INDUSTRIAL MINERALS IN DAILY LIFE*

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Few of us realize the importance of industrial minerals in our everyday lives. Perhaps a trip through a normal working day will underscore our reliance upon these nonmetallic minerals. This article was written to emphasize how much our lives would change without ready and economical access to these fundamental constituents. The products that contain industrial minerals or require them in the manufacturing process are highlighted in bold face.

As we step out of bed in the morning, we place our feet on the carpet. (Calcium carbonate, or limestone, is used in the carpet backing.) We find our way to the kitchen and switch on the electric light and coffee pot, which are made of either glass or ceramics. (Both glass and ceramics are made entirely from industrial minerals: silica sand, limestone, talc, lithium, borates, soda ash, and feldspar.) As we enter the kitchen, we walk on linoleum (calcium carbonate, clay, and wollastonite) or ceramic tile.

While the coffee is brewing, we sit down to read the newspaper. At the same time, we remember that we have to take a trip, so we consult our Official Airline Guide and refer to the Yellow Pages of the phone book for the number of the airline. (All of these papers are filled with kaolin clay; limestone, sodium sulfate, lime, and soda ash are used to process them.)

The coffee is ready. We brown a slice of toast and sneak a piece of cake from last night’s party. (Bakery items, such as bread and cake icing, contain gypsum.) The plate from which we are eating is composed of glass, ceramics, or china, a special form of ceramics. We might also have a full breakfast or contemplate what we’ll have for lunch or dinner. All of the food that we eat relies on industrial minerals for its growth and production. (All fertilizers are composed of potash, phosphates, nitrogen, sulfur, and other minor minerals. The acidity of soils must be regulated with gypsum, limestone, or sulfur. In fact, without industrial minerals, there would be no modern agriculture.) One of the most basic food additives is an industrial mineral: salt. It is so basic that it was historically used as a medium of trade or payment, as implied in our word salary.

We now get ready for work. We brush our teeth with toothpaste (calcium carbonate [limestone] or sodium carbonate). Women might put on lipstick (calcium carbonate and talc) and powder (talc); men may use hair cream (calcium carbonate). Other forms of makeup also contain industrial minerals. The countertop in the bathroom is synthetic marble or synthetic onyx (titanium dioxide, calcium carbonate, and alumina hydrate). Sinks, basins, toilets, and similar fixtures throughout the house are kept shiny with cleansers (soda, pumice, diatomite, feldspars, and limestone). Kitchen and bathroom tiles are installed and waterproofed with putty and caulking compounds (limestone and gypsum).

Before we leave, we brighten up our wardrobe with jewelry. (All precious and semiprecious stones -- opal, amethyst, aquamarine, topaz, garnet, diamond, etc. -- are industrial minerals.)

As we walk outside, we make a mental note to fix the composite roof. (Fiberglass is composed of almost the same ingredients as regular glass: silica, borates, limestone, soda ash, and feldspar. Fiberglass and asphalt, along with lesser quantities of either talc, silica sand, or limestone, make up composition roofing.) As we get in the car, we plan planting and gardening projects for the evening. In addition to fertilizers, we need to buy soil amendments and planting mixes. (Vermiculite, perlite, gypsum, zeolites, or peat improve plant growth.)

Once we leave for work, we are surrounded by industrial minerals. Our car is composed of them, starting from the ground up. Tires contain clays and calcium carbonate, and mag wheels are made from dolomite and magnesium. All of the glass in the car is entirely made from minerals, as is the fiberglass body that is becoming popular on many models. Many components in the car are made of composites, which are usually combinations of fiberglass and plastics. (Plastics are made from calcium carbonate, wollastonite, mica, talc, clays, and silica.) As we drive to work, we benefit from numerous industrial minerals in the bumpers, dashboard, radiator cap, and floor mats, among others.

The paint that makes our car so attractive is mostly composed of industrial minerals: titanium dioxide, kaolin clays, calcium carbonate, micas, talc, silica, wollastonite, and others. In fact, all paints that we encounter today, from that on our house to the stripe down the middle of the road to the interior of our office and other buildings, are composed of industrial minerals.

Modern transportation is almost entirely reliant upon industrial minerals, and this does not stop with the car. Gasoline and lubricants depend on industrial minerals because the drill bit that

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originally discovered the crude oil was faced with industrial diamonds. Drilling fluids, used for ease of well drilling, are almost entirely made from barite, bentonite, attapulgite, mica, perlite, and others. Clays and zeolites are used in the catalytic cracking process to refine crude petroleum and produce gasoline and lubricants.

On our way to work, we don’t think about it, but we are literally riding on industrial minerals. Concrete pavement is composed of cement and aggregates. Aggregates are themselves industrial minerals: sand and gravel or crushed stone, such as limestone, dolomite, granite, and lava. Cement is manufactured from limestone, gypsum, iron oxide, clays, and possibly pozzolan. Even asphaltic pavement or blacktop contains industrial minerals as aggregates.

The building we are about to enter is made from or of industrial minerals. If it is a concrete, stone, or brick building, it is entirely made from industrial minerals. There may be steel structural members; the steel production process requires fluorspar for fluxing, bentonite for pelletizing, and perhaps chrome for hardening. The making of steel requires the use of high-grade refractory bricks and shapes made from bauxite, chrome, zircon, silica, graphite, kyanite, andalusite, sillimanite, and clays. Fiberglass batts may be used for insulation in our office building, as they are in our home.

Inside the building, we are often enclosed by wallboard or sheetrock (gypsum with fire-retardant additives, such as clays, perlite, vermiculite, alumina hydrate, and borates), joined together with joint cement (gypsum, mica, clays, and calcium carbonates). The plate-glass windows are entirely made from industrial minerals. The floors or decks between floors are probably made from concrete with lightweight aggregate (perlite, vermiculite, zeolites, or expanded shales).

To begin our work, we may pick up a pencil (graphite and clays) to make a list of things to do. One of our first tasks is to mail a few invoices that are backed with self-contained carbon paper (bentonite or other clays or zeolites). We need to order some supplies, so we pick up a catalog or magazine and note the glossy feel of the paper, due to a high content of kaolin clay or calcium carbonate, and the extreme whiteness of the paper, due to titanium dioxide. Almost every sheet of paper that we use was made from industrial minerals, such as talc, or contains minerals as fillers and coaters. Even some inks contain calcium carbonate or other fillers.

The morning has worn on and it is time for a break. In addition to drinking coffee in a coffee cup, which is made of industrial minerals, we eat a roll that has been heated in the microwave on a microwavable container (plastics filled and reinforced with talc, calcium carbonate, and titanium dioxide or clays). While on break, we ponder what to do during the weekend. Recreational devices, such as golf clubs, tennis rackets, fishing rods, and skis, are commonly made from graphite or a slightly "older" material, fiberglass. Backpacking equipment, such as pack frames, pots, and pans, are made of aluminum. (All aluminum, for whatever use, originates with bauxite, one of the most widely used industrial minerals.) The mantles in camping lanterns are also made from an industrial mineral, thorium.

Communications equipment incorporates numerous industrial minerals. The standard product of the industry for many years has been the silicon chip, made from quartz or silica as the name implies. Optical fibers, made from glass, are replacing some copper wiring. The television screen or computer monitor is made of glass, but critical tubes also contain phosphors made from the rare earths or lanthanides, a family of industrial minerals. Even superconducting materials are made from industrial minerals (yttrium, lanthanides, titanium, zirconium, and barite).

After a hard day at the office, we stop for refreshments with our friends. A glass of fruit juice or, for the less temperate, wine or beer, would be refreshing. All of these liquids are filtered through either perlite or diatomite during the purifying and clarifying processes. If we add sugar to any of our drinks, we will enjoy the benefits of industrial minerals because limestone and lime are basic to the production of sweeteners. Our refreshments may be served in ceramic mugs or glasses, which are composed entirely of industrial minerals.

Filtering and purification are major uses for industrial minerals. Drinking water is purified and clarified by filtering through limestone, lime, and salt. Wastewater-treatment plants use zeolites, soda ash, lime, and salt in the filtering process. Vegetable oils are filtered through clays, perlite, or diatomite. All of the minerals mentioned in this paragraph are used to filter and purify water in swimming pools.

After we return home, we may need to take medicine or pharmaceuticals. Antacid pills are essentially made from calcium carbonate. Other treatments for upset stomachs include Milk of Magnesia (made from magnesia or dolomite), Kapectate (made from kaolin), and medicines made from clays, such as attapulgite. We ingest the barium "cocktail," made from barite, prior to being X-rayed for gastrointestinal disorders. Iodine is used in tincture of iodine for cuts and bruises. Lithium, which is used to treat mania depression, is derived from an industrial mineral.

Abrasives are used for making sandpaper for home or workshop use, emery boards for our fingernails, and polishing compounds for our silverware and other items. Abrasives are made from pumice, diatomite, silica, garnet, corundum, and emery. Porcelain figures for our what-not shelves are made from silica, limestone, borates, and soda ash, and plaster of Paris for our lawn are made from gypsum.

As a final testament to our dependence on industrial minerals, an ode to our lives will eventually be inscribed in the form of an elegy on monumental stone, made from marble or granite.

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