

Wild Heritage

By Todd Tanner



I was in Alaska back in September for the annual rainbow trout feeding frenzy, and I brought home a small reminder of my trip. It's a brown and cinnamon pebble about the size of a quarter. Now I didn't pick out this particular stone because of its beauty, although it's certainly handsome enough. Instead, I pulled it from the edge of Frying Pan Lake – the lake in the photo – because I wanted something tangible to mark the spot in my memories. If the proposed Pebble Mine becomes a reality, the lake, with its salmon, pike and rainbow trout, along with the top end of world famous Upper Talarik Creek and a large swath of the surrounding countryside, will simply cease to exist.

That's right. In case you haven't heard, we're getting ready to trade part of the pristine wilderness that sits atop Lake Iliamna, one of North America's most important angling destinations, for a pile of gold and copper. And if, in our shortsightedness and greed, the Pebble Mine happens to destroy what

Like a deadly time bomb, a proposed gold and copper mine could eventually devastate one of the world's most productive trout and salmon fisheries.



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may well be the finest wild trout and salmon fishery on the planet . . . well, at least I'll have something to remind me of the way things used to be.

Nothing is black & white anymore. Not even the subject of wildlife conservation. It's all complicated, with infinite shades of gray, and we're constantly being told that we need to balance fish and game against the economic bottom line. As sportsmen, we have to allow for growth, for

expansion, for progress. We have to compromise.

Except sometimes we can't compromise. Sometimes we have to draw a line in the sand and say, "Hell, no!" Sometimes the risks to the resource so far outweigh the potential rewards that reasonable men and women, folks with their heads on straight, have no choice but to take on the SOB's who worship profits and don't give a damn about the places we hunt and fish.

Here's a news flash. The Good Lord isn't building any more great trout streams, nor is he going to replace Upper Talarik Creek (part of which will be swallowed by the

mine) or the Koktuli River, or the Mulchatna River, or the Nushagak River or the Kvichak River, if we stand by and allow a Canadian

company by the name of Northern Dynasty to turn the gentle slopes above Lake Iliamna into a time bomb.

And that's what the mine will be. A time bomb. You can't build North America's largest gold and copper mine, with 700-foot-high earthen dams and vast lakes of toxic waste, without courting catastrophe. Hell, you certainly can't do it in an earthquake prone area on top of the world's most productive trout and salmon rivers.

Here are a few things to consider about Pebble:

- The mine's enormous open pit would be roughly two miles long, a mile and a half wide, and 1700 feet deep.

- One of the huge earthen dams would be more than four miles long and 700 feet tall.

- The dams would need to hold back some 2.5 billion tons of tailings – forever.

- The Kvichak River, which boasts the world's largest sockeye run (as well as one of its top rainbow fisheries), and the Nushagak River, which has

Alaska's most prolific king salmon run, would both be at risk.

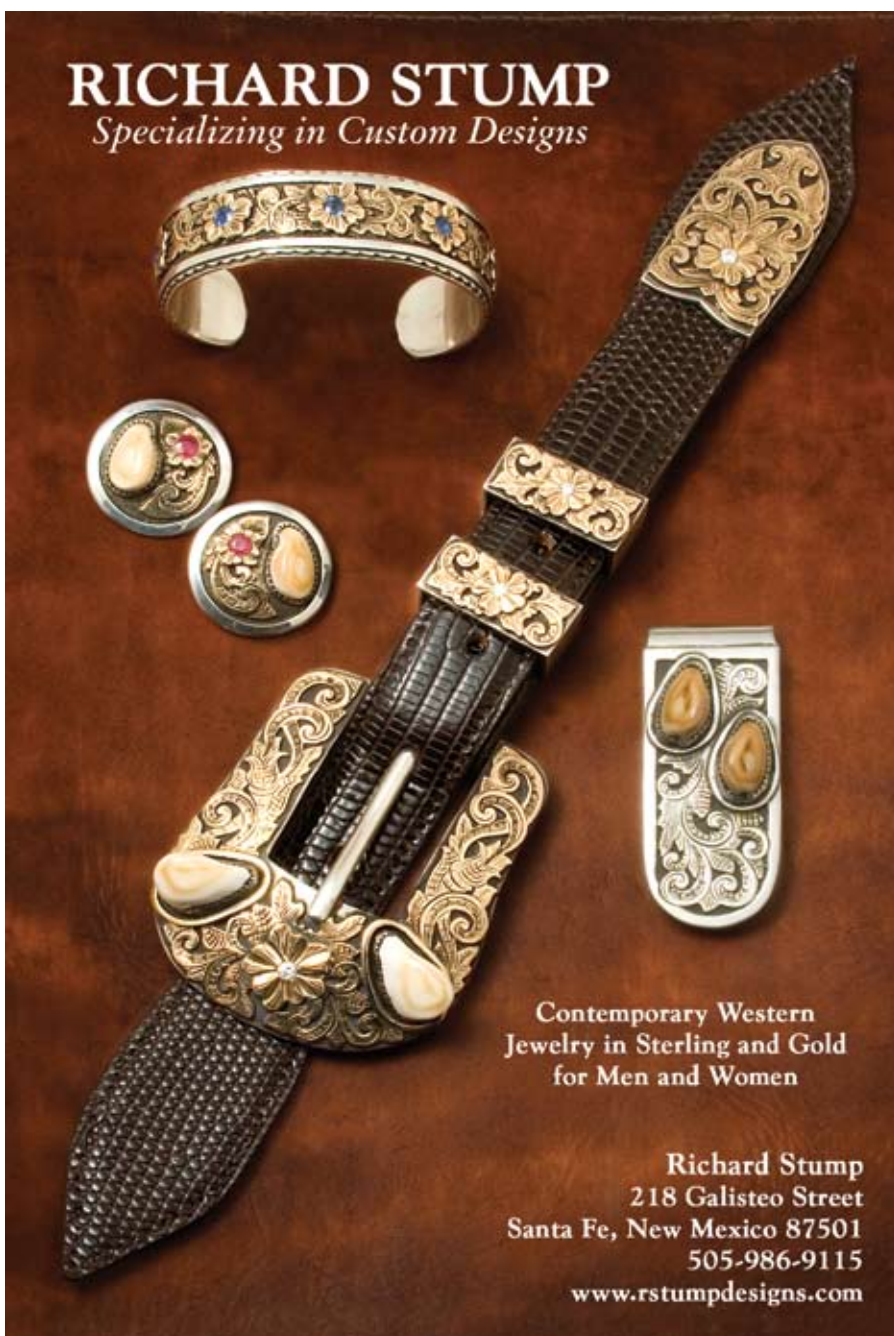
- The Bristol Bay region has frequent earthquakes.

In early September Brian Kraft and I flew out to the proposed mine site and wandered around for a while. Brian runs Alaska Sportsman's Lodge, one of the nicest trout/salmon/char operations you could ever hope to visit, and he's adamantly opposed to the mine. And you can understand why. If someone decided to industrialize your local wilderness and then store a vast witch's brew of cyanide, sulfuric acid and toxic heavy metals just upstream from your fishing lodge, you probably wouldn't feel all warm and fuzzy about the project.

But Brian's opposition to the mine runs a lot deeper than his economic interest in the local fishery. You simply can't live in that amazing country without opening your heart to it. You learn where the salmon spawn and the rainbows feed, you walk the ancient caribou trails that are worn deep into the earth, you see the brown bears and eagles, and you eventually start to understand that this particular landscape is not only special; it's unique.

Then, out of the blue, men in expensive suits show up and say it's time to cash in. The hell with the salmon, the hell with the trout, the hell with the caribou, the hell with the bears. Forget the hundred million dollar Bristol Bay sport fishery. It's all about the gold.

Well, the fact is that we can do without the gold. What we really need – and I can't emphasize this enough – is sanity. Because putting the entire Lake Iliamna region at risk is insane. It's madness. You don't trade an amazing natural treasure (and the sustainable local economy it supports) for a boom-and-bust mine and an ongoing legacy of toxic contamination. Not when history teaches us that the vast majority of hardrock mines are unable to contain their pollution or keep their promises.



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Fortunately, there are an awful lot of sportsmen who oppose the mine. Trout Unlimited has come out against Pebble. So has Alaskan Senator Ted Stevens, the Dallas Safari Club, the Alaskan Bowhunters Association, the National Wildlife Federation, the Sportsman's Alliance for Alaska, American Rivers, the Federation of Fly Fishers, the Bristol Bay Alliance and the United Fishermen of Alaska.

On a local level, more than 70 percent of the area's residents, as well as *Alaska Magazine* and the *Anchorage Daily News*, want to stop Pebble. But we need even more hunters and fishermen to stand up. The State of Alaska will likely decide the fate of the mine, as well as the ultimate fate of the Bristol Bay trout and salmon fisheries, in the next few months. Please take a minute to sign the online petition at www.sportsmansalliance4ak.org. You can also contact Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, who seems to be sitting on the fence, and share your thoughts.

Just before Brian Kraft and I flew out to the site, we fished the Kvichak downstream from his lodge. My notes from that morning are a far cry from eloquent, but they'll give you a reasonably good feel for what we experienced.

hooked 20 rainbows up to 27"

average size was 23" to 24"

*lost one huge fish of 10 lbs. or better
great angling*

Right now, the Sword of Damocles is hanging over the Kvichak. Hell, it's hanging over the entire Bristol Bay region. If the Pebble Mine gets the go-ahead, the floodgates will open, more mines will be proposed and approved, and our world – a world that still includes wild trout and salmon and bears – will be greatly diminished. Is that really the legacy we want to leave our children? 🐾

Author's Note: You can write the Governor of Alaska at the following address: Honorable Sarah Palin, Governor of Alaska, Third Floor, State Capitol, Juneau, AK 99811. You can also e-mail her at: <http://gov.state.ak.us/govmail.php>

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