MINING FOR ANSWERS

Drainage from the old Tulsequah Chief Mine in northwest British Columbia sits in a containment pond next to the Tulsequah River.
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Tribal Governments and indigenous activists on both sides of the Alaska-Canada border are raising questions about a mining boom in northwest British Columbia

BY PAULA DOBryn
PHOTOS BY CHRIS MILLER EXCEPT AS NOTED

Holly Churchill (Haida) harvests cedar, sea asparagus, and beach grass from tidal areas near her home in Ketchikan. Born into the Eagle moiety, Churchill is an accomplished weaver who specializes in Haida basketry. Her family comes from Haida Gwaii, British Columbia. Besides weaving, Churchill is playing a new role of late: environmental activist. She is speaking out, along with other concerned tribal citizens and tribal government officials, about a mining boom in northwest British Columbia, a remote corner of Canada bordering Southeast Alaska. They are questioning how mineral development upriver from their communities could affect Southeast Alaska fisheries, tourism and livelihoods.

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RICH IN SALMON AND MINERALS

The transboundary region of Northwest B.C. and Southeast Alaska spans about 32 million acres, roughly the size of Switzerland and Portugal combined. Alpine tundra, boreal and coastal rainforests, and a marine environment of islands and estuaries define this rugged, wild place.

Keith Carlick, a member of the Taku River Tingit First Nation and resident of Atlin, B.C., pulls a king salmon from his drift gillnet on the Taku River. Carlick and fellow Canadian fishermen fish for all five species of Pacific salmon just above the border between the U.S. and Canada. They hand-haul their 50-foot drift gillnets aboard small skiffs from May through September.

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The area in question encompasses the territory of diverse indigenous Nations that lived and thrived there for a vast period of time before the ‘US/Canada’ border was first drawn on a map. The Tlingit and Haida Nations and their tribal members have inhabited Southeast Alaska for thousands of years. On the Canadian side, the Tsimshian, Tahltan, Taku River Tlingit, Iskut, Champagne and Aishihik, Gitanyow Hereditary Chiefs and the Carcross/Tagish are among the primary First Nations. The area is also home to major rivers with large and healthy populations of five species of Pacific salmon, the economic and cultural backbone of Southeast Alaska. “Salmon have sustained us since time immemorial. They define who we are,” said Churchill. Thousands of fishermen harvest them commercially, for sport or to put food on the table. Salmon contribute an estimated $1 billion to the Southeast Alaska economy every year. The U.S. Forest Service has calculated that some 90 percent of rural South- east households use salmon with the average resident consuming about 75 pounds a year. If anything happened to these stocks, it would affect us all,” said Raymond Paddock, environmental coordinator for Central Council. Besides fish and wildlife, the trans-boundary region is also rich in minerals, and the B.C. provincial government is promoting their development. In a jobs plan released two years ago, B.C. Premier Christy Clark pledged to see eight new mines constructed and nine others expanded by 2015. In a speech to a mining conference in Vancouver in January of this year, Clark said her province is halfway there. “There’s a great opportunity there and all of the communities of north-west British Columbia will see the benefits,” said Brian Downie, a city councilor from Terrace, B.C., a community near a large copper and gold project. “It means jobs. It means ore shipped by rail, zinc, gold and silver and operated from 1951 to 1957. The site is currently under development by Chieftain Metals Inc. Both officials spoke to a local television station in B.C. last fall. Canada has encouraged industrial development by providing economic incentives, relaxing environmental regulations and by subsidizing the construction of the Northwest Transmission Line, an extension of B.C.’s power grid. The line will light up many parts of the remote north-west corner of the province for the first time. In January Clark pledged to extend a $10 million tax credit for mining exploration for another year. In the same speech, she ordered a review of B.C.’s environmental permitting process to streamline it for development. Five of the mining projects the B.C. government is promoting are located in watersheds upstream from Southeast Alaska. Developers are trying to re-open Tulsequah Chief, a shuttered 1950s-era mine near the Taku River. Other significant transboundary mining projects include KSM, Red Chris, Schaft Creek, and Galore Creek. The rivers they could affect are the Taku, the Stikine and the Unuk. The Taku is typically Southeast Alaska’s single largest overall salmon producer. Coho and king salmon are its top species. The Stikine, near Wrangell, is Southeast’s second largest salmon producer. The Unuk, close to Ketchikan, ranks as one of Southeast’s top five king salmon rivers. Tulsequah Chief: A Cautionary Tale

Tribal officials and activists point to what’s already happening at the Tulsequah Chief as a cautionary tale. The defunct Canadian mine has been releasing acid mine drainage into the Taku River for years. Acid drainage occurs when sulfide-bearing ore is exposed to air and water. The substance, akin to battery acid, is often laden with heavy metals, making it unhealthy to drink and toxic to fish. “The Tulsequah Chief’s current owner, Chieftain Metals Inc., is attempting to raise cash to restart mining and to stop the polluted discharges. In a 2013 letter to B.C. environmental regulators, the Douglas Indian Association (DIA), the federally recognized Tribe of the Tlingit people of Douglas Island, the Taku River, and Stephens Passage shorelines, said a cleanup of the Tulsequah is long overdue. The Taku River valley is traditional territory for DIA members. Its ecology is “precious to the Tlingit” and all components must be “protected as kin,” the letter states. “We must see that these living systems are protected to the highest standards.” Last May, in a formal letter to Canadian Parliament member Nathan Niblack and Bokan are relatively small projects. And they do not threaten any significant salmon habitat. “That’s probably the number one factor,” Peterson said. The Tulsequah Chief Mine contains ore deposits of copper, lead, zinc, gold, and silver and operated from 1951 to 1957. The site is currently under development by Chieftain Metals Inc. Would mining by the Tulsequah Chief be stopped if the pollution were not controlled? The Tulsequah Chief Mine is currently under development by Chieftain Metals Inc. Tulsequah Chief in 2012. This January, the tribe sued to stop the project. That case is pending. Southeast Alaska tribes are not categorically anti-mining, said Richard Peterson (Haida), president of the Organized Village of Kasaan, a tribal government. Tribes look at each mine project case by case and decide whether to support the project based on fair jobs for tribal members and potential impacts on fish and water, he said. Some Alaska Native corporations such as Juneau’s Goldbelt directly benefit from mining. mining on the Niblack site. The substance, akin to battery acid, is often laden with heavy metals, making it unhealthy to drink and toxic to fish. Tulsequah Chief as a cautionary tale. The defunct Canadian mine has been releasing acid mine drainage into the Taku River for years.

Acid drainage leaves one of several adits for the Tulsequah Chief Mine in British Columbia, Canada. The Tulsequah Chief Mine contains ore deposits of copper, lead, zinc, gold, and silver and operated from 1951 to 1957. The site is currently under development by Chieftain Metals Inc. But mining by the Tulsequah Chief Mine is currently under development by Chieftain Metals Inc. would affect us all.”

Acid drainage leaves one of several adits for the Tulsequah Chief Mine in British Columbia, Canada. The Tulsequah Chief Mine contains ore deposits of copper, lead, zinc, gold, and silver and operated from 1951 to 1957. The site is currently under development by Chieftain Metals Inc. Similarly, the Kasaan tribe supports mining in Southeast. Representatives of mining companies, federal and state agencies, tribal leaders and others are expected to attend. In a 2013 letter to B.C. environmental regulators, the Douglas Indian Association (DIA), the federally recognized Tribe of the Tlingit people of Douglas Island, the Taku River, and Stephens Passage shorelines, said a cleanup of the Tulsequah is long overdue. The Taku River valley is traditional territory for DIA members. Its ecology is “precious to the Tlingit” and all components must be “protected as kin,” the letter states. “We must see that these living systems are protected to the highest standards.” Last May, in a formal letter to Canadian Parliament member Nathan Niblack and Bokan are relatively small projects. And they do not threaten any significant salmon habitat. “That’s probably the number one factor,” Peterson said. The Tulsequah Chief Mine contains ore deposits of copper, lead, zinc, gold, and silver and operated from 1951 to 1957. The site is currently under development by Chieftain Metals Inc. would affect us all.”

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The B.C. mine project that’s raising the most ire in Southeast so far is known as KSM. It’s a giant copper-gold-molybdenum deposit in the headwaters of the Unuk, just north of the Alaska border, near Stewart, B.C. Seabridge Gold, a junior mining company based in Vancouver, has spent the last five years seeking to turn KSM into a large open-pit mine. It hopes to obtain government permits this year.

If built, KSM would produce an average of 130,000 tons of ore daily for up to 55 years from an industrial footprint of about 6,500 acres. As currently designed, it would be one of the world’s biggest gold and copper mines. The pit would be located near Sulphurets Creek, a tributary of the Unuk, and it would include a 15-mile tunnel for transporting the ore to a processing facility near the Nass River, one of B.C.’s largest salmon rivers.

According to Seabridge, the project would directly employ about 1,800 people on site, and thousands more across Canada, during the construction phase. Over the five decades the mine is projected to operate, it would generate more than 1,000 on site jobs annually and thousands more indirectly throughout Canada. KSM could generate billions of dollars in tax revenue and royalties for Canada.

KSM would also create an estimated 2 billion tons of mine waste that would require perpetual treatment and containment because of their toxicity. Two tailings dams, each bigger than the Hoover Dam, would be required to contain the waste.

Protection of the environment, including downstream waters, is a “guiding principle” behind the design of the KSM project, according to Seabridge. On its community website for KSM, the company points out the project has undergone extensive environmental and technical evaluations by independent experts over the past five years to ensure the protection of the surrounding environment.

Officials from three State of Alaska Departments — Natural Resources, Fish and Game, and Environmental Conservation — participate in a
But king runs have plummeted in recent years in many parts of Alaska, including Southeast. Regulators have responded with fishing cutbacks and closures. While the exact cause or causes of the king salmon declines is murky, it’s clear that Alaska’s most iconic fish is in trouble.

“These projects, especially KSM, couldn’t be in a worse location,” said Sanderson of Central Council.

“We have five species of Pacific salmon that use the Unuk. Salmon is our traditional food. If anything happens to them, we will be in a world of hurt.”

Central Council announced its formal opposition to KSM two years ago. The April 2012 resolution argued that any breach of the mine’s tailings dams could have “catastrophic effects on the environment, downriver and into Southeast Alaska waterways.”

FINDING A CROSS-BORDER VOICE

Southeast tribes have begun reaching out to their indigenous counterparts across the border, particularly the Gitanyow. The Gitanyow, who are based in Kitwanga, B.C., downstream from the deposit.

In a November 22, 2013, letter to federal and provincial ministers of the environment, the Gitanyow raised concerns about KSM, most notably how it could pollute the Nass River, the third largest salmon producing river in B.C. Seabridge discounts the risk to the Nass River.

“Salmon populations in the Nass River will not be affected by the KSM Project,” Seabridge claims on its website. “There will be no impacts on water or salmon because no acid-generating contact water will be released into the environment.”

The Gitanyow want the Canadian government to put the brakes on the project until more extensive studies, aimed at building a unified voice of aboriginal concerns.

“We would be open to working with any group that shares our same concerns. I definitely think there’s a need to make those connections,” said Marsden.

Anmita McPhee, president of the Tahltan Central Council, a First Nations with a membership of about 5,000, said Tahltan chiefs have begun speaking with Alaska tribal leaders downstream in Wrangell.

“We have done a lot of work with First Nations downstream. That’s why we were able to stop some big developments in the Sacred Headwaters,” McPhee said.

Photo shows part of the proposed location for KSM’s open pits (foreground). The mine’s waste rock storage facilities, designed to hold over 2 billion tons of waste, could lie in valleys below (water right of photo). On the distance, Sulphurates Creek flows toward the Unuk River (out of sight) which drains into Alaska’s Misty Fjords National Monument near Ketchikan. The Unuk is one of Southeast Alaska’s top salmon-producing rivers.

Michael Foy Photo

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