

# Beyond The Lines

SIX SOUTHEAST ALASKANS MAKE A QUIET CASE AGAINST TRANSBOUNDARY MINES

BY CHRIS SANTELLA

From the seat of a float plane several thousand feet above the Taku River, Chris Zimmer, Alaska Director of the non-profit Rivers Without Borders, points to a line of felled trees snaking up a mountainside. “That’s the border with British Columbia,” he says matter-of-factly. Behind us, Taku Glacier is still in view, a 2.5 miles wide path of ice serrated with deep crevasses that shine an unnaturally bright blue. The Taku, in contrast, flows nearly white, testament to its glacial origins. (Note to self: if fishing the Taku, use big dark flies.) A few miles further east we circle over the grounds of the Tulsequah Chief mine, spread along the Tulsequah River upstream of its confluence with the Taku. Before operations ceased in 1957, gold, silver, zinc, copper and lead were mined here. The site consists of a few Quonset huts, some heavy machinery, a red building that Zimmer identifies as the water treatment facility and a few rectangular ponds adjacent to the structure. It seems innocuous enough, except these ponds contain acid mine drainage, an acidic soup with toxic heavy metals in it. And since the water treatment plant is closed, when these ponds overflow the pollution goes right into the river. The mine has been polluting the Tulsequah River, and also likely the Taku, with acid mine drainage since the mine was abandoned more than 50 years ago.

As I write, the Tulsequah is getting very close to renewing its operations. And four other large-scale mines on the headwaters of two other major southeast Alaska rivers—the Stikine and the Unuk—have either gained approval or are in the process of being reviewed. These rivers—along with the Taku—are among the most productive salmon rivers in the state.

As the bumper sticker goes, “We All Live Downstream.” This is true of the commercial and subsistence fishermen of Bristol Bay, and it’s equally true of the thousands of residents who make their living—and have built their lives—around the fecund waters of the Taku, Stikine and Unuk. The catch

is that the downstreamers in southeast Alaska have little recourse in beating the development of these mining projects back as they reside on the east side of the border. There is growing support across the region for the United States State Department to utilize the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 (which clearly states “boundary waters and waters flowing across the boundary shall not be polluted on either side to the injury of health or property on the other”) but the State Department so far has not committed to this course of action. The gravity

of the damage these mines could inflict upon Alaskan waters (and Alaskans) has been underscored by the recent failure of a four square kilometer tailings pond at Mt. Polley Mine in southern British Columbia... a mine owned by Imperial Metals, which is preparing to begin operations at the Red Chris Mine on a tributary of the Stikine.

The numbers—in terms of salmon escapement, fishing jobs and over all dollars pumped into the Southeast Alaska economy—tell a powerful story. But the stories of those Alaskans who’d be impacted by the mines (and their seemingly inevitable fallout) convey the urgency of the situation in an equally compelling manner. A few follow below.



Mt. Polley Mine tailings

AP PHOTO/THE CANADIAN PRESS, JONATHAN HAYWARD

## Len “Pete” Peterson and Heather Hardcastle

### Taku River Reds

“Some people call the Taku Inlet fishery the Gentleman’s Catch,” ventured Pete Peterson as we sat in the galley of the Heather Anne at its mooring at the Aurora Harbor in Juneau’s Gastineau Channel. “Many of the fishermen there have advanced degrees,” Heather Hardcastle, Pete’s daughter and the Heather Anne of the boat, chimed in. “They’ve made a conscious decision to fish.” “One of the fishermen out there was a college professor during the school year,” Pete added. “He was told that he had to teach one summer. He quit teaching.”

The marina is usually referred to as “Aurora Harbor.”

Peterson came to Juneau in 1970 for a teaching job that was supposed to last two years. Like so many, he never left. But a schoolteacher’s salary wasn’t quite enough to support a family, so he sought summer work. “I did carpentry, drove a schoolbus, then crewed with a friend who was trolling,” he continued, “but none of it was very lucrative. I eventually earned enough to get my own gill-netting boat in 1981. It paid for college for my kids.” The kids—Heather and her brother Scott—were part of the team from early days. “We were always out there with mom and dad,” Hardcastle recalled. “I loved the band Abba, and would make up songs and dance routines where I’d sub in lyrics about sockeye to an ABBA song. My version of “Super Trouper” went like this:

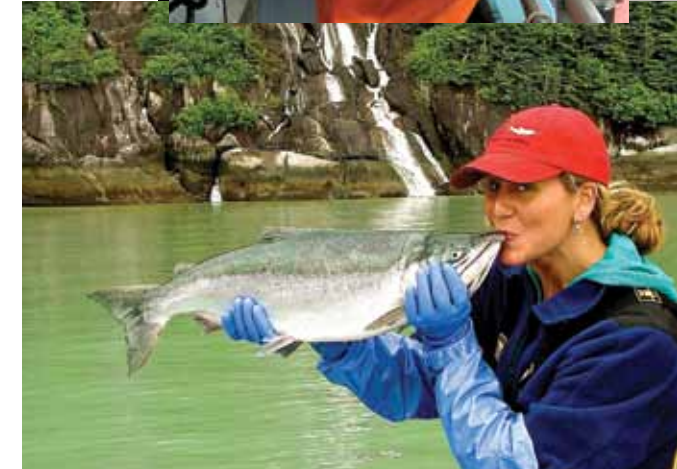
*Tonight the sockeye salmon they are gonna find us  
Swim into our net  
Baby don’t you fret  
We are gonna get the set.*

“One time, the net got caught in the prop. My mom stripped down to her skivvies, put on a snorkel and mask and jumped in. It was pitch dark and the water was 55 degrees. She got the prop untangled. I thought she was a rock star!”

Taku River Reds was born out of necessity. Thanks to a glut of farmed salmon, markets for wild caught fish crashed. “I realized that we had to do something to add value to our fish or not bother to fish,” Peterson said. “We tried smoking, making lox, making jerky. None of it worked. Then we came upon the idea of pressure bleeding the fish from a troller friend. As soon as the fish come in the boat, we run salt water through the fish’s circulatory system to expel the blood. This process prevents bacterial growth and thereby prevents any fishy smell and improves shelf life. It’s a higher end product, but the market is there. I always felt that these wild sockeye, if handled well, sells itself. It’s food as art.”

Taku River Reds provides income for Pete and his wife, Heather’s family and another family—plus the other fishermen provide fish to the company.

“I have to say that I always enjoyed returning to teaching at the end of the fishing season,” Peterson added. “I had autonomy as a teacher. I was responsible for the kids, but I didn’t have to worry about the school going up on the rocks.”



“I ALWAYS FELT THAT THESE WILD SOCKEYE, IF HANDLED WELL, SELLS ITSELF. IT’S FOOD AS ART.”

—Pete Peterson

## Mike Erickson

Alaska Glacier Seafoods

Juneau Bay shimmers in the summer Alaska sun from the loading dock at Alaska Glacier Seafoods on the north side of Juneau. Snow-flecked mountaintops in the distance likewise glimmer as boats move across the water.

Inside the scene is not as pretty. A conveyor belt moves chum salmon along an assembly line attended by a platoon of young men and women clad in yellow rubber bibs. A machine lops off the head, one set of workers scrape out the roe, another the guts and then the fish are graded according to meat color, stacked high in crates and flash frozen. Immense plastic tubs hold fish blood and guts... which will later be used.

The scent of the processing floor is not like roses... though for Mike Erickson, it smells like a good business proposition.

"Juneau was never considered a big fishing town as Alaska goes, but that's changing," he said, in a conference room looking down on one of the processing lines. "Our market is worldwide. This year we'll purchase from 250 to 300 different vessels. There are usually two or three people per boat. I can't tell you how good you feel when you go home knowing that you helped create two or three jobs."

At the plant itself, Alaska Glacier seasonally employs another 150 to 160 people; some 40 employees work year round. "It's not the most attractive work—the plant is wet and cold, and the hours are long," Erickson continued. "But we have some people that have been with us for 10 or 15 years. We must be doing something right. My guiding principles are work hard and be honest. Something that speaks to the quality of our workers: of every 20 skippers that bring their catch in, maybe one will watch the scales."

Alaska Glacier has found success by adding value to their seafood wherever possible. "We want every fish to go out in a value-added state," Erickson said. "It requires more attention to detail, but I don't want to ship work overseas. We try to use all the fish. We used to utilize 60 to 70 percent; now it's 90 to 95 percent."

"We've had opportunities to expand through acquisition, but we didn't want to, in part for our quality of life. I've got happy employees, a solid company, a good life—what more could I want?"



"JUNEAU WAS NEVER CONSIDERED A BIG FISHING TOWN AS ALASKA GOES, BUT THAT'S CHANGING. OUR MARKET IS WORLDWIDE."



Overlooking Auke Bay

COPYRIGHT © KEVIN G. SMITH / ALASKASTOCK



COPYRIGHT © MARK KELLEY / ALASKASTOCK

## Richard J. Peterson

President of Central Council  
(Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska)

At the Central Council headquarters in an office park near the Juneau airport, Richard Peterson made it very clear that he does not see his constituency as stakeholders in the rich tapestry of Alaska's resources, and their continued well-being. "The native people in Alaska are as much a part of the environment as the trees and the fish. We are a resource. I don't know if there's any way in western culture to describe exactly how we relate to the land. I bristle when people suggest we subsist off the land. I can go to Fred Meyers [a grocery chain] and subsist."

"When I go to my family's fishing grounds in June and July, I go not just for food, but (also) for spiritual nourishment. It's as much a religious experience as anything else. When I'm there I belong, I know who I am... though I understand that people who don't have this sort of relationship with the land might see this as fluff."

"I believe that resource extraction has its place. There's a desire here for industry for economic viability, but we need to make sure our natural resources are in balance. I wasn't that alarmed about the mines until I asked the KSM [Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell] representatives some simple questions. I was condescended to; they weren't transparent. 'Don't worry,' they said. 'The dams [that hold the toxic tailings] are covered for 100 years. Just take our word.' What about the 101st year? It's not 'will it fail?' It's when. It might be a long time, but it will fail."

"Then what? These mining operations have potential to impact our land and water like nothing that's ever been seen before. The disaster at Mt. Polley raises the legitimacy of our concerns. When are our natural resources going to be held in the same esteem as a project's 'commercial potential?'"

"The Tlingit and Haida's culture and self-perception is dependent on the land. Any threat to the land and its resources is a direct threat to our existence. If the salmon go away, that changes how we are."



"WHEN I GO TO MY FAMILY'S FISHING GROUNDS IN JUNE AND JULY, I GO NOT JUST FOR FOOD, BUT FOR SPIRITUAL NOURISHMENT. IT'S AS MUCH A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AS ANYTHING ELSE. WHEN I'M THERE I BELONG, I KNOW WHO I AM."

## Brian Merritt

Commercial Fisherman/Teacher, Wrangell

**B**rian Merritt moved to the town of Wrangell when he was three. “My dad came here to teach school and fish,” he began. “Now I teach fourth grade and fish.” Where Pete Peterson and Heather Hardcastle set gill nets, Merritt likes to troll. “I run 18 hours out of Wrangell to the open Pacific,” he explained, “and troll offshore. I’ll fish all the way from Cape Muzon (at the southernmost border with British Columbia) to Cape Edgecomb (near Sitka). I do some drift-netting later in the summer, but it’s a different deal. It’s not as satisfying.”

When asked about the appeal of trolling, Merritt’s already enthusiastic manner almost bubbled over. “Part of the reason I do it is for the money, much of it is for the thrill. You catch a lot fewer fish than the gill netters, but it’s exciting. Trolling for king salmon is the best job in the world, you get paid while having fun! Just because you hook ‘em doesn’t mean you’ll land them.” He explained how trolling works. “You have four lines, each with a cannonball (to get the lines down). Each line has six to 20 leaders, and each leader has a lure attached. You might use spoons, you might use hoochies [which resemble a rubber squid]. It’s about outsmarting them; one guy might get five fish on a pass, the other guy 40. I own \$5,000 worth of hoochies and sometimes I still don’t have the one the kings like!

“On a typical day when I’m trolling, I wake up at 2:30 and begin the run out. There will be 20 or 30 mast lights on the water as you head out. On the way, I’ll tie gear. I’m often six or 15 miles offshore; if that’s the case, I won’t come back into port for a few days. I’ll get up early and fish all day. On a good day in the summer season, you might get 100 king salmon. This year, I got 191 on the first day of our seven-day season. The boat can hold 1,000 iced fish. The processors don’t want fish that are more than five days old, so whether you’ve filled the boat or not, you head in after day five. I can get \$70 to \$80 for a king salmon. They’re paying you for a job you love; kind of like teaching fourth grade. My daughter is 20 and she said recently, ‘You know, Dad, I might come up and fish kings with you even when I have a full-time job.’”

“MY DAUGHTER IS 20 AND SHE SAID RECENTLY, ‘YOU KNOW, DAD, I MIGHT COME UP AND FISH KINGS WITH YOU EVEN WHEN I HAVE A FULL-TIME JOB.’”



## Brenda Schwartz-Yaeger

Owner, Alaska Charters & Adventures

**I**m the fourth generation in my family to get some portion of my livelihood from the Stikine River,” Brenda Schwartz-Yaeger mused from the seat of her boat in one of Wrangell’s sheltered marinas. “My ancestors were big game guides, trappers, fishermen and crewed riverboats going up the Stikine. My dad was a fisheries biologist. He might have been the first white man to hike all the tributaries of the Stikine.”

Schwartz-Yaeger wears a few different hats to make ends meet in Wrangell as so many Alaskans do—in her case, artist, commercial fisher and tour operator. “In the summer, I captain a custom jetboat that was designed to let me get back into the nooks and crannies of the Stikine... and back out,” she continued. “John Muir described the Stikine as ‘a Yosemite Valley 100 miles long.’ There are peaks up to 10,000 feet, rugged mountains with glaciers reaching down, wolves, moose, beavers and bears, brown and black. It’s a big chunk of wilderness; for wilderness to function, you need vast areas like the Stikine. Most of my clients (200 to 300 a season) are photographers or nature lovers. I try to give them an overview of the place, a beautiful cruise with a stop every 30 minutes to explore. It’s hard for people to wrap their mind around the river—even recognize that it is a river. The scale is humbling. I like to make people take a breath and realize how insignificant we are, that we’re not in control. I’ve had people have a life-changing experience out there; others want to rush back to the mall!

“You can take this boat all the way up to Telegraph Creek—that’s 167 miles. It’s amazing to think of the steamships once plying the river that far upstream. There was a time when the Stikine was a highway and a workplace for the native peoples. At times through history, no one really knew exactly where the border [between Alaska and British Columbia] was. I don’t think we can take the Stikine country apart and say, ‘Canada, you do what you want.’ As far as fish and nature and the river are concerned, there’s no line there.”



“IT’S HARD FOR PEOPLE TO WRAP THEIR MIND AROUND THE RIVER—EVEN RECOGNIZE THAT IT IS A RIVER. THE SCALE IS HUMBLING.”



Wrangell Mountain Range