

## To talk transboundary mining, Taku Tlingit put folks in the same boat

Taku Tlingit reinforce cultural ties to land in discussion on transboundary mines



Katie Spielberger | For the Juneau Empire

Members of the Douglas Indian Association release flowers into the Taku River Sunday, July 12, 2015 in memory of loved ones who have recently passed away.

By [KATIE MORITZ](#)  
JUNEAU EMPIRE

Lillian Petershoare’s family fishes the Taku River and has done so for decades. A new generation is now learning the tradition.

John Morris “grew up on the Taku until I was 15 years old; I knew no other place.”

Barbara Cadiente-Nelson read a passage by Elizabeth Nyman: “This river, this watershed ... know who you are and, if you permit it, it will tell you.”

Tlingit men and women whose lineage can be traced to the Taku River area spoke on their connection to the water and the land during a daylong boat trip down the Taku River on Sunday. The cruise was organized by the Douglas Indian Association.

The trip was meant to “put us on the same boat” — drawing a link between Tlingit connection to the land and the need for mainstream awareness and protection of its resources, said the DIA’s Morris, addressing the diverse group of passengers on the catamaran.

The day's discussions aimed to show the importance of the river as a resource to the Taku River Tlingit, the T'aaku Kwáan, and impress that importance on the city, state and federal officials who came to listen.

It was also a space to talk about transboundary mines — metal mines located or planned across the political border in British Columbia that have the capacity to impact salmon-producing watersheds in Southeast Alaska.

About noon, the catamaran pulled up to a group of gillnetters just starting the day's work. Their boats trailed long streams of net in the expectation that they soon would be filled with Taku River salmon.

According to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, this week has brought the first 24-hour gillnet fishery opening during the sockeye run in Taku Inlet since 1988.

Tlingit elder and storyteller David Katzeek gestured out the catamaran's window and told passengers to take photos of the scene so future generations will know what it was to fish the river.

“This is not going to be available if people continue to do what's being done up the Taku River,” he said.

Industrial resource extraction near the river has caused people to think “it's mine; it's ours; I can do anything I want with it,” he said. “The Tlingit never lived like that.”

Environmental staff from the DIA and Rivers Without Borders spoke on the impact of the now-defunct Tulsequah Chief mine and other mines planned for sites upstream from Southeast watersheds.

Rivers Without Borders' Chris Zimmer said the Taku is “the most productive salmon river in Southeast.”

Zimmer spoke about the Tulsequah Chief, a metal mine that closed in the late 1950s but continues to leak acid drainage into the Taku River.

DIA has done chemical testing of beach sediment along the Taku to check for toxicity and to set a baseline as other transboundary mines pop up.

In August 2014, a tailings dam failure at the Mount Polley mine in British Columbia caused billions of gallons of toxic waste rock and contaminated water to flow into the Quesnel Lake watershed. The provincial government announced earlier this month it is allowing parent company Imperial Metals to reopen the mine.

B.C.'s Red Chris gold mine, also owned by Imperial Metals, recently received its final operating permit. It sits on the transboundary Stikine River watershed.

And the Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell mine, the largest proposed for watersheds shared with Southeast Alaska, sits at the headwaters of the Unuk River, which flows into Misty Fjords National Monument near Ketchikan.

Zimmer said the province is going to do what it wants to do in terms of its mine permitting.

“No matter what (British Columbia) does up there, we have to protect our rivers,” Zimmer said.

The United Tribal Transboundary Working Group, a coalition of 13 Southeast Alaska tribes, is working together to be a voice against transboundary mining and for Southeast's seafood-producing watersheds.

“The tribes decided the best way to handle this issue is to unite,” the working group's Jennifer Hanlon said.

The Taku was certainly putting on a good show Sunday — huge sea lions sunned themselves lazily on rocks, and pods of killer whales surrounded the boat, blowing columns of steam from their foreheads and dipping beneath the waves.

Katzeek sang a traditional killer whale song while almost everyone else used whatever technology they had on hand to snap photos of the animals.

Sylvester Jack, a Taku River Tlingit First Nation member “from the other side of the glacier” in Atlin, British Columbia, traveled to Juneau to take Sunday’s trip. No matter what a map might say, political borders don’t mean anything, he said.

“We are one people,” Jack said. “Protect this land, because without it, we are nothing.”