People who know and understand mining, count mining waste as one of the primary environmental concern. Every activity in mining – extraction, beneficiation, ore processing or transportation – produces waste in some form or the other.

Waste from mining is termed as overburden. It essentially is the topsoil and earth removed during open cast mining operations. Ore of a low grade also becomes a part of mining waste as does tailings which the leftover material once the ore has been extracted. As high grade ores are depleting fast, most countries have started exploiting even the lower grades which has added to the amount of mining waste and disposal issues. Most of this waste, in the absence of proper disposal, is dumped in water bodies like rivers, lakes, sea, etc.

The report, released on February 28, takes cognisance of this very nuisance of mining. It estimates that mining companies are dumping 180 million tonnes of hazardous waste into water bodies every year. This amount is 1.5 times the municipal waste dumped in the US in 2009. This may well be a gross underestimation as it is based on data from only 18 mines of the world.

The report has enlisted a few mines that are dumping or propose to dump their tailings in different water bodies. The list is far from comprehensive but puts forth the point adequately. The report also says that it is mostly big corporations like BHP Billiton, Newcrest Mining, Rio Tinto, Xstrata and the likes who are dumping their mining wastes into waters around the globe – a well established fact by now. It categorises mining waste dumping according to the recipient water body.

The report states it is difficult and very expensive to clean up water bodies after years of dumping again a fact well known. This is explained citing a few examples. It contains certain recommendations for mining companies to prevent the harm to environment and people. The most obvious one is to produce less waste by opting for an underground mine instead. A noble recommendation but the every reserve may not be viable with underground mines and hence this option will be limited to a very few players only. The next recommendation talks about drying the tailings and backfilling them which is a popular practice but seldom followed the way it should. The last recommendation suggests not mining in certain places especially where wastes cannot be stored safely on land. As much as the last recommendation is much needed, in today's world where even the lowest grades of ores and not being spared from extraction, this may not be accepted by companies or governments. But there certainly is a need to identify some no-go zones for mining and do a intergenerational equity analysis to ensure mineral supply to our future generations too.

For the governments, the report prescribes tightening of laws that protect water bodies, to ensure cost of clean up in case of spill/dumping, etc.

The report does not bring out any new facts but brings together established issues and solutions for one critical aspect of mining operations – waste disposal into water bodies.