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AT GREAT RISK

An Alaskan Outfitter's Take On A New Mine Proposal.

During the past 23 years, my family has considered the wilderness of Bristol Bay in southwest Alaska our home. Our homestead, centrally located in Becharof National Wildlife Refuge, is surrounded by wilderness, thousands of square miles of it, complete with oversized moose, perpetually hungry grizzly bears and peripatetic wolves and caribou. Like Africa, Alaska is one of the world's great game fields, and the Bristol Bay region is one of the finest areas in the state.

I come from a family of hunters, and it was the game that first attracted us, but it is the wilderness – and by that I mean an entire bio-

logically intact, healthy ecosystem with operating balances and counterbalances that has minimal human impact – that keeps us here. We still guide a few hunters and fishermen but try our best to keep our impact to a minimum. Our home is small, tiny in fact, and other than our airplane, we use no motorized vehicles. Our minimal power requirements are easily met by using solar and wind power. Our reverence for wild places, however, is not shared by all.

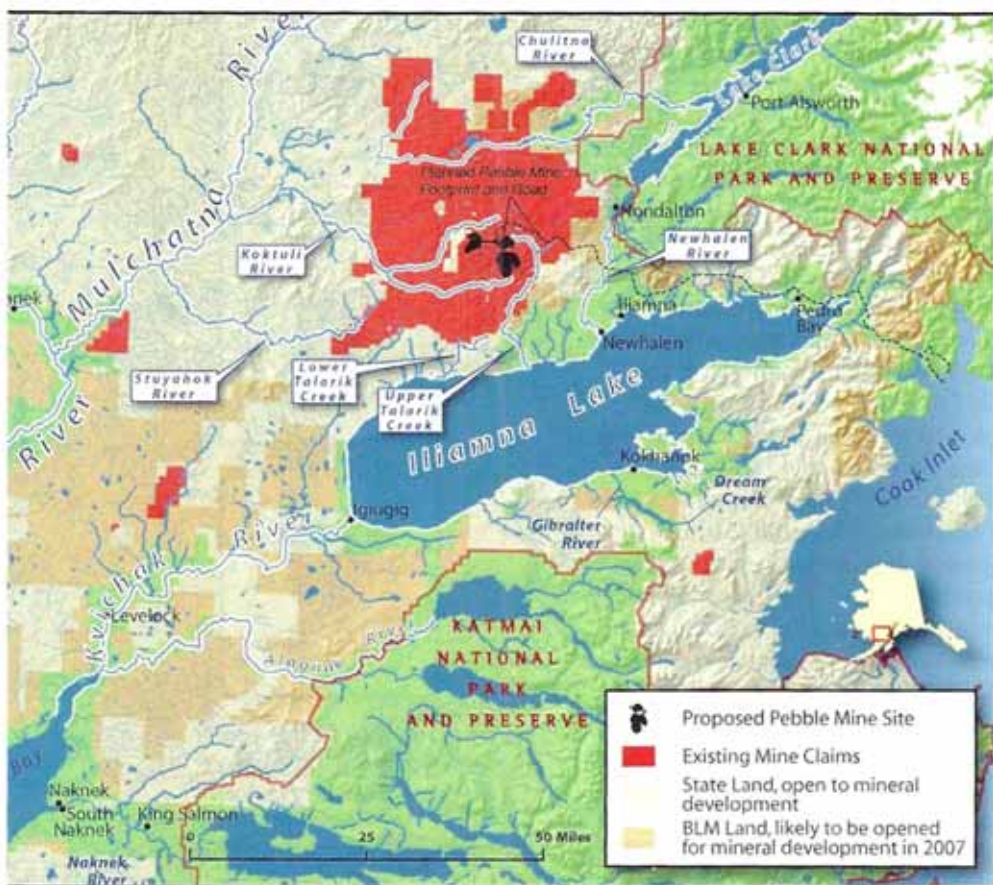
Historically, our nation, to say nothing of our state, has not been as kind to wilderness. Wild places were looked on as areas to be subdued and exploited. As our country's population continues to boom,

and housing developments, shopping malls and box stores expand, the pressure on its few remaining wild areas is intensified. Natural resources are needed in increasingly large amounts. Recently, large deposits of gold, copper and molybdenum have been identified in the Bristol Bay region, and America's relationship with wilderness is again being examined.

There is no arguing the fact that our country could use raw materials, as well as jobs, and that is the tact the backers of the proposed Pebble Mine in southwest Alaska are exploiting. As proposed, the Pebble project would become one of the world's largest combined open-pit and deep hole underground mines. The estimated life span of the mine would be 70 to 100 years with an estimated \$800 billion worth of minerals extracted. The mine is expected to employ 1,500 workers, and no doubt spill over to many more with the needed transportation, road building, power generation, housing, etc. It all sounds fantastic until you examine the details.

The Pebble Mine site is at the head of the Bristol Bay region of the state, on the upper end of the Iliamna watershed. Iliamna Lake is the largest in the state and spawning grounds for tens of millions of salmon and uncountable trout, char and grayling. The mine owners, Northern Dynasty and Anglo American, plan on using cyanide leaching techniques to extract the minerals. That is the same method as was used in Anaconda, Butte, Clark Fork and Miles City, Montana, mines. Mines that have become environmental disasters as their toxic chemicals leach into surrounding waterways. They have become taxpayer-funded, super-fund sites.

The difference between these mines and Pebble Mine is that Pebble will be many times larger. Foreign mining giants Northern



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Dynasty and Anglo American propose, and promise, to safely contain their toxic waste in perpetuity in three immense lakes behind dams, each larger than the Three Gorges dam in China! Historically and statistically that seems unlikely, as both Northern Dynasty and Anglo American have abysmal environmental records in Indonesia, Guyana, Romania, New Guinea and Peru. A close look at their prospectus even shows that, as non-U.S. companies, they claim they cannot be held liable for environmental damages.

At risk is the entire Bristol Bay ecosystem, home to a quarter of the world's sockeye salmon and the richest fishery in the world. Not only are we gambling with the cultural and traditional subsistence lifestyle of the local natives, an indefinitely sustainable, \$100 million per year commercial fishery and a \$60 million sport fishing industry, but also possibly the fate of all the world's salmon. According to a recent Wild Salmon summit in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, the world's most prominent experts from Japan, Russia, Korea, Canada and the U.S. claim that "Bristol Bay salmon stocks are the key to preserving genetic diversity of wild salmon."


Fish will not be the only species to suffer. Bristol Bay and the entire Alaska Peninsula are home to the densest population of brown bears in the world. Their density and phenomenal growth are due to the seasonable accessibility of salmon. Even the moose and caribou benefit from the influx of nitrogen and fertilization of the soil and vegetation surrounding the streams and tundra. Without salmon the entire region's ecosystem will collapse.

In the past I have worked at gold mines, and I realize there will always be trade-offs and compromises. Some are worthwhile. I hate to sound like the average whining NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard), but the long-term environmental consequences of the Pebble Mine are beyond anything the world has ever seen. As we have discovered in Europe, Canada and both coasts of the U.S., salmon are highly susceptible to environmental disturbances.

Betting that three monstrous, toxic-filled lakes sitting on porous soils in a seismically active area will never leak is a fool's bet.

With carefully crafted legislation and oversight it might not happen in my lifetime, but statistically it is a certainty. When it does happen, it will be devastating and last longer than all the money made by local miners and the fortunes sent overseas to foreign corporations. Two thousand-year-old Roman mines in

Briton still leach toxins into their streams.

Bristol Bay is the world's finest and largest fishery, as well as home to one of the few remaining great game fields of the world. Like Tanzania's Serengeti plains and Ngorongoro Crater and Botswana's Okavango Delta, it is a natural jewel that deserves protection. There will always be jobs and money, but once the world's natural treasures are exhausted, they are gone forever. 

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