

Comment: Indigenous people ‘sing’ for the earth

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Have you heard of mine birds singing? Long ago, miners took canaries into coal mines to warn about the presence of poisonous gases. As long as the birds lived, people lived. Indigenous people are like coal-mine canaries, except that we are not brought into the mines — the mines are brought to us.

Our ancient indigenous homelands are located in present-day British Columbia and Alaska, considered part of the Arctic Nations. We are connected through water, culture, salmon, oral history and complex family bloodlines. As indigenous peoples, we now unite to address the urgent and far-reaching impacts of unbridled mining activities in B.C. We now “sing” of threats to our existence.

We have already felt the sting and suffering of a major mining disaster in B.C. in 2014 at Imperial Metals’ Mount Polley Mine, that left us reeling in fear for our future, clean water and wild salmon. The preventable disaster released 6.6 billion gallons of mining waste into Quesnel Lake and the Fraser River watershed, home to one of the world’s largest salmon runs. For the first time in history, indigenous families along the Fraser River did not harvest salmon, out of fear of mining contamination.

Despite it being the worst environmental disaster in Canadian mining history, no charges or fines have been laid against the company. Instead, B.C. granted the company a temporary re-opening permit that created new potential for another breach during spring snow melt. Their solution? Authorize ongoing discharge into Quesnel Lake. This “business as usual” approach to mining must end.

We maintain a long-term approach to our way of life, considering beyond our own lives, ahead to seven generations of grandchildren. We acknowledge our stewardship responsibilities and have already mobilized to work together, across political borders, to protect clean water, healthy salmon and flourishing wildlife by addressing mining threats in a proactive and collaborative way, to ensure our collective future well-being. Do you hear the mine birds singing?

U.S. President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau committed to “collaborating with indigenous and Arctic governments, leaders and communities to more broadly and respectfully include indigenous science and traditional knowledge into decision-making, including in environmental assessments, resource management, and advancing our understanding of climate change and how best to manage its effects.”

We share a vision of the future: fresh, clean water, wild salmon, healthy and vibrant communities thriving for millennia. Let us put safety before profits and implement the independent Mount Polley Report recommendations. Let us reinstate critical fisheries habitat protections under Canada’s Fisheries Act. International solutions and higher standards will benefit everyone.

We advocate for world-class stewardship and mining policies based on best practices and best technologies, such as that of the Northern Secwepemc, which has taken the industry by storm. In Alaska, the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Work Group calls for the U.S. government to uphold its fiduciary trust responsibility to tribes. We seek a binding agreement between indigenous and federal governments with seats as equals at the decision table.

Indigenous peoples from Alaska and British Columbia are rekindling ancient ties to bring together First Nations and tribes. At the end of April, we will meet on Prince of Wales Island in southeast Alaska, where we will collaborate to unify our strategies and actions to protect the vital resources we share with each other and the world. We welcome Trudeau and Obama to attend.

Please hear us. We sing for our changing Earth. We sing for our way of life. We sing for all of us. Join our chorus. Together, stronger and louder, we will inspire the world to keep the forest mine birds singing.

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