

802330 *A planned open-pit copper mine raises concerns over B.C.'s last frontier:*

THE TATSHENSHINI

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Southam News

The wildest river in North America runs through a part of Canada left over from the Ice Age, past giant ice fields, peaks four kilometres high and glaciers that calve into the slate grey water.

Untouched by roads or permanent settlements, the Tatshenshini in the northwest corner of British Columbia is true wilderness. But deep inside one of the mountains is a cache of high-grade copper, and a Toronto company wants to slice off the top of the peak to get at the metal inside.

Geddes Resources Ltd. is planning to build a giant open-pit mine on Windy Craggy Mountain. But environmentalists, backed by a group of prestigious international conservation organizations, have begun a national campaign to tell Canadians what is at stake.

"I'm convinced we will see it protected. It's like we're living in the last century and discovering Banff. It is so splendid, so beautiful, so incredibly scenic it surely won't be destroyed," says Ric Careless.

One of several activists fighting to stop the mine, Careless has been travelling across Canada to talk about the Tatshenshini, a remote river many Canadians have never heard of.

When he describes the exquisite beauty of the wide northern waterway edged with ice and mountains and alpine meadows, his voice is that of a man enchanted.

"On the south-facing slopes the snow melts early in the spring. The gravel is deep, so the grizzly bears can burrow, and there are dens every five

square kilometres. It is B.C.'s wildest and last frontier."

As well as grizzlies, the Tatshenshini wilderness area is home to eagles, mountain goats, salmon and Canada's only population of the rare silver-blue glacier bear.

Geddes wants to start construction this year and have the \$600-million project on line by 1994.

"I am convinced we can stop it," Careless says.

Last year, the initial plan to mine the Windy Craggy deposit was rejected by both the B.C. and federal governments, primarily because of the company's approach to the waste rock left over after copper is extracted. The ore contains high concentrations of sulphur, which, when exposed to air and water, turns into sulphuric acid.

Geddes Resources' first plan was to pile the waste rock on glaciers. Their revised proposal is to store it under a four-kilometres-long man-made lake.

Company president Gerald Harper says water would act like a barrier to keep oxygen out, and prevent acid from forming. "If it was going to be an environmental catastrophe, I wouldn't have proposed it. I've got too much concern about the environment for that."

Activists aren't so sure.

The underwater storage method was more expensive than the original plan. To make it economically feasible, Geddes dramatically increased the size of the mine.

The average production is predicted to be 30,000 tonnes of ore a day, up 50 per cent from the original proposal. And more than 150 trucks would be needed to haul out copper concentrate every day — that works out to one truck every 12 minutes.

Careless says the technology Geddes is proposing

isn't well-tested, and that acid could leach through the soil into the ground water if it isn't properly stored.

If the acid gets into the river, it could destroy the salmon many other animals depend on. The risk of acid drainage will last long after the mine shuts down, at least a century, Careless says.

The B.C. and federal governments are screening the revised proposal. If it is approved, it will move to the next stage of the environmental review process, and a panel would likely be established and public hearings held.

Geddes is not a large company and employs only 12 people full time. But larger Vancouver-based mining companies are major shareholders: Cominco Ltd. owns an 18-per-cent interest, and Northgate Exploration Ltd. owns 44.5 per cent.

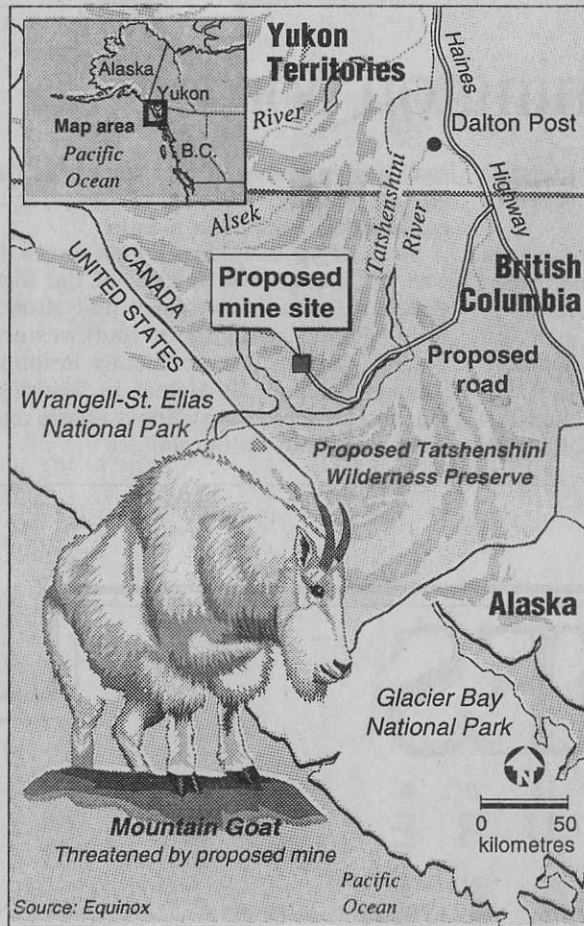
And environmentalists question the company's ability to finance and run a project of this scope. Harper counters that the size of the company is irrelevant.

Geddes faces a formidable array of environmental groups: 26 groups representing two million members across North America have been linked up through a group called Tatshenshini Wild.

And the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, backed by the Sierra Club, World Wildlife Fund and the National Audubon Society, and the U.S. National Parks Service have asked the B.C. government not to approve the mine.

Canadian environmentalists are also asking the province to create a new provincial park.

Alaska and Yukon already have national parks in the area, and if B.C. follows suit and protects the region's heartland, the arctic and sub-arctic reserve would be among the largest international protected areas in the world.



Source: Equinox
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