

The Pacific small island state of Solomon Islands gained independence from Britain in 1978. Solomon Islands has a population of around 400 000 mainly Melanesian people distributed across six moderately sized islands and hundreds of smaller islands. The traditional economy has been based on hunter-gatherer and small-scale farming activities, with the bulk of the population residing in self-sufficient rainforest and coastal villages. Melanesians have a particularly strong cultural attachment to land, which is considered to be within the custodianship of the community at large. Individual land ownership in the Western economic sense is largely unknown. Melanesian society and culture is strong and complex. Colonial and post-independence Solomon Islands has had to face the challenges of a transition from a traditional society to a partially urbanized society and a rapidly increasing population and changing economic drivers and dynamics. Mining and mineral development is one area of economic activity that holds the promise of generating hard currency quickly to develop the country, but that needs to be achieved in a sustainable manner. Gold Ridge is situated in Central Guadalcanal, some 22 km southeast of the country's capital town, Honiara. Gold Ridge hosts around 1.4 million ounces of epithermal volcanic-hosted gold. Ross Mining NL began the construction of Solomon Islands' first gold mine in 1997 and operated a highly successful gold mine between 1997 and 2000, when ethnic tensions (unrelated to the mine) closed the operations. This paper documents the painstaking negotiations and planning that took place from 1993 and particularly from 1995 – 1996 which paved the way forward for the development of a gold mine within a fragile tropical rainforest environment among traditional Melanesian people who had little prior knowledge of modern mining activities.