

Off the Beaten Path: Notes from the transboundary

I'd rather get smacked with a spawned out salmon

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FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

Writing this column isn't fun — it kind of feels like being slapped around with spawned-out chum salmon. This analogy might sound strange to some, but many of us growing up in Southeast Alaska have

experienced a salmon or two across the face. It's a small price to pay when it comes to all the good things salmon give us, like delicious food and money. Well ... there's also the hair loss and irritable bowels that come with the stress of commercial fishing. And then there's the immorality of lying about the size of one's catch that often comes with sport fishing. This column will not address the darker side of fishing.

On Oct. 24, Salmon Without Borders and the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Working Group held a presentation at Centennial Hall to better educate the public on the new wave of mining mega-projects sweeping across Northwest British Columbia.

It was Friday and, to be honest, I felt like doing what I do most Friday nights — sitting in the corner of my damp, cold room, lit by a single candle, listening to Mumford and Sons on repeat and asking the universe why. Salmon have been good to me, though, and the thought of our fisheries being threatened was enough to make me venture out into public.

For 12,000 years, since the great glaciers melted from Southeast Alaska, people and the land have been receiving the gift of salmon. Salmon ask for basically nothing in return. To keep receiving the gift — and give they do (according to Salmon Without Borders, they provide 7,000 jobs and generate \$1 billion in Southeast's economy) — it's simple: Don't threaten stocks by overfishing or by polluting the waters where they spawn and their young grow.

Many of the British Columbia mines, including several massive open pit mines, are planned to operate near the headwaters of our biggest salmon producing rivers, the Taku, Stikine and Unuk. These mines present numerous threats — acid mine leakage, a tailings dam failing, waste water not being treated and the residual toxic effects of heavy metals, to name a few.

At the meeting, Heather Hardcastle, commercial fishing outreach coordinator for Trout Unlimited, said that as of present, Alaska has no real mechanism to have any say over how these mining projects are developed. Chris Zimmer, the Alaska Campaign Director for Rivers Without Borders, described the British Columbia industrial boom as a "freight train pointed at Southeast Alaska. The question is, can we keep it on the tracks?"

The chance of the Taku, Stikine and Unuk being significantly polluted by these mines is somewhere between high and inevitable. John Morris, representing the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Working Group, grew up on the Taku River. He said that acid mine leakage has been occurring from the Tulsequah Chief Mine, located on a tributary of the Taku River, since the mine closed down in 1957, despite repeated attempts to clean it up.

David Chambers, president of the Center for Science in Public Participation, pointed out that acid mine drainage is toxic at one part per billion. He used the analogy that all it would take is one penny in \$10 million to pollute a water source.

These toxins don't just go away — they can contaminate a watershed for multiple generations.

Sarah O'Neal, the Associate Director of Fisheries Research and Consulting, said 40 percent of Pacific salmon have been extirpated from their original range. One third of the 1,400 remaining stocks are threatened. Forty percent of western watersheds are polluted from mining, according to the EPA.

At about this point in the meeting I started fantasizing fiercely about my wet room, Mumford and Sons and the unresponsive, cruel yet beautiful universe. Luckily Heather Hardcastle stepped up and offered some hope.

"Our best chance to keeping the train on the tracks is the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909," Hardcastle said and pointed out in Article IV of the treaty: "... the waters herein defined as 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." Hardcastle went on to talk about how the International Joint Commission was the ticket for mitigating negative effects from mining outside Alaska's borders.

Salmon Beyond Borders wrote in a pamphlet they passed out at the meeting: "Under the treaty, the State Department can refer a boundary waters matter to the International Joint Commission (IJC) for thorough review. In the case of Southeast Alaska/Northwest (British Columbia) transboundary region, the IJC would study and consider how this region's waters and communities may be affected by industrial mineral development in Northwest (British Columbia)."

The recent catastrophic failure of the Mount Polley Mine tailings dam near the Fraser River in British Columbia presents clear evidence that transboundary mining is worthy of the International Joint Commission. Mount Polley is owned by Imperial Metals, the same company that owns the Red Chris open-pit mine near a tributary of the Stikine River. The Red Chris mine has been blockaded by Tahltan protesters, recently.

If you're interested in adding your two cents for our salmon, Salmon Without Borders suggests sending letters "to Secretary of State John Kerry requesting that the U.S. Department of State refer the issue of mining and transboundary watersheds to the International Joint Commission for further study to assure protection of valuable resources shared by the U.S. and Canada."

I'm at the end here.

I retract the statement I made about the chum salmon in the first paragraph. Writing this column felt more like being smacked around by all five species of salmon, a handful of halibut and a sculpin for good measure.

It's our resources and our legacy, though.

No one but us can make sure we protect it for future generations. Next week I'm writing about puppies.

For more information visit <http://salmonbeyondborders.org>.

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