

# 6

## Chilkat River



PHOTO: COLIN ARISMAN

CHILKAT RIVER, ALASKA

**State:** Alaska

**Threat:** Mining

**At Risk:** Salmon and local cultures

### Summary

Every year, hundreds of thousands of salmon swim from the Pacific Ocean into Alaska's Chilkat River to spawn. Local tribes and other communities depend upon the river and salmon for their culture and economy. A proposed copper-zinc mine could change this forever, polluting the river with toxic acid mine drainage. Federal and state agencies have abandoned their responsibility to protect the Chilkat. The local community is trying to resist, and the last hope is to convince the project's corporate investor, DOWA, that the only responsible course is to back out of this mine to preserve the health of the Chilkat for future generations of wildlife and people.

### The River

What makes the Chilkat River and its abundant salmon runs truly unique are warm, geothermal upwellings that prevent areas of the river from freezing until much later in the winter, after other salmon streams are long-covered in ice. The river's magnificent runs of king, sockeye, coho, pink and chum salmon prompt the largest gathering of bald eagles in the world every fall in the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve. The Tlingits of the Chilkat Indian Village of Klukwan, who have lived along the Chilkat River for thousands of years, named the eagle gathering area on the Chilkat the "Council Grounds." Klukwan is one of the longest continually inhabited places in North America. The Chilkat River salmon also support one of the largest brown bear populations close to human habitation — 350 brown bears live in the Chilkat Valley alongside the 2,500 people living in Haines and Klukwan.

The Chilkat River's salmon, eagles and bears are the cultural and economic backbone of the entire region. The value of the subsistence, sport and commercial harvests of salmon are rivaled in importance and economic impact only by the tens of thousands of tourists that come to the Chilkat River every year to fish, paddle rafts, kayaks and canoes, and photograph the river and its wildlife.

### The Threat

A Canadian-based company is securing permits to develop a copper-zinc mine just outside the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve and the Tlingit Village of Klukwan. The deposit, known as the Palmer Project, would be a stone's throw from the Klehini River, one of the Chilkat's main tributaries. The mine site is only a few miles from the confluence of the Klehini and the Chilkat as it approaches the Haines Highway, a National Scenic Byway paralleling the river as it races down the valley to Haines and the Lynn Canal.

# 6

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Based on experiences at other similar mines, the extraction of copper-zinc-silver-gold-barite ore will likely generate sulfuric acid, which will mobilize heavy metals from mine waste and surface deposits. Given the high levels of rain and snowfall every year in the Chilkat Valley, it is inevitable that metals toxic to salmon will migrate into groundwater and surface waters. To make matters worse, the region is on a major seismic fault and experiences significant earthquakes on a regular basis; several of the largest earthquakes ever recorded were centered within a short distance of the Chilkat Valley. Any storage facility for millions of gallons of contaminated tailings and wastewater would be under constant threat of catastrophic failure.

When salmon are returning from the ocean, they must find their home streams to spawn. They accomplish this amazing feat by detecting the natural profile of minerals present in the water of their home river. If that mineral profile changes, they become disoriented, burning up the precious energy they need to reach their upriver spawning beds. Any higher level of contamination and they become sick, produce deformed offspring or die. Any runoff, leakage or even permitted discharges from the mine would significantly alter the water quality and chemistry of the river, and threaten the Chilkat's salmon runs forever.

Any significant impact to the Chilkat salmon runs would mean the end of the annual eagle gathering, the loss of critical habitat for the valley's brown bears and drastic changes to a culture and lifestyle that has been central to the people of the Chilkat Valley for millennia. The mine might only be in operation for a decade, but it would put at risk the survival of this incredibly special place for hundreds if not thousands of years.



PHOTO: CONNOR GALLAGHER

### What Must Be Done

It is impossible for the mining industry to guarantee that this mine will not at some point result in major impacts to the Chilkat River and the entire valley ecosystem. Unfortunately, both federal and state administrations have shown little interest in protecting this special place from mining. However, a Japanese minerals investment firm, DOWA Holdings Company, has been backing the Canadian effort to develop this prospect for the past eight years. DOWA claims on its website to commit to, "hand-over the sound global environment to the next generation through our business activities...We will minimize the environmental impact and environmental risk in our business activities..."

We are challenging DOWA to live up to its claim of protecting the environment. They must reevaluate their support for the Palmer Project and leave the Chilkat River and its salmon, eagles, bears and people intact for generations to come.



PHOTO: ADAM SARACENO

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#### Take Action:

[www.AmericanRivers.org/Chilkat2019](http://www.AmericanRivers.org/Chilkat2019)