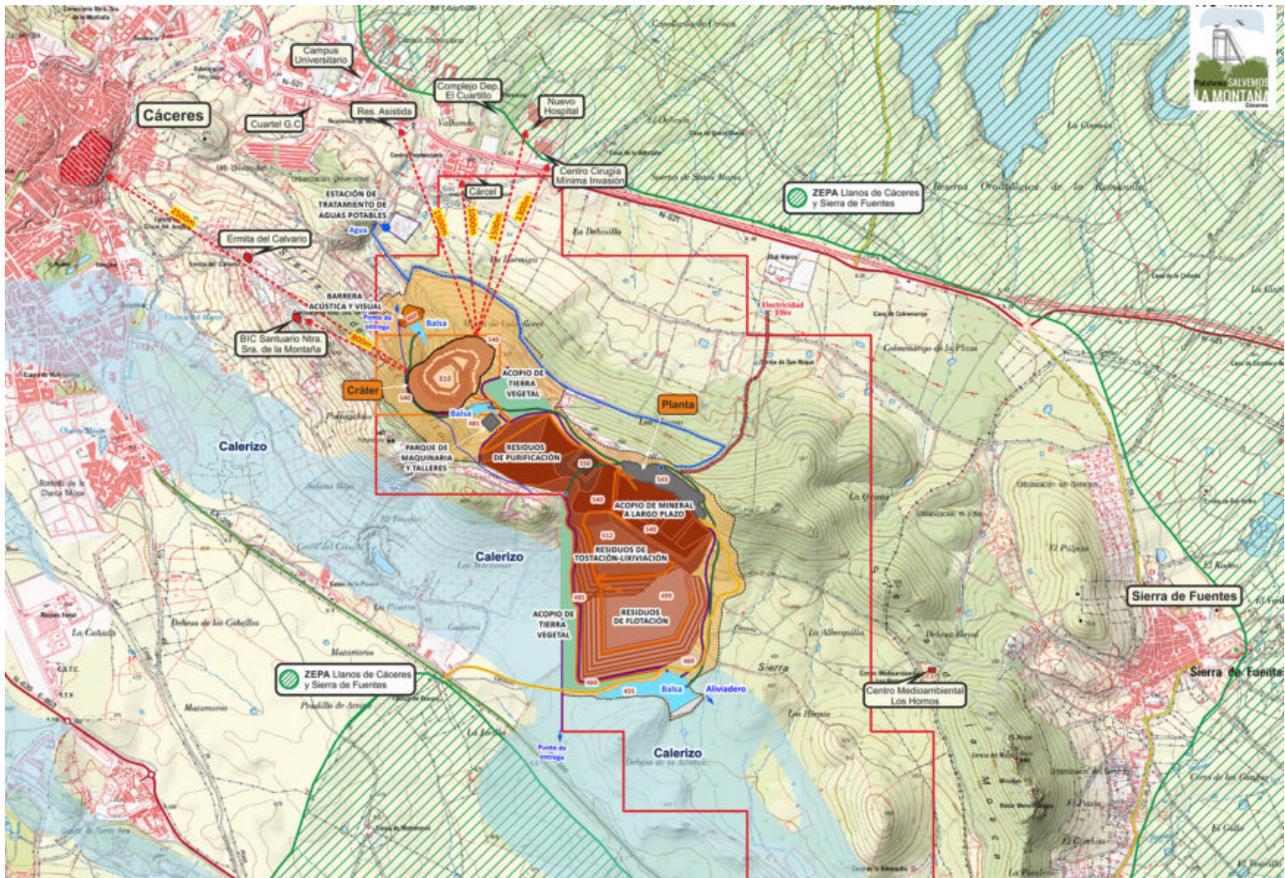


Lithium threatens the heritage of Cáceres

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Plunder or opportunity. Colonialism or development. Looting or investment. This is how different protagonists see, like the different sides of a Rubik's cube, the open pit mine that aims to extract lithium in the vicinity of Cáceres, a city that was declared world heritage. Behind the initiative to exploit the Valdeflores (or Valdeflorez) deposit, located in the Sierra de la Mosca, is the company Tecnología Extremeña del Litio, owned to 75% by the Australian company Infinity Lithium and to 25% by Valoriza Minería, a subsidiary of the Spanish group Sacyr.

The Valdeflores story not only has different faces and colours but, as in any Rubik's cube, poses the complex task of relocating the shades as the only way to solve the problem. The area had already been exploited during the 1970s, mainly for tin mining, but it was gradually forgotten and in the following decade the activity ceased. Mining interest began to awaken in Spain after the 2008 crisis and in Valdeflores lithium mining, in particular, has been going through the period of obtaining necessary permits for the last five years. A process that has accelerated during recent weeks.

One of the colours that must first be aligned in order to understand the Rubik's cube of Valdeflores is that Cáceres was recognised as a world heritage site in 1986. The planned extraction area is located at less than three kilometres from the historic centre of the

municipality. To the new hospital, the university campus or the sports complex, this distance is halved, as can be seen on any map. Could Cáceres stand to lose its World Heritage status with the implementation of the mining project?

The company denies that there would be any “objective reason” for this and, at least for the moment, the possibility is not officially included in a list offered by Unesco of 53 properties that are at risk of losing their status. But the truth is that the UN authority has indeed expressed concern. In July of last year it sent a letter to the town council, inquiring about possible consequences of the mine on the municipality. “Unesco considered that these values could be at risk. An institution like this does not get in touch if it is not concerned, and when it is concerned it has reason to be. I am not saying that one thing leads to the other, cause-effect, but it is clear that this project has raised their concern”, warns the town planning and heritage councillor of the Cáceres Town Council, José Ramón Bello (PSOE).



Protests against the mine (Cáceres) / **Salvemos la Montaña**

An archaeologist by profession, Bello opposes “this mine because of its location. But neither the party nor we are against mining. We are not against development. But compliance with the law is fundamental”. According to the Geological Mining Information System of Extremadura (Sigeo), in the area around the city of Cáceres alone, the Junta is currently processing mining permits for more than 9,000 hectares (almost 13,000

football fields): around 1400 hectares are in Valdeflores and Ampliación Valdeflores. The same colonialist model is being used that was implemented in South America and Africa”, denounces the municipal spokesperson for Unidas Podemos, Consuelo López.

“The mines or resources are where they are, nature puts them there and, in terms of productive potential, this location is important. Within mining there is a term called world class, and Valdeflores would be a deposit of this type,” says Roberto Martínez, head of mineral resources at the Spanish Geological and Mining Institute (IGME), who admits that “it is very strange that a new mine should be opened in an urban environment, especially in a large municipality like Cáceres”

An imposition of macro-politics?

Although this project has been on the table for around five years, given the current political, energy and economic context it has claimed its place in recent months. Another of the shades of the Rubik’s cube that the Valdeflores open-pit mine represents is the European Union’s (EU) current commitment to lithium as part of its route away from fossil fuels. According to Peter Handley, a senior European Commission official, lithium is a “strategic raw material” and the EU has a special interest in extracting it from European deposits, so as not to be dependent on external countries when it comes, for example, to manufacturing batteries for electronic devices and electric vehicles.

This European gamble could be the subject of another article, but it can be summed up in the great Green Pact presented at the end of 2019 by Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the Commission. To this end, a “transition fund” of up to 100 billion euros was created, and along the way the EBA (European Battery Alliance), the ERMA (European Raw Materials Alliance), the EIT (European Institute of Innovation & Technology) and a whole jumble of acronyms supported by a flood of millions of euros have been set up. Money that initiatives such as Battchain, born at the beginning of this year, aspire to. This consortium aims to boost the automotive battery business in Spain and has been described as “a project of great driving force” by the Minister of Industry, Reyes Maroto, in reference to the fact that it will provide an important boost to the Spanish economy.

Battchain is specifically conceived as a huge assembly line within the state, in which Cáceres occupies the first place, that of lithium extraction and refining. Last February, Valdeflores announced its participation via Extremadura Mining, a company owned by Infinity Lithium. “It is beginning to be said that the plundered Extremadura is going to be plundered again and become a lithium exploitation site. We are going to keep the bad stuff and the rest is going to go out. We are returning to the concept of the national caciquismo that comes to take everything they can from Extremadura and to plunder it”, laments Santi Márquez, founder and one of the current spokespersons of the platform Salvemos la Montaña de Cáceres.

The project is designed for 30 years, “the maximum allowed by law”, says the IGME researcher. The most current calculations made by Tecnología Extremeña del Litio, as he tells us, promise 218 direct jobs once operations begin, in addition to a further 855 indirect jobs. “These figures are not real because, as happens in this type of mine, they

include highly qualified workers who would come from outside. Moreover, the figures for the mines that currently exist in Spain are much lower”, denounces the spokesperson for Unidas Podemos, who stresses that, “even if employment were higher, it is not a future of the city or a model of economic development that we want. Cáceres has other values”.

The Junta de Extremadura, at the request of this media, has confirmed its alignment with the policies promoted by the EU, and explains that “this can be considered an opportunity for Spain to be Europe’s supplier of this mineral and for territories such as Extremadura to consolidate themselves as industrial production points linked to the extraction of lithium itself”.

Revolving doors in Extremaduran politics?

With such a clear European roadmap, embraced at both state and regional level, and with so much money at stake, it is worth asking about the margin of decision of the citizens of Cáceres when it comes to choosing their future and their model for the city.

The General Municipal Plan (PGM) of Cáceres is the door, currently still closed, for the mine to become a reality. But “they change the regulations and what cannot be possible now could be possible in the future”, Márquez predicts. In the recent memory of the people of Extremadura, Marina Isla de Valdecañas is present, a luxury development built in 2007 in a Special Protection Area for Birds (ZEPA). There was no permit on that occasion either, but it went ahead regardless because the regional government declared it an asset of regional interest and reclassified the land. It was later declared illegal by the courts, which nonetheless ruled to respect what had been built and demolish only what was half built.

In April 2018, the Cáceres municipal plenary voted on the possibility of changing the PGM: 21 councillors (PSOE, PP and CáceresTú) voted against, compared to the four Ciudadanos councillors who were in favour. Among the latter was Cayetano Polo, who in September last year left C’s, the party of which he was regional leader, with which he was a candidate for the regional government in 2019 and of which he was a deputy in the Extremadura Assembly, to, less than two months later, join the ranks of Ininity Lithium as head of institutional relations. Coincidence? What influence does the company have on those who represent the citizens of Cáceres? When contacted by CTXT, Polo preferred to remain silent. Bello, the town planning councillor of Cáceres, has spoken out on the matter: “Star signings or not, I put my hand in the fire for all the people and for the integrity of my fellow councillors, both of my own colour and of others. I am not aware of any pressure. We talk about this a lot, always with a specific arbiter, which is the law”.

On Thursday 18 February, the municipal plenary once again voted on the mine. In this case, the question was more direct: yes or no to Valdeflores. The situation was repeated again, with nuances: the majority of the corporation (PSOE, PP, Unidas Podemos and three non-attached councillors) rejected the project; the only dissenting voice was once again that of C’s, now with three councillors... of whom only two voted because the third, Antonio Bohigas, was disconnected before the debate (it was online), “for personal reasons”, as he later declared to El Periódico de Extremadura.

“How many times are we going to have to vote, or are we waiting for a new representation so that the result will be different? We don’t know. I think they are stalling for time”, reflects the spokesperson for Unidas Podemos. The PSOE councillor understands, however, that “the fact of debating this again at a time when there seems to be a media offensive to push the project forward is legitimate. I think it is a good thing to update our opinion”.

In the last few weeks, the news about the open pit mine project has been revived in the regional media. Among other things, because the Junta has granted a permit to study the minerals. Again, there are different colours in the Rubik’s cube of administrative procedures.

Can the mine be approved through the ‘Valdecañas route’?

There are two applications on the table for research, not exploitation, following the usual procedure for this type of mine. Both were approved (2017) and subsequently annulled (2019), following appeals. With about 60 hectares, Valdeflores is the most important because it is the one that affects the area where excavation is wanted. The Junta de Extremadura confirms to this newspaper that its processing is “very advanced. The hearing of interested parties has been completed and the allegations presented are being analysed. In the event that there is opposition to the granting of the permit, a legal report will be sought and finally the proposal and the corresponding resolution will be issued”.

The second application is that of Ampliación Valdeflores, 1,329 hectares covering the area where the mineral processing plant is supposed to be built. The controversy has been reignited since this was again granted by the Junta at the end of 2020, an approval that the associations that forced the previous refusals have announced they will appeal against again. The concession this time has come with limitations to 854 hectares of the requested area, in which only “works that do not require the application of mining techniques” are permitted. An unfavourable report by the Cáceres Town Council led to this conditioning, under the argument that it violated local regulations, specifically the General Municipal Plan (PGM), which expressly prohibits extractive activity on land that cannot be developed because it contains protected forest mountain areas.

If Tecnología Extremeña del Litio obtains the permit now still being processed, Valdeflores says it will present the project for exploitation as well as the environmental impact statement: “We would be ready to start building a year after the definitive permits”. But as long as the General Municipal Plan prevents the exploitation of the Sierra de la Mosca, the mine seems condemned to failure.



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Modifying a PGM, according to sources consulted by CTXT, is in any case not simple, as it does not depend only on political majorities within the municipal corporation. They explain that it is a structural modification that would take several years, and also involving the participation of different affected institutions, which would have to issue favourable reports. The most important of these is the environmental impact assessment.

Can a situation like that of Valdecañas happen again? The urban planning regulations on municipal land have been modified since then: in 2018 Extremadura passed the Law on Sustainable Land and Urban Planning (LOTUS) and now declaring a Project of Regional Interest (PIR) is not so simple. It would require demonstrating that the initiative has a social character and also that the promoter of the works is an administration. The same sources consider the former to be very difficult in the case of a mine (although the argument of employment and development could always be used) and the latter practically unthinkable.

The 'Valdecañas route' having been ruled out a priori, they warn, however, that, as difficult as it may be to modify the PGM, it is possible, including a favourable environmental impact statement: "One of the arguments will be that the area no longer has the natural values that led to its protection because there are many detached houses, much anthropization of the territory, so the values that had to be preserved have already been lost".

The environmental impact is, in fact, one of the arguments that the platform Salvemos la Montaña de Cáceres uses to explain its opposition to the open pit lithium mine. Among other things, they talk about the "irreversible destruction of our mountain" and the

impact on groundwater. The company responds that they will use “recycled water” and that seepage into the aquifer is “geologically impossible”.

This is how the Rubik’s cube of the Valdeflores open pit lithium mine is taking shape. There are still several colours to relocate and, for now, each protagonist analyses them in their own way: public health, the environment and the possibility of sustainable mining, the “social acceptance” demanded by the European Commission itself for the mine to go ahead. From the platform Salvemos la Montaña de Cáceres, Márquez launches a final message: “I don’t know how far this could go if the plans go ahead. The Junta could run into a big problem. If the machines go in, I am sure that Cáceres will mobilise and will not allow it. Remember Gamonal? It is the feeling that is being created now. We are going to encourage people to continue the struggle so that we don’t give in to pessimism and so that people don’t settle for the idea that nothing can be done”.

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(<https://ctxt.es/es/20210301/Politica/35167/litio-caceres-mina-unesco-valdeflores-j-marcos-angeles-fernandez.htm>).

Update: On April 8, the Junta de Extremadura denied the research permit for Valdeflores, arguing that the municipal urban development plan does not allow for drilling to be carried out on the land. Some days later Infinity Lithium applied to be made inactive on the ASX stock market, effectively freezing its shares on the Australian Stock Exchange (at least temporarily). The company does not openly admit that the Junta’s decision is the official cause for this, but the fact remains that Infinity has not been traded again since then. Infinity Lithium’s official explanation is that the suspension from the Stock Exchange is due to a series of changes in the ownership of the Australian company. It’s important to bear in mind, as indicated in the article, the authorisation that has been denied is key for the future of the Cáceres mine, since the Valdeflores application is the one that affects the area (about 60 hectares) where it wants to excavate, so Infinity Lithium is obliged to rethink its entire strategy. At the moment, everything is up in the air and the company has not been listed on the stock exchange for more than a month, so its shares have suffered.

About the authors

Precarity. Philosophy. Journalism. A *freelance* poser of questions from these vital horizons, **J. Marcos** is author of several books and has published articles and photographs from over twenty countries, which at times receive recognition in the form of awards. www.desplazados.org Themes: #victims #water #humanrights #energy #memory #de-growth #peripheries

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Tags: critical raw materials, Lithium, Mining Industry, Spain