The Menominee River, named after the Menominee Tribe, is the largest river system in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. Approximately 120 miles long, the Menominee River watershed encompasses 4,000 square miles and drains into Lake Michigan’s Green Bay. A vital resource that supplies drinking water to communities in Marinette, Wisconsin, and Menominee, Michigan — which have a combined population 24,000 — the freshwater of the Menominee River is significant to ecosystems in the wetlands and rare landscapes of Shakey Lakes Savanna, the most intact, diverse area of pine and oak barren in Northern Michigan.

The Menominee River and the history of the Menominee People are deeply entwined: The Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin’s creation story takes place at the mouth of the river. Winding through sacred tribal lands, the river is especially meaningful to the Indigenous People, who connect 10,000 years of history, culture and heritage with this region. Today, the Menominee Tribe plays an active role in stewardship of the river and management of the land around it.

Regarded by anglers as a world-class smallmouth bass fishery, the Menominee River provides habitat to a variety of fish — including walleye, pike, trout and half of the remaining population of lake sturgeon. In addition to fishing, the Menominee supports a seasonal tourism industry offering a host of recreation opportunities, including paddling, hiking and wildlife watching. In 2018, tourism in Marinette County, Wisconsin, generated $159 million in support of local economies.

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A Canadian mining exploration company, Aquila Resources, Inc., seeks permits for a metallic sulfide mine on the banks of the Menominee River, near Stephenson, Michigan. Known as the Back Forty Project, the footprint of the mine and tailings dam encompasses 1,087 acres — or 1,435 football fields. With no prior mining experience, Aquila plans to dig a 750-foot deep pit (the equivalent of a 57-story skyscraper) only 150 feet from the river’s edge.
Mining poly-metallic sulfide ore is inherently risky when located near a water source. The proposed mining process uses toxic chemicals, such as cyanide. When crushed sulfide interacts with oxygen and water, they create sulfuric acid — the same caustic substance in car batteries. Sulfuric acid leaches out toxic heavy metals, including copper, cadmium, arsenic, lead and mercury, into waterways. This is known as acid mine drainage. If this pollution seeped into surface and groundwater, the Menominee River and ultimately Lake Michigan would also become contaminated. Even at slightly elevated levels, these contaminants can lead to cancer, failure of the respiratory system, nervous system, brain, heart, lungs, liver and kidneys. Due to project risks, many insurance companies no longer offer the liability policy required to cover any damages related to toxic leftovers. Currently, it is unclear if Michigan’s Environment, Great Lakes and Energy has defined an alternative contingency plan.

The Back Forty Project would require large amounts of highly reactive and toxic leftovers, or tailings, to be stored behind a dam. Aquila plans to use risky upstream dam construction — the same method now banned in Brazil due to the 2019 dam collapse that killed over 270 people and flooded the countryside with toxic waste. Due to excessive rain, snow-melt and runoff made more variable by climate change, previous hydrological tests used to predict performance of a tailings dam are irrelevant, as they do not reflect current changes in hydrology. Cumulative impacts as a result of this level of environmental degradation would be felt for generations to come. Even without a catastrophe, the project threatens to disrupt the land and desecrate ancient agricultural and ceremonial sites of the Menominee Tribe.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

The Coalition to SAVE the Menominee River, Inc. and the Menominee Tribe, along with communities in Wisconsin and Michigan, are fighting Aquila for the right to a clean river. The threat compelled eight counties in the region to pass resolutions against the company’s proposed Back Forty mine.

After withdrawing its insufficient application in December 2019 for the last remaining dam safety permit, Aquila will have to reapply for the permit. It is critical that the content of the mining application plan is consistent with the requirements of the Clean Water Act, including the protection of the Menominee Tribe’s interests. A new application will require a public hearing and comment period, providing an opportunity for the public to speak on behalf of the Menominee River. Michigan’s Environment, Great Lakes and Energy agency must deny the dam safety permit for the Back Forty Project. Furthermore, Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers and Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer must oppose this harmful project, which poses unacceptable risk to downstream communities.