



WRANGELL SENTINEL

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To the Editor:

Can Alaskans trust the government of British Columbia to act honestly, responsibly and openly as B.C. authorizes and proposes to manage a series of mines (up to six of them) in the watersheds of some of the greatest, wildest and most productive watersheds in North America? Is BC “basically the same” as Alaska, as Mines Minister Bennett claims, when it comes to process and regulation of industrial activity? There is no question B.C. has a “mine approval” process, but make no mistake, it is vastly different beast than a legal, public and scientifically legitimate environmental or social impact assessment process.

The reality is Alaskans are heavily dependent upon, and place huge value on public lands that are the foundation for an abundance of salmon, fresh water, productive watersheds, and subsistence, employment and recreational necessities and opportunities ; they are fortunate, more than many in North America, to be endowed virtually in their back yard, with federally protected and managed landscapes like National Forests, including the spectacular “salmon” forest, the Tongass, and National Parks and Wildlife refuges. While there are powerful and persistent special interests working against the people of Alaska, Alaskans still have on their side a slate of federal legal and regulatory processes that have enabled citizens to defend their interests and those of society in general. These democratic and legal processes are why Alaska stands atop the pyramid of states whose present and future ecological and social integrity is anchored in a wealth of federal managed lands and resources that benefit Alaskans preferentially.

So how does British Columbia compare to Alaska when it comes to empowering its citizens and limiting the ambition of special private interests who have long coveted public resources? As a wildlife scientist who has studied land and resources management and conservation in BC and AK for several decades, I have some observations that I think Alaskans should take to heart, and I’d like to quickly summarize a few of them, just as I did recently at a public forum in Wrangell.

Just 1% of B.C. is owned and managed by the federal government, compared to about 64% in Alaska. The upshot of this is there is no federal law, with its ability to draw in public participation, widespread legal scrutiny, or use of science standards, at play in B.C. Canada’s endangered species Act, know as SARA, applies only to federal land., and B.C. has no ESA. It means that rivers like the Stikine, the Taku and the Whiting in B.C. lack the public and federal regulatory oversight that Alaska benefits from.

These are watersheds, and provincial forests, akin to State Forests, that have no comprehensive Forest Management plan like the Tongass does. Why? There is no equivalent of a National Forest Management Act in B.C. or Canada, and without a legally enforceable Land management plan for Northwest B.C., there is and can be no public

oversight; B.C. has no NEPA, and consequently there is no legal public EIS process, and no Appeals process. In those very few cases where environmental assessment is politically initiated, the industrial proponent, that is the mine developer, is allowed to write its own environmental impact statement (or at least what passes for one in B.C.)

Without a legally defined management plan, powerful public and legal tools for environmental management and protection like a roadless rule or a travel management plan are only a pipe dream. Without travel management plans, roads proliferate and road density and use threaten fish and wildlife habitat. The public is shut out of the government-industry agenda for these lands, and for decades it has been an agenda of logging and mining. To make matters worse, British Columbians are systematically kept in the dark about industry / government communications; B.C. has no Administrative Procedures Act to expose agency conduct and rules to judicial or public scrutiny, and there are no Sunshine Rules in place, so records and meetings are not available to the public.

Most of America's environmental protection success depends on citizen participation and scrutiny, a very crucial part of which is your legal right to enforce environmental laws in the courts (citizen suit provisions). No such right exists in B.C. or Canada, consequently after decades of immunity, agencies and industry (mining) treat public lands and resources as there for the taking. Resource depletion and endangerment are common outcomes in this kind of regime.

The take home message exposed by these crippling deficiencies is that Alaskans, their rivers and salmon and all that depend upon them, are exposed and vulnerable unless they insist on, and get, an airtight international binding legal agreement for performance standards, inspection and enforcement for mines in B.C. Without that in hand, the ecosystems you depend upon will, with time, be progressively in not catastrophically, degraded.

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