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Stikine River

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The River

The Stikine River flows from an area known as the Sacred Headwaters in British Columbia into Southeast Alaska. The Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people have occupied this region for more than 10,000 years. The community of Wrangell is home to 2,400 year-round residents with the population rising to more than 3,000 during the seasonal fishing period. Indigenous people rely on foods gathered from the river and forests to survive. “Subsistence” food gathering is not just about eating; it is the major method of how culture is passed down to new generations. The Stikine supports five different species of salmon, as well as moose, geese, deer and multiple other game that are integral to the diet of the entire community. One of the river’s claims to fame is that it is the fastest-flowing navigable river in North America.

The Threat

The Stikine is threatened by the pollution from an operational mine at the headwaters—the Red Chris Mine, with others proposed nearby. These mines are extracting minerals, including silver, gold, molybdenum and copper. The Red Chris Mine is owned by the same company, Imperial Metals, responsible for a massive dam failure in 2014 at its Mount Polley site (Cariboo region, British Columbia, Canada) that polluted lakes and rivers with 24 million cubic meters of toxic waste.

Mines have to keep their tailings (toxic ore waste potentially containing cyanide, arsenic, and/or mercury) immersed in water in perpetuity. The earthen dams holding the tailings at the Stikine mines are engineered in the same way as the failed dam at Mount Polley. Further cause for concern is that the area sits on the Queen Charlotte/Fairweather fault, which is similar to the San Andreas fault in California. Consequently, the risk of an earthquake leading to a dam failure in this region is a major concern. As one tribal member stated, “If that dam fails, our way of life will become a dead zone.”

State: Alaska

Threat: Mining

At Risk: Indigenous way of life; healthy fisheries; clean water

Summary

The Stikine River’s clean water, fish and wildlife are the lifeblood of local communities, including tribes who have called the area home for thousands of years.

The river and its fisheries, water quality and people are threatened by toxic pollution from current and proposed mining projects. The International Joint Commission of the U.S. and Canada must protect the human rights of the tribes and others reliant upon a healthy river and stop these mines from polluting the Stikine with harmful mining waste.

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What Must Be Done

By allowing contamination from mining to endanger the transboundary Stikine River, British Columbia is violating the 1909 Boundary Waters treaty that prohibits Canada and the U.S. from polluting each other's waters. The Southeast Alaska Indigenous Transboundary Commission (SEITC) has asked the U.S. State Department to convene the International Joint Commission (IJC) to address this concern. International scrutiny of mining operations, under the objective auspices of IJC, is the best way to ensure protection of water quality and native fisheries in the Stikine River system. Specifically, the U.S. State Department should direct the IJC to investigate and report on the current discharges from the mines and the current cumulative adverse impacts on water quality, fisheries, wildlife and the environment. In addition, the U.S. State Department should request an immediate moratorium on new mines or mine expansions based on a lack of analysis of the cumulative and downstream impacts to water quality and fish habitat.



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On December 5, 2018, SEITC submitted a petition to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights calling for an international review on the threat these mines pose to the tribal way-of-life. The Inter-American Commission must agree to hear this case and seriously consider the impacts these mines are having on generations-old subsistence practices that form a mainstay of the livelihood, culture and traditions of the tribes.

Lastly, in 2018, Alaska Governor Bill Walker signed a Memorandum of Agreement with British Columbia to review the mines and discuss financial resources in the event of a disaster. Current Governor Mike Dunleavy must continue to support this collaborative effort to ensure a healthy, sustainable future for the Stikine River Basin and the tribes and local communities that it supports.

For More Information

Jessie Thomas-Blate
American Rivers
(202) 347-7550
jthomas@americanrivers.org

Tis Peterman
Southeast Alaska Indigenous
Transboundary Commission (SEITC)
(907) 305-0120
tispeterman@seitc.org

Take Action:

[www.AmericanRivers.org/
Stikine2019](http://www.AmericanRivers.org/Stikine2019)



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