

Polluted paradise: Chile town waits for cleanup as coal shuts off

February 12 2024, by Sandra FERRER



Mejillones is among the country's five so-called "sacrifice zones" where residents live engulfed in pollution emitted by chemical industries and coal-fired plants, poisoned by toxic waste, noxious air particles, and dirty water.

With its emerald green waters and white sands, the small town of Mejillones in northern Chile looks deceptively like a typical seaside resort.

However, in the distance, coal-fired plants and factories bellow noxious fumes into the air, a grim reminder that the town in the Atacama Desert is among the country's five so-called "sacrifice zones," where residents live engulfed in pollution.

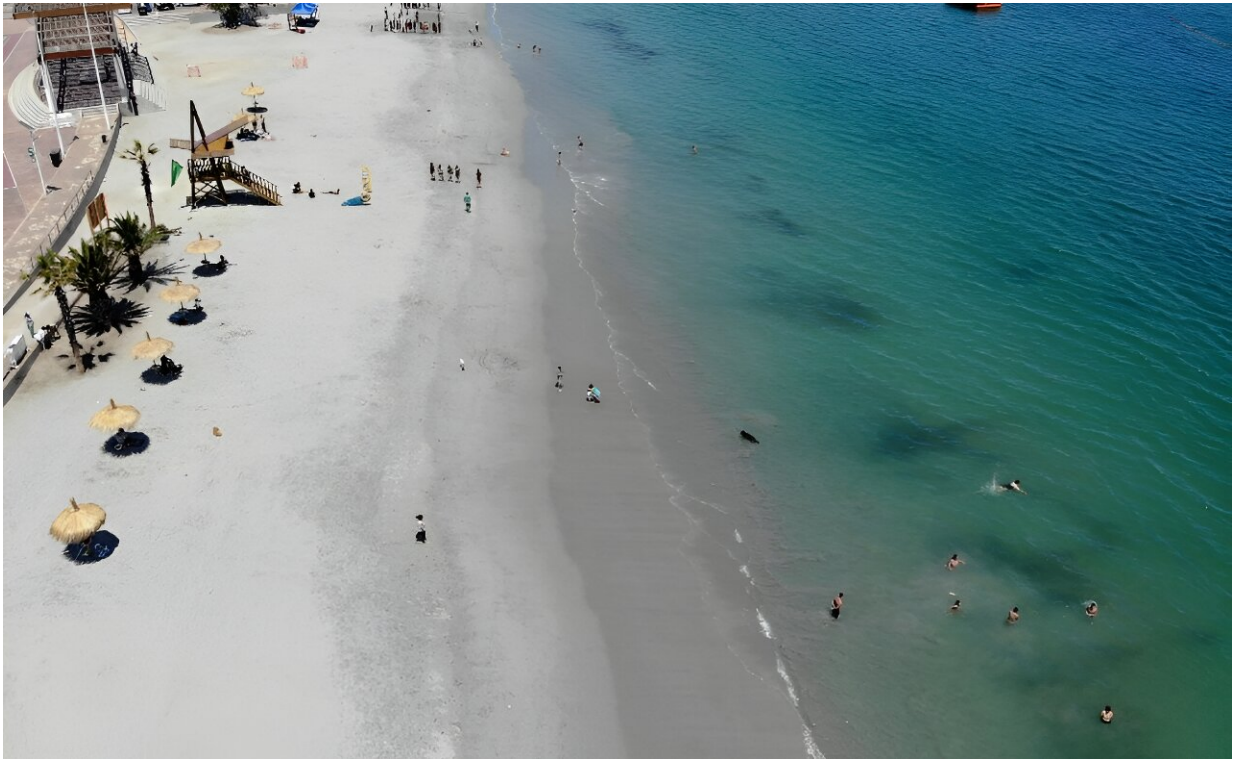
Chile has embarked on a whirlwind energy transition and vowed to shutter 28 coal-fired power plant units by 2040, nine of which have already been closed.

"The impact of electricity production from coal is considerable in terms of the climate crisis, but also the impact it has on sacrifice zones," said Estefania Gonzalez from Greenpeace's office covering Argentina, Chile, and Colombia.

Residents must not "be left without any protection because a company arrives, exploits a certain territory, and then leaves," she said, urging a fair energy transition which allows for damaged regions to be "repaired."

Mejillones is expected to start winding down the first of its eight coal-fired units later this year.

Convincing energy companies to repair the damage they have done to the environment once they leave will be no easy task.



A few summer visitors lounge under straw parasols at the beach, or take a dip into its cold waters.

Chile's Energy Minister Diego Pardow told journalists recently that older coal units "are not legally bound to take into account environmental considerations."

"That is part of the challenge we need to overcome today. It is not merely about turning off a switch, but taking care of everything that entails."

'Everyone has cancer'

On the pier of the fishing port in the town of 13,000 residents, in the

heart of the Atacama Desert, Jose Gonzalez, 58, says he is suffering from stage 4 [kidney cancer](#), and is on [sick leave](#) from his job as a port agent.

"The pollution is immense," he said, pointing out the string of companies linked to the [chemical industry](#) and [coal plants](#) that dot the vast Pacific bay and which he believes are behind his illness. "Everyone suffers from cancer."

However, it is not easy to link diseases such as cancer to the polluting industries where they live.



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"Years can pass before one realizes" there is a link, said Michel Marin, a surgeon and president of the Antofagasta Medical College.

A 2019 study financed by the northern Antofagasta region, showed the presence of heavy metals and organic materials in the bay from the discharge of industrial waste and wastewater.

A few summer visitors lounge under straw parasols at the beach or take a dip into its cold waters. Seals romp nearby at a fisherman's cove, and the wider peninsula is a feeding ground for blue and fin whales.

Despite the beauty of the ocean, Jose Sanchez, secretary of a fisherman's union, said "the bay is dead."

"The seabed is polluted, there are fewer species, fewer mollusks."

The dire situation has halved the number of fishermen in the area, which once stood at 300.

Burning coal releases many harmful chemicals into the air, and while the plants have installed special filters to reduce pollution, this will not disappear as long as "the coal parks are open", said municipal councilor Manuel Monardes Rojas.



Sea lions are pictured at the Mejillones fishermen's cove.

Still, he insists the picture-postcard beach is a "clean zone" due to its distance from the industrial area.

"Mejillones is now focusing on tourism," he said.

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