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Celebrating clean water

By Mary Catharine Martin | CAPITAL CITY WEEKLY

You'd be hard-pressed to find a Southeast Alaskan that doesn't love salmon, or a salmon that doesn't need clean water.

Several recent short films highlight the importance of Alaska's salmon rivers, while focusing, to some degree, on proposed Canadian mines located in the watersheds where those rivers begin. Many fishermen, tribal groups, environmental organizations and tour operators see British Columbia's mining boom as a threat to salmon, and to Southeast Alaskans' way of life.

Southeast Alaska Conservation Council recently formed "Inside Passage Waterkeeper," which communications director and film producer Daven Hafey says focuses exclusively on clean water in the Inside Passage. It's part of the International Waterkeeper Alliance, which also has branches in Puget Sound, Cook Inlet and more than 200 other places. The group's first project was a short film called "Water is Life."

"We might have some disagreements ... and that's fine ... that's the way any creative society should function," Hafey said. "But (the program/video is) to help people understand we're all in this together."

The film briefly mentions the mines, but focuses on the importance of the Stikine River. "We have this incredibly rich and increasingly rare resource," Hafey said. "Southeast Alaska is one of the best places to live in the world, and a big part of that is because we have such clean water here."

Hafey said they didn't ask people about mines, but that "nine out of ten" brought it up. "When they (people in Telegraph Creek, Petersburg and Wrangell) caught wind of what we were doing, they believed in the project of telling the story of the Stikine and they wanted to make sure we got it right," Hafey said.

Everyone with whom they spoke agreed on the importance of the river, he said. "There was nothing controversial or ambiguous," he said. "They were uniformly in support of clean water. In Southeast, it's pretty amazing to have so many people in support of the same thing."

XBoundary

Meanwhile, another short documentary on transboundary rivers - "Xboundary" - premiered to a standing-room-only audience in Juneau this weekend. For that documentary, filmmaker Ryan Peterson floated down the Unuk River, at the head of which a giant open pit and underground Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell mine is to be located. (We use the word "giant" because the largest of the open pits is to be as deep as the deepest open-pit mine in the world.) The event was organized by Salmon Beyond Borders, a group formed by fishermen, tour operators, environmental groups and the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Working Group, which counts among its members more than half of Southeast Alaska's tribes. Salmon Beyond Borders' members have been working to involve the International Joint Commission, which resolves disputes about the waters shared by Canada and the United States, on the matter of BC's transboundary mines. So far, Alaska's Congressional delegation, numerous Southeast Alaskan municipalities, and many others have formally requested the IJC's involvement. Just the same, it's something that's difficult to accomplish, said fisherman and panelist Heather Hardcastle; ideally, Canada has to agree it's necessary, as well.

The event Friday focused on the film's premiere, a panel including Ryan Peterson, mining expert David Chambers, Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska President Richard Peterson, CCTHITA environmental specialist Jennifer Hanlon, Hardcastle, and Jacinda Mack, whose Secwepemc people were negatively affected by the Mount Polley tailings dam breach on August 4 of last year.

(The dam breached in the Quesnel Lake watershed, which flows into the Fraser River. The Fraser River empties into the ocean near Vancouver. Imperial Metals, the company that owns Mount Polley, this year opened the Red Chris, a mine in the Stikine River watershed. The Alaska Department of Natural Resources and other state agencies interact with Canadian officials and regulators and have said they do not have outstanding concerns on the transboundary mines on which they've been consulted.)

After the breach, for the first time in her people's history, many could not fish and chose not to fish for salmon, Mack said - in part because they were worried about the health effects, and in part because they feared the tailings breach would reduce the spawn and they wanted to help the fish.

Quesnel Lake is the nursery of about a quarter of British Columbia's salmon, Mack said. "The news ... was like receiving news of a death in our family," she said. "We came together and had a grieving ceremony on the banks of the river. It would break my heart to see (it happen in) this community."

"I don't want it to be just a sad tale, even though it is," Mack said. She went on to talk about the work she and others are doing to ensure "we address this in a way that this never happens again."

"This is a really compelling issue for me," said Richard Peterson, who is from Kasaan, which he pointed out is "famous for some of the first and biggest mines in Southeast Alaska."

Peterson said he's pro-development in many circumstances, but on the matter of transboundary mines, he's "ready to be radical."

He compared Southeast Alaska's rivers to veins.

"They are carrying, truly, our world's life's blood," he said. "Sometimes I feel like the only time I know who I am is ... setting a seine (net) to pull in sockeye."

The first time he ever saw a herring spawn was in Sitka, though he's heard stories and seen pictures of large spawns around Kasaan.

"Because of overzealous resource extraction, my kids, their kids will never see that," he said. "It's a really emotional thing when you realize these resources, if we're not doing our part, they're gone."

Hanlon said her clan, the Teikweidi (brown bear) clan of Yakutat, is the core of her identity.

"From a tribal perspective, we're not simply stakeholders," she said. "We don't have one stake or simple interest when our entire existence is at risk ... we need to take care of the land in order to take care of our future ... for indigenous people, this is a human rights issue."

Upcoming films, showings

Inside Passage Waterkeeper has shown "Water is Life" in Juneau, Wrangell, Petersburg, Tenakee Springs, and Craig. They plan showings in Ketchikan in late June, and hope for some in Haines, Klukwan and Kasaan by the beginning of the summer.

The next project for the program will be called "We Eat Fish!" and will focus "on the fact that Southeast Alaska, throughout the region, consumes so much rich, healthy, affordable food that we can just gather or catch," Hafey said. They'll be filming it this summer in Ketchikan, Saxman, Metlakatla and Prince of Wales.

Salmon Beyond Borders may show "Xboundary" in other Southeast communities, said organizer Jill Weitz.

"We know clean water is absolutely important for everybody that walks this earth," Hafey said. "It's not optional for anybody. We wrote out this project to emphasize that ... the purpose of the video is to help people remember how rich this resource is."

To watch Water is Life, go to <http://www.insidepassagewaterkeeper.org/water-is-life-the-stikine-river>.

To watch "Xboundary," go to <http://www.salmonbeyondborders.org>.

• Contact CCW staff writer Mary Catharine Martin at maryc.martin@capcityweekly.com.