



Off the Beaten Path: Transboundary mining efforts are just another gold rush scam

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The history of gold rushes has no shortage of scams. There's everything from fake telegraph stations, to the disaster that occurred in Valdez in 1897-1898 when around 4,000 men and women, hoodwinked by steamboat companies advertising a supposed easier route to the Interior, were dropped off in Prince William Sound. In the ensuing months the would-be prospectors tried to reach the Klondike via a route over the Valdez Glacier. Suffering scurvy and other deprivations, many died. Several claimed there was an ice demon on the glacier that was tormenting and killing them. Few, if any, ever made it the gold fields.

My favorite scam was "The Petrified Man," a life size figure made out of cement and plaster someone found in a Denver junkyard. Jefferson Randolph "Soapy" Smith (the same Soapy who died after a gun battle with Frank Reid in 1898 in Skagway) acquired the statue and promptly claimed he'd found the body of the missing link. He put it on display in the booming mining town of Creede, Colorado and charged a fee for a look. After supposedly making thousands, Smith leased the "The Petrified Man" to another entrepreneur for a national tour.

Today, in Southeast Alaska and northwest British Columbia, we're faced with another, much less charming, gold rush scam. We're being told by mining corporations and the B.C. government that giant open pit sulfide mines being built in transboundary watersheds of the Taku, Stikine and Unuk Rivers won't pollute our shared waters. We're being told that the earthen tailings dams — the KSM mine in the Unuk watershed is predicted to produce 4,000,000,000,000 pounds of toxic tailings (acid mine drainage is toxic at one part per billion) — will not fail, that our concerns are unwarranted.

The Aug. 4, 2014 tailing dam failure at the Mount Polley Mine, owned by Imperial Metals, in central British Columbia couldn't make the scam any more transparent. Ten million cubic meters of toxic water and 4.5 million cubic meters of fine toxic tailings polluted the Fraser River watershed. For the first time ever, many of the First Nation Secwepemc people didn't fish for salmon.

The best scam artists trick their victims into thinking they're doing them a favor. The steamboat companies that created the Valdez stampede made the route sound like a surefire and quicker path to riches. Soapy Smith would sometimes send a collection around to buy a prospector a ticket home after Smith's gang had fleeced him. It's hard not to imagine the victim (unaware that his benefactor was the same man that had organized his robbery), depressed and exhausted after his Herculean effort and defeat, feeling a glimmer of hope that at least there was a little good in men. Smith may have been shot down, but his spirit lives on in giant corporations and the governments that are in thrall to them.

The mega mining corporations and Bill Bennett, B.C.'s Minister of Energy and Mines, have proven their commitment to talking pretty, but have shown little regard for acting responsibly. If Canada cares about the long-term future of the region, it will work with Alaska and the U.S. to involve the International Joint Commission and make sure a short term industry doesn't destroy a sustainable resource and way of life.

Imperial Metals was recently allowed to begin production at the Red Chris Mine in the Stikine Watershed. The Red Chris (a giant open pit sulfide mine) uses the same tailings dam design as the one that failed at Mt. Polley. A sulfide mine targets valuable metals in sulfide-rich ore. When sulfides are exposed to water and air, sulfuric acid is often generated and can lead to polluting watersheds and ecosystems.

During "Stories and Science of Our Transboundary Rivers," a presentation hosted by Salmon Beyond Borders, last Friday, Frank Rue, once the Commissioner of Fish and Game, posed a question to the panelists.

"There's been no large body sulfide mine that hasn't polluted in a wet environment. Is that true?"

Dr. David Chambers, a mining expert, admitted he couldn't think of any. He went on to say that, "Fundamentally all tailings dams will fail."

The majority of transboundary mines — all exist in a wet and seismically active region — are predicted to operate between 20 and 50 years. Water treatment from tailings will have to happen anywhere from 200 years to forever. The likelihood of that happening is about as good as Soapy Smith creating a dating and organic gardening reality show on Mars.

Panelist Richard Peterson, president of Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, described rivers and streams as acting like the veins and capillaries of the land. Peterson pointed out this isn't just an environmental issue, it's a human's right issue. Indigenous people have been dependent on salmon since time immemorial. To construct the tsunami of mines in a rushed, under-regulated and irresponsible manner is to undermine a 12,000 year legacy of salmon giving themselves to people and the land.

Panelists quoted Lt. Gov. Byron Mallot, who met with them Friday morning, as saying “this is not an issue, it’s an opportunity.” Mallot is right. The writing is on the wall. Future generations need us to get off the bucket (toilet), put on our rubbers, and stand up for our fish and waters.

- For more information visit salmonbeyondborders.org. Also, check out Ryan Peterson’s great 6-minute documentary XBOUNDARY at <https://vimeo.com/119170132>.
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