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Opinion

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Windy Craggy
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DEVELOPMENT VERSUS PRESERVATION



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GOLD MINE OF NATURE: Tatshenshini wilderness area is site of a battle between tourism and environment advocates and the mining industry

An industry perspective on the TAT

by DAVID BARR

... a geological consultant, writing on behalf of the B.C. and Yukon Chamber of Mines

IN THE WAKE of the half-page rhetorical flourish by columnist Stephen Hume arguing for the absolute preservation of the Tatshenshini/Alsek wilderness area (Shangri-la, May 7), it is necessary to ask: What's the real issue?

The real issue is that:

1) This remote portion of B.C. had not been considered to be of any public interest until the discovery in 1958 of Windy Craggy, a significant copper-cobalt-gold-silver deposit on Tats Creek, a subsidiary of the Tatshenshini River. Only in the late 1970s did part of the Tatshenshini and Alsek Rivers become popular for rafting;

2) River-rafters are attempting to preserve 100 per cent use of the Tatshenshini and Alsek rivers, none of which is directly affected by the proposed mine. They object particularly to construction of a bridge and an access road of which they will have occasional sightings over only a fifth of their 100-kilometre route. They have spurred an international environmental lobby to designate the entire 11,000-square-kilometre Haines Triangle a wilderness area;

3) The Windy Craggy deposit is of world-class significance and yet this potential mine development, including access road and all ancillary facilities, would occupy no more than 0.1 per cent or 11 square kilometres of the total Haines Triangle. The mine site itself lies 30-40 kilometres up Tats Creek from the Tatshenshini River. Only recently, it has been recognized that Windy Craggy appears to be within a highly mineralized belt of rocks of at least 40 square kilometres which contain other significant but relatively untested copper deposits;

4) Most of Haines Triangle is rock, scree, snow and ice. The most scenic portion, apart from sections of the Tatshenshini and Alsek rivers accessible to vessels, lies west of the Alsek River and includes Tweedsmuir glacier. However, there are tens of thousands of square kilometres of equivalent terraces

throughout the Coast Mountains in B.C. and Alaska. In fact, the Haines Triangle is surrounded by three major national parks and preserves that cover 88,000 square kilometres, already one of the largest protected alpine areas in the world.

Now, in seeking to preserve rafting on the Tatshenshini with no unnatural visual impacts, preservationists are promoting the addition of almost one-sixth of the remaining six per cent of the provincial land base available for the government's objective for park creation to this remote and inaccessible portion of B.C.

5) Many preservationists speak disparagingly of the mining industry's contribution to the B.C. economy. This is particularly discouraging in a recessionary period when the economy needs stimulus to develop new resources.

Windy Craggy would require an investment of \$555 million for initial development with a mine life of 20 to 40 years. Annual expenditures are estimated at \$150 million, resulting in 500 direct jobs and 1,500 indirect jobs for contractors, suppliers and others. Personal, mining and corporate income and sales taxes alone for the first 20 years are estimated at \$720 million for B.C. and \$545 million federally.

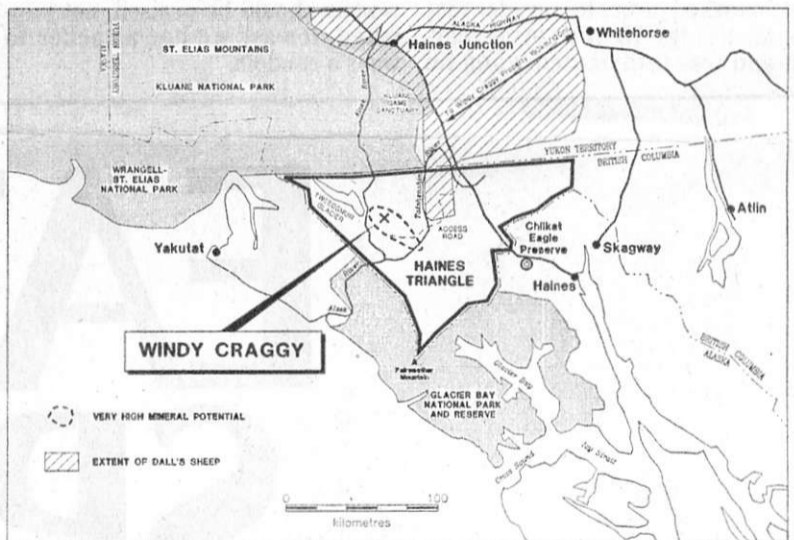
At its current level of 45 rafting trips per season, about 1,000 individuals contribute \$1 million to \$1.5 million in total revenues, which would presumably continue unimpeded during the life of the mine.

SEVERAL PARTS of Hume's article deserve critical re-examination.

• "Certainly it (Tatshenshini) seems essential to the survival of North America's grizzly bears."

Surveys indicating the actual number of grizzlies in the area are inadequate. The most recent B.C. Fish and Wildlife Branch estimate of grizzly distribution indicates the Tatshenshini/Alsek area is part of a large zone with an average of more than one grizzly bear per 65 square kilometres. The 1990 estimated population of B.C. grizzly bears was 14,500, while the Yukon estimate is 6,300, widely dispersed.

• "Flanked in Yukon by Kluane National Park and Alaska by



Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, the Russell Fiord Wilderness Area and Tongas National Forest, the Tatshenshini would establish a biodiversity preserve of international scope."

Such a preserve already exists without Tatshenshini.

• "Distinct ecosystems ranging from sea level to 3,000 metres and from river estuary rain forest to intermontane tundra are present in the Tatshenshini."

Similar distinct ecosystems exist throughout the Pacific Northwest — each unique in the purest sense.

• "In the middle of this is where Geddes Resources wants to locate its Windy Craggy copper mine, an open pit project that will decapitate a mountain and produce 375 million tons of waste rock. To put that volume in perspective, loaded into pickup trucks and driven away, bumper to bumper, the line would extend from here to Saturn."

As planned, Windy Craggy would be mined by both open pit and underground methods. Based on its reserve of 327 million tons granting 1.4 per cent copper and other metals, gross metals recovered would be valued at \$8.5 billion (at current metal prices). Waste rock produced would remain on site in waste dumps. Mr. Hume's mathematical analogy is meaningless as the 190 billion pickup trucks required to span 1,280 million kilometres would each contain about

1½ kilograms of waste rock.

• "Stephen Owen's Commission on Resources and the Environment says the proposed Windy Craggy project poses a threat to fisheries valued at \$50 million a year."

THE 1992 preliminary value of the salmonid fish catch from the Alsek River system approximates \$200,000 US. While a letter attributed to Ric Careless, executive director of Tatshenshini Wild, states "CORE says that the [Windy Craggy] mine would place international fisheries worth \$50 million/year at 'severe, perpetual and large scale risk' from potentially massive amounts of acid and heavy metal pollution," there is no reference to any quoted value in the commission's report.

• "In a worst case, we trade a resource that's sustainable in perpetuity for one that's non-renewable and has a fixed life span. Considered over 500 years the fishery turns out to be worth about \$25 billion. Some trade off."

Even aside from the inflated estimate of the fishery's value, there would be no impact on the salmon resource if the plan to avoid contamination of the Alsek/Tatshenshini river system is maintained. B.C. mining operations face stringent requirements for maintaining downstream water quality.

There is no trade-off, only maximization of the use of our natural resources. □