLANET

By *Sasha Chavkin* | November 5, 2013, 10:15 am

A new report released yesterday by the nonprofit Blacksmith Institute shines a spotlight on ten of [the most toxic places in the world](#), highlighting environmental hazards from Indonesia to Russia to Nigeria. The report found that the greatest threats to human health are increasingly coming from thousands of impoverished workers conducting small-scale production in dangerous conditions, rather than massive volumes of waste from single companies or factories.

The majority of the new entries to this dubious top ten – which was updated from a similar list issued by the Blacksmith Institute in 2007 – are large river basins and artisanal production sites where tens of thousands live and work in proximity to toxic chemicals.

In Kalimantan, Indonesia, some 43,000 artisanal gold miners scratch out a living by burning mercury to extract gold concentrate from earth, exposing themselves and their communities to poisonous mercury vapors. Along the Matanza-Riachuelo River Basin in Buenos Aires, Argentina, about 15,000 small-scale industrial sites dump chromium, lead and copper into the river, placing most of the roughly 20,000 people who live near its banks in danger. A cluster of more than 200 tanneries in Hazaribagh, Bangladesh, releases more than 22,000 cubic liters of chemicals each day into the Buriganga River, which is a crucial source of water for the megacity of Dhaka.

Bret Ericson, the program director for Blacksmith's Global Toxic Sites Identification Program, said the newest additions to the list of leading toxic threats reflect changing patterns of global production.

"It's not from the major industrial global players, it's from the mom-and-pop shops that provide the raw materials that we use," Ericson said, noting that demand from the West still fuels many of the dirtiest industries. "Our consumption pattern also drives the pollution problem in other parts of the world."

Other sites where clusters of small-scale production provided large-scale health risks to the population include the Citarum River Basin in Indonesia, which provides 80 percent of the water supply for the city of Jakarta, and Agbobloshie, a massive eWaste dump scavenged by large numbers of recyclers in Accra, Ghana.

The key criteria for the sites included on the list were the severity of the health risk they posed, the level of toxic contamination, and the degree to which they were prototypical of broader global threats. While the standards were not scientific, Blacksmith staff members said that the selections reflected wider sampling and an improved understanding of toxic health hazards than the 2007 list.

The [Blacksmith Institute](#) is an international non-profit group that works with governments, NGOs and multilateral organizations such as the United Nations to assess and remediate pollution in low and middle income countries. Its [funders](#) include foundations, development banks and major corporations. As of now, Blacksmith has conducted risk assessments at more than 2,000 contaminated sites in 49 different countries.

In addition to the new sites on the list, there are four holdovers from the 2007 compilation. Three of these are in the former Soviet Union, and reflect the consequence of large-scale industrial pollution that has yet to be remedied.

The city of Dzerzhinsk, Russia, is a longtime center of chemical manufacturing, including the production of chemical weapons. Norilsk, also in Russia and located north of the Arctic Circle, was for the decades the site of the world's largest heavy metal smelting complex. In both cities, life expectancy for workers is more than ten years below the Russian average.

The final site in the former Soviet Union is Chernobyl, Ukraine, where the lingering contamination from the infamous nuclear meltdown continues to place large populations at risk.



Photo: [Shutterstock](#).

Ericson said these sites remained on the list because of the ongoing public health risk they presented, as a result of both the scale of the initial contamination and a lack of progress in reducing the threat to the population.

“If there’s been an inadequate effort at sites, then they will remain on the site,” Ericson said.

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By *Sasha Chavkin*



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