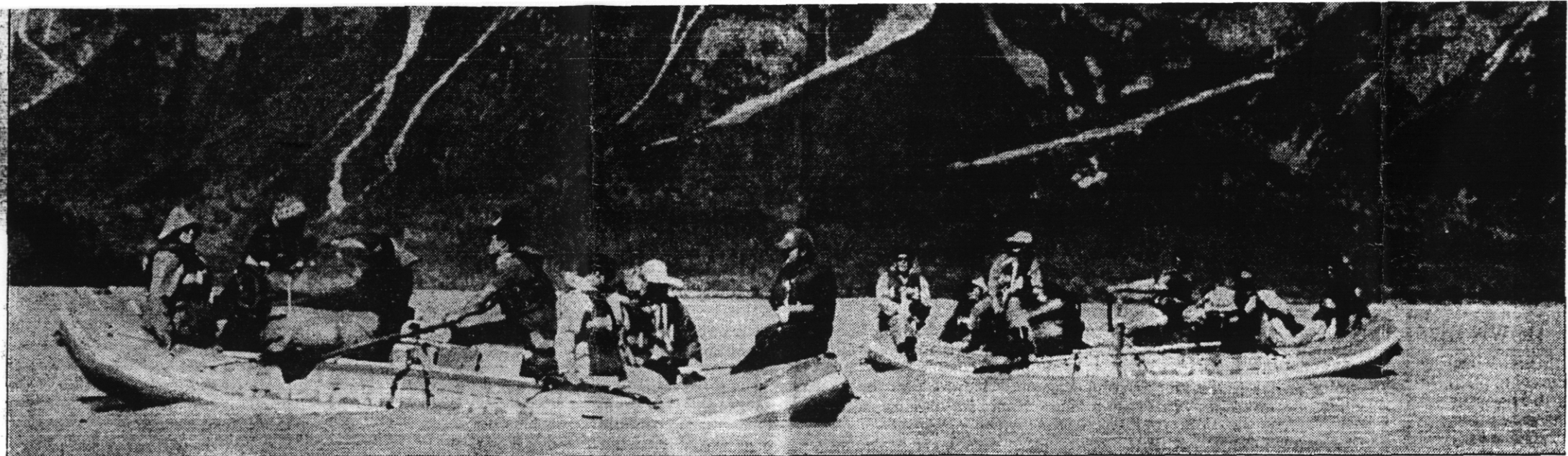


Windy Craggy 24/180

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ON THE TATSHENSHINI-ALSEK RIVER SYSTEM: a trans-boundary river and an international issue

Environmental coalition springs to the defence of B.C.'s top wilderness stream before miners get at copper deposit

By MARK HUME  
Sun Senior Correspondent

A MAJOR international environmental confrontation is brewing in British Columbia's most remote region.

The battle over the Tatshenshini Valley, in B.C.'s wild northwest corner, was joined Friday by a coalition of 24 Canadian and U.S. environmental organizations representing 7.5 million people.

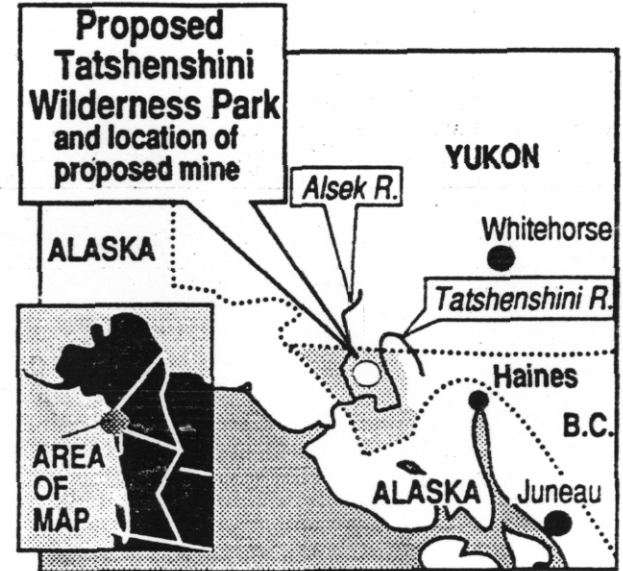
As an opening move the coalition will call on the governments of B.C., Alaska, Canada and the U.S. to hold full environmental impact assessments of a massive copper-robalt-gold mine proposed for Windy Craggy Mountain, in the St. Elias Range.

The Windy Craggy deposit, owned by Vancouver-based Geddes Resources Ltd., would be one of the biggest mines B.C. has ever seen. With an estimated value of \$400 million it would produce 120,000 tonnes of copper a year and provide 600 jobs for at least 20 years.

The economic and physical scale of the mine are staggering — but so are the wilderness values in the St. Elias Range, a rugged triangle of mountains that juts across the top end of the Alaska Panhandle.

The Tatshenshini River, which runs down the valley and which a mine access road would have to cross, is widely regarded as the best wilderness river in

# River of conflict



North America.

The "Tat" also hosts a major salmon run and supports one of the few salmon sports fisheries in northwestern B.C. and the Yukon.

The mine would be located near a glacier above the Tatshenshini River.

"There is nothing I have seen, anywhere, that can compare with the Tat," said Ric Careless, executive director of the Wilderness Tourism Council of B.C.

"We believe this mine could be an environmental disaster and we have to know what the costs are.

"We are saying we want complete environmental assessment — federal, provincial and U.S. — before any further work is done on this mine."

The Wilderness Tourism Council, which represents about 1,000 wilderness business operators in B.C., has been joined in the protest by the National Audubon Society (U.S.), World Wildlife Fund Canada, Sierra Club (U.S.), American Wilderness Society, Environmental Youth Alliance (Canada), Yukon Conservation Society, B.C. Wildlife

Federation, International Rivers Coalition (U.S.), the Western Canada Wilderness Committee and 14 other groups.

"I've been involved in wilderness issues for 20 years and this is the first time I've ever seen so many groups come together so quickly," said Careless.

Environmental critics have two complaints about the proposed mine, which plans to start production in 1994. First, it would produce millions of tonnes of waste rock which could generate acid drainage in to the Tatshenshini.

The acid drainage, which geologists say would continue for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, could destroy the Tatshenshini salmon run, environmentalists say.

Second, a mine access road would have to bridge the Tatshenshini, thereby reducing the river's wilderness quality.

Careless said the acid drainage threat makes the Windy Craggy mine an international issue because the river runs through Alaska and U.S. fishermen target the Tatshenshini salmon.

U.S. wilderness rafters also operate on the river.

"It's a trans-boundary river and an international issue," said Careless.

Paul George, director of the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, said his organization is concerned about the earthquake threat in the area.

Geddes Resources plans to put a huge mine tailings reservoir behind a one-hundred-meter-high dam. But George said the dam could be destroyed by an earthquake.

George said a quake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale hit the area in 1958.

"If the mine development goes ahead, the Tatshenshini would be under threat from an acid spill disaster for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. It's like putting a nuclear waste dump atop the San Andreas fault," said George.

Doug Haagenon, manager of administration for Geddes, said the company is well aware of the valley's wilderness values — and the mine's potential threats.

Haagenon said he is not surprised to see

a coalition of environmental groups lined up against the mine.

"We've heard this 100 times before," he said of the concerns raised by Careless and George.

"We have done approximately \$4 million worth of studies on that project so far. We have done a lot of environmental work."

Haagenon said a major environmental impact statement has been filed with the B.C. government and the company is prepared to conduct more studies, as the government may dictate.

Under the mine development review process, the company is expected to file technical reports on the project's environmental, social and economic impacts.

The government is reviewing the plans. Haagenon said the company expects to be asked to fine tune its initial filing.

"We do acknowledge that our work is not complete and that there are deficiencies. We want some response from the mine review process so that we can address that in stage two."

He said the company has explored all possibilities and there are no alternatives to building a bridge over the Tatshenshini.

He said Geddes engineers believe the mine can neutralize acid drainage.

"Acid drainage is not a new problem," he said.

Haagenon said the company rejects the need for more environmental hearings.

"In our opinion we do not feel the environmental assessment review process is necessary in Canada and the same would apply to the environmental impact statement process in the United States."

Geddes Resources is about to launch a public review of its plans, with hearings in Smithers, Prince George, Kamloops and Vancouver on May 22, 23, 24 and 28, respectively.

Environmentalists are holding their own public process, with a lecture and slide show in Vancouver on May 1 at 7:30 pm in the Robson Square Conference Centre.