

THE BATTLE OF BRISTOL BAY



FROM PETERSON/THE ELY SHOP

ABOVE: Aerial image of the Nushagak River in the Bristol Bay area.

TOP RIGHT: Campaign adverts have been running in the American press.

The proposed development of a massive gold mine in Alaska is threatening disaster for its fish-rich rivers, writes **Tom Legge**, and the region's entire future could depend on how our trade reacts.

United we stand, divided we fall. An old cliché perhaps, but one with more than a mere grain of truth underpinning it. Across the globe, anglers and their collective representative organisations have fought battles against pollution – industrial or agricultural, overt or insidious – for generations.

The outcome is so often dependent upon

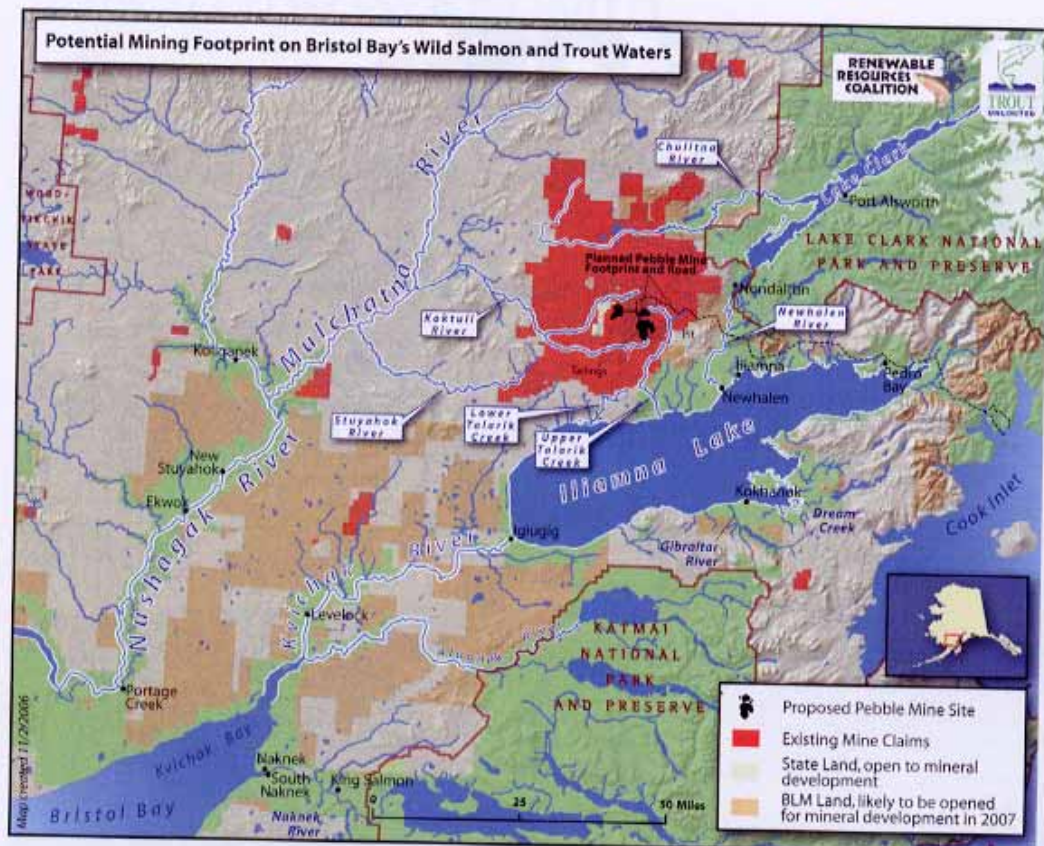
their financial strength and that of their opponents – plus of course the willingness and ability of the authorities to monitor and enforce penalties.

From a trade perspective, pollution is bad

“The angling trade is fighting shoulder to shoulder with environmentalists”

news. The bottom line is surely that you can't sell fishing tackle if there's no fish to catch?

Now angling's attention is on Alaska and what has become known as The Battle of Bristol Bay. It is quite possibly the sport's largest ever fight against polluting forces, and one where anglers and the angling trade are fighting shoulder to



ABOVE: This map shows the extent of the area that will be affected by the proposed mine.

shoulder with environmentalists, commercial fishermen, outdoor clothiers and a significant chunk of the native Alaskan population.

The story is best told through the eyes of these key players (see panel, right), but here is a brief history. It began in 2004, when a mining conglomerate applied to the state of Alaska to create what would be North America's largest open pit gold and copper mine in the fish-rich region of Bristol Bay.

Pebble Mine – as proposed by Canadian firm Northern Dynasty and their powerful partner Anglo American Mining – would occupy an area of some six square miles and require the construction of a complete supporting infrastructure including roads, processing buildings and offices, in land surrounding or fringing two major watersheds with numerous tributaries.

These rivers are home to giant rainbow trout and grayling, and also contain the spawning grounds of massive numbers of Pacific salmon. Some estimates claim up to 60 per cent of the Pacific salmon population run these rivers to spawn. Whilst that figure remains unsubstantiated, what is irrefutable

is the fact that 100,000 sockeye salmon were clocked by an Alaska Department of Game and Fish sonar on a single day last July on the Kvichak River. Coho salmon follow the sockeye run a month later, with bears in eager attendance throughout. Herds of caribou also traipse the region on their annual migrations.

It all sounds like the basis for a wildlife documentary – and indeed that is exactly how Felts Media, award-winning producers of fly fishing films, saw it. Shot in 2007, 'Red Gold: The Southwest Alaska Salmon Treasure' is a documentary in the making, clips from which are viewable on several campaigning websites including www.bristolbay-alliance.com and www.savebristolbay.org.

The US fly fishing trade has supported the film through donations. The banner ads of such companies as Redington, Rio, Sage, Brunton, Berger, Patagonia, Scott, Seal Line, Thermarest, RL Winston Rod Co, William Joseph, Abel, The Fly Shop and Trout Unlimited are prominent on the sites. Any donor of more than \$500 has been promised a listing in the film's credits. For more information email travisrummel@gmail.com.

"Some estimates claim that up to 60 per cent of the Pacific salmon population run these rivers to spawn."

The centra

The local hero

Battles against pollution often throw up local heroes. Bristol Bay's leading light is Scott Hed, outreach director with the Sportsman's Alliance for Alaska, who has taken the crusade on the road to angling shows around the USA.

Scott has also been focusing on a petition calling for two new ballot initiatives. They call



Scott Hed is optimistic about new legislation.

for new laws in Alaska to compel large-scale mining operations to comply with a number of clean water initiatives. The petition needed 24,000 signatures for it to be considered for legislature. Scott delivered the following update just hours before this issue of *Angling International* went to press.

"One of these [two ballot initiatives] would completely ban the use of cyanide. These are not intended to affect smaller family mining operations which are part of the region's history and heritage. But should one or the other be passed, we feel this would raise the bar too high for Pebble Mine to be built.

"We turned in 30,000 signatures and we're confident that there will be enough following the necessary checks for accuracy of addresses. If neither is accepted, the matter will go before Alaska's voters either in August or November."

The overseas ambassador

Internationally respected English fly fisherman and angling artist Charles Jardine has acquired a kind of unofficial role as the European ambassador for the Bristol Bay battle. Jardine, a consultant to several companies including Hardy Greys, is an active participant in UK angling politics.

"I'm supporting the cause directly by doing a painting, the original of which will go to the Federation of Flyfishers for auction at their annual jamboree in Montana this July. A limited edition run of prints will also be made available," he said.

figures in the battle



Charles Jardine, raising awareness.

"I am also doing my best to raise awareness of the situation in the UK and Europe. Angling unity is a buzzword at the moment, but we are light years behind the situation that this has created in the US.

"People see this battle as a touchstone against future desecration of nature. We have to support it and learn from it because, make no mistake, there will be a time when something similar happens in Scotland or Slovenia or Poland or the Czech Republic.

"We're up against some very powerful organisations, who will present a very smooth and slick case as to why they should be allowed to proceed with the mine. But here they've grabbed by the tail if not a tiger then a tiger cub, and even tiger cubs can hurt and they can grow."

The trade veteran

Among the many tackle and outdoors companies supporting the cause is a senior trade figure who has served time representing the wider industry:

Bill Kline of US outdoor clothing and equipment giants Patagonia.

Says Kline, "I was president of our trade association for many years and know that it can be difficult to galvanise companies into united action, but this particular issue has done that like never before.

"The US and Canada have a great deal of experience in how mines operate and their effects on the aquatic environment. When an open pit is dug, the tailing complete with arsenic and other toxic chemicals has to go somewhere. It's estimated that the dam required for a tailing pool for an operation the size of Pebble Mine would be 15 storeys high.

"Past experience tells us that the dangerous chemicals still leach into water systems for many decades thereafter, and this would obviously have a terrible impact on the many wonderful fisheries of Bristol Bay. These chemicals even break down the plasticisers on fly lines, so you can imagine what they do to the fish and wildlife.

"The mine's effect on the region's economy would be good for ten to 15 years, but the aftermath vastly outweighs that. Patagonia would likely be less affected than the likes of Sage or Scott, but this is something we simply have to stand together on."

THE MINING PERSPECTIVE

No reference to the environment or fishing could be found on the pages www.northerndynastyminerals.com, website of Pebble Mine prospectors Northern Dynasty Minerals Ltd.

However, the Pebble Limited Partnership – formed by Northern Dynasty and Anglo American – has a photo of a fly fisherman on the environment page of its website, www.pebblepartnership.com, where the introduction reads: "The Pebble Partnership is committed to develop the Pebble Project in a way that will provide long-term benefits for local communities while protecting environmental values and traditional ways of life.

"To date, The Pebble Partnership has invested \$55 million on environmental and socioeconomic studies to guide the development of a project plan that will be submitted for government and public review in the years

ahead. These multi-disciplinary studies were conducted with the assistance of 50 independent consulting firms. Additional studies are currently underway.

"Environmental baseline studies are the cornerstone of environmental planning at the Pebble Project. Data collected from these rigorous studies provide the basis for understanding how the natural environment in the project area works.

"This knowledge is essential to determine how the project can be responsibly developed and managed without compromising fisheries and other valued natural resources in the Bristol Bay region. The Pebble Partnership will provide baseline data to state and federal agencies and the public at various stages as part of its commitment to full disclosure. Additional information will be posted on this site as it becomes available."



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