

OUR PARKS ARE TOO PRECIOUS TO MINE

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This piece is in response to an article written by a representative of the BC and Yukon Chamber of Mines suggesting that the Tatshenshini-Alsek World Heritage Site should be mined.

Despite what some mine promoters would like to think, mining and parks don't mix. With 60% of British Columbia having already been altered by or allocated to resource extraction - 80% in southern BC - the chance to hang on to even remnant samples of our province's pristine landscapes and ecosystems is disappearing fast. The fact is, all that future generations of British Columbians will ever know of the original earth is that which we protect as parkland today.

Since wilderness can only be lost and never recreated, this means the parks we save now must be safeguarded forever. With over 100 species going extinct worldwide each day due to loss of habitat from resource development, parks are tomorrow's archives of life, biological lifeboats... the museums of Creation. Yet these museums will not stay intact for our children's children, if we allow them to be mined.

Just look at Strathcona Park, where a tragic decision in the 1960's allowed mining in the core of that park. As the then BC Parks Director Bob Ahrens said.... "What harm is a ten acre mine in a park of 500,000 acres? Let me tell you, this requires power development, a tailings disposal site, a mining mill site, mill effluent disposal sites, many roads, a camp, barge shipping and tugs on a major lake, loading-out works, then a highway through the park, all for just a starter. That 10 acre hole influences 100,000 acres of the choicest part of the park."

Since then British Columbians have learned their lesson; they've never allowed mining to start up in another provincial park. Now however, there are those in the BC and Yukon Chamber of Mines who would like to go back in geologic time. They'd like to get at the parks. Their first target: Tatshenshini-Alsek Park in northwestern BC, a United Nations World Heritage Site.

The Tatshenshini-Alsek is the only river system to carve through the St. Elias Ranges, Canada's highest mountains. The ecosystems of this watershed range from marine to sub-arctic interior, and from sea level to 19,000 feet. Tatshenshini features the highest year-round density of grizzly populations in Canada. It is the only place where the rare silver-blue glacier bears occur in Canada; there are fewer of these creatures on Earth than pandas. Dall sheep, wolves, mountain goats, the largest moose in the world and all 5 species of salmon- this is nature at its grandest.

The Tatshenshini-Alsek is homeland for the Champagne and Aishihik peoples who have lived in and traveled this wondrous place of mile-wide rivers, huge peaks and glaciers since time immemorial. That Tatshenshini Park has been designated a World Heritage Site says volumes about its ecological and cultural importance to humanity. It says this place is as precious as the Grand Canyon, or Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

Therefore, to even contemplate mining Tatshenshini is like talking about clearcutting Banff National Park... it's sacrilege. Be clear on one thing, if a World Heritage Site such as Tatshenshini were ever violated by mining, not only would our nation break its treaty commitments to the international community but no park in British Columbia or Canada would be safe.

Those in the mining industry who try to diminish Tatshenshini's recreational significance simply don't know what they're talking about. Just 3 years after its creation, Tatshenshini Park already supports more back country user-days than South Moresby National Park. As well, 100,000 people/year drive the Haines highway which forms the park's eastern boundary, a tourism flow which has yet to be tapped.

Is the mining industry really so desperate that it needs to target a World Heritage Site and our parks, when it currently has access to 90% of BC? Isn't that enough?

The evidence shows that despite the creation of new parks over the past 3 years, the BC mining industry is thriving with record high levels of mineral production (\$3.48B in 1995), very strong increases in returns on mine development (\$200M, the second highest return in 10 years) and a 33% increase in exploration activity (from \$66M in 1993 to \$88M in 1995). Today in BC, there are 14 metal and coal proposals for new mines in the government approval process. At a further 7 mines, expansion projects are underway.

These figures contradict the BC Chamber of Mines Director Dave Barr's recent claims in the Vancouver Sun that the industry has been crippled by "greedy" conservationists. Conservationists work for the public good so that there will be some pristine natural places left for our children. Mine promoters work for their own self interest, hoping to strike it rich.

SomePalatino it seems that these individuals put the best spin on a project to attract backers and perhaps fail to tell the whole story. For example, in its wailing about the Windy Craggy mine proposal in Tatshenshini, industry spokesmen seldom volunteer facts about the enormous environmental risks posed by this project due to acid mine drainage (AMD).

Yet as Jack Patterson, Managing Director of the BC and Yukon Chamber of Mines says, "Acid rock drainage is the number one environmental problem facing the mining industry."

It occurs when sulphide bearing ore is exposed to atmospheric oxygen and moisture through mining. This creates sulphuric acid which then seeps into the bed rock and leaches out heavy metals: cadmium, copper, arsenic. When this toxic brew flows into streams, it is lethal to fish. Once started, AMD is virtually impossible to stop and it keeps on polluting and poisoning for thousands of years.

There are mines in England excavated by the Romans that are still bleeding acid. In the United States, the US Bureau of Mines reports that AMD has killed 12,000 miles of rivers. In Canada, the federal government estimates that the cost of bringing current AMD problems under control to be \$2-5 billion. The ore at Windy Craggy had an incredibly high 40% sulphide content and would have created an enormous 250 million tons of acid generating waste rock and tailings.

There was simply no way to ensure that massive amounts of acid and heavy metal pollution would not develop to poison the valuable salmon fisheries of the transboundary Tatshenshini-Elsek river system... forever. Located atop a mountain peak, underneath an active glacier, in the highest earthquake hazard zone in North America, Windy Craggy was probably the most dangerous mining project ever proposed in Canada.

For all its boosterism of Windy Craggy, typically the industry fails to fess up that the project was rejected twice as being too environmentally hazardous during six years of reviews by the BC and Canadian Governments.

Nor does it readily reveal that the proposed mine was a transboundary project which would have required a portsite in Alaska. This meant the Americans had a veto which they were quite prepared to use. Given the extreme acid mine drainage risks to Alaskan fisheries and to Glacier Bay National Park, opposition was resolute throughout the US Government bureaucracy, the Congress and indeed the White House, including Vice President Al Gore. The Windy Craggy proposal failed to get to first base on any of the 31 permits required by the US.

In any case, the bankrupt argument for mining our parks should no longer be a point of debate. The industry has recently signed two important agreements supporting the need for mining-free parks. The issue now is whether it will honour them.

The first is the Whitehorse Mining Initiative (WMI), a national mining accord instigated by industry, which it negotiated and signed with labour, native and environmental leaders in September 1994. A key agreed-upon WMI goal was:

"To create and set aside from industrial development by the year 2000 those protected areas required to achieve representation of Canada's land based natural regions."

The second, in May 1995 the BC Chamber of Mines and the Mining Association of BC, along with provincial labour and environmental leaders signed a "Statement of Commitment to British Columbians" which includes unequivocal support for the completion of the Protected Areas Strategy in BC, free from all industrial development, including mining.

So given these industry commitments, why is there now renewed talk in Chamber of Mines Director Dave Barr's recent Sun op-ed piece on mining our parks. Is the mining industry intending to renege on its agreements?

BC's mining industry has a choice. Either it can play the role of a responsible corporate citizen by honouring the WMI, and accept that the parks such as Tatshenshini World Heritage Site are pristine areas to be left intact for future generations, and that a very few high risk AMD deposits - such as Windy Craggy - are simply too dangerous to mine. If it does this it will find opportunities to reap the cooperative benefits of the accords it has signed. This will yield increased certainty and investor confidence for the industry.

If instead the industry disregards its public commitments and tries to mine the parks, it will engender public distrust and mire itself in the type of valley-by-valley confrontations that plagued the forest industry for too long. This regressive step would lead to needless conflict. What a tragedy if such Jurassic thinking were allowed to prevail.

Surely the time has come for BC's mining industry to move forward into the modern era and clearly demonstrate its respect for the environmental rights of other land users, both British Columbians now living and those yet to come.