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IMBROGLIO IN ALASKA

A unique coalition formed to head off a controversial mine could be a model for conservation efforts going forward.



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Salmon drive both the ecosystem and the economy in the Bristol Bay region.

There is something about the word *Alaska*. Its last syllable seems to leave a trail behind it, like an animal's breath suspended in cold light, or tracks in moist sand. It lingers in the throat long enough to conjure images, like the last note of an emotive song.

Alaska! Wild, free, untamed; a place where lifestyles still reflect resilience and independence; the last of the American

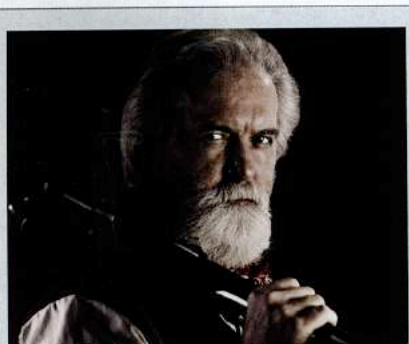
frontier; the last chance for us to decide what a future North America will look like. Will there be places to inspire dreams, to call our adolescent souls to adventure and freedom, to ensure our sacred belief that unyielding possibility and challenge can thrive in a universe of instant gratification and far too much connection?

These ideals remain enshrined in the American consciousness and they make Alaska unique within the national psyche. Certainly they are much more than romantic illusions. They lie at the heart of American idealism and its peculiarly adventuresome nature, that rare combination of hardheaded practicality and passionate ideology that has so profoundly driven American achievement. Indeed there is something deeply American about Alaska, and thus there will always be a part of America that cares deeply about what happens in the nation's last vestige of its former life. Alaska poses one question to the American conscience: Will we keep great wild places that are exceptional beyond measure? Or, like many Bierstadt and Cole masterpieces, will their reality survive only on gallery walls to remind us "What if . . .?"

Despite its great wilderness heart, Alaska has changed significantly in the last forty years and we are increasingly faced with decisions about what its future will be. One thing we can be assured of, once Alaska has been conquered by industrial push and rendered to sameness by modern views of importance, there will be an incalculable loss to America and indeed to people everywhere. While there are no easy answers to a way forward for any nation, state, or people, there certainly are consequences for each path chosen. Increasingly, there are fewer and fewer places where such decisions are even possible. Most have long since surrendered to the march of modernity, and reversing such decisions is simply not an option. Alaska must not be denied its right to decide and pursue its own way, but like it or not, these decisions will inevitably confront the wider views of the nation and the world.

Always for its native peoples, and for immigrants since the arrival of Russian trappers and traders in the 1780s, Alaska's wild resources have been the basis of the region's economy and the mainstay of its cultural identity. Today, however, energy reserves provide more than 85 percent of the state's revenues, and royalty checks are part of virtually every citizen's income. Indeed, Alaska has long been viewed as a state wide open for business; very wide open, in fact, with far less restrictive environmental laws than most. Nevertheless, traditional ways of life remain deeply embedded and those who make their living off hunting and recreational or commercial fishing have deeply held concerns about Alaska's future, as well as their own. Naturally, those who market wilderness want to keep Alaska as wild as possible. At the same time, many Alaskans look to new job opportunities created by industrial activities.

Since 2001, a storm has been brewing in Alaska over this issue, a decision



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about salmon, gold, and a way of life. Like everything Alaskan, it has taken on huge proportions. It is known as the Pebble Mine debate, but it is no small stone and by overturning it, one finds a complex issue indeed. The proposed mine lies within a water-soaked region of extraordinary ecological importance approximately 250 miles southwest of Anchorage, known as the Bristol Bay watershed. Its network of streams, ponds, lakes, and wetlands supports an incredibly productive ecosystem that is home to all five species of Pacific salmon, with an annual run of sockeye alone that can average 375 million fish. Within its watery embrace, nearly two hundred bird species and forty mammal species can be found, including the iconic great bears, caribou, and moose. If there is a magical place within a magical kingdom, this watershed is certainly it. Its commercial, subsistence, and recreational fisheries alone are worth hundreds of mil-

lions of dollars and support at least 14,000 jobs annually.

So we might all agree, this is one place we do not want a major industrial development. Regrettably, in 1988 the largest gold and copper deposit in the USA (there is also molybdenum) was found at the headwaters of the Kvichak and Nushagak Rivers, two of the watershed's eight major rivers that pour into mammal- and fish-rich Bristol Bay. While estimates vary, the reserves could be worth at least \$300 billion. Development would create at least 2,000 construction and perhaps 800 operating jobs—not huge numbers of people employed compared with fishing, but not insignificant in that region either. Also not insignificant is the scale of the proposed development and the potential impact and certain risk associated with this mine. There is simply no way to twist this without admitting that the risks are real for a potentially calamitous ecological disaster.

Pebble will be one of the largest mines on earth and will sit in a seismically active region. Extracting the surface and buried mineral deposits will require excavating and crushing some ten billion tons of rock, creating a seven-square-mile crater gouged to a depth of three-quarters of a mile, the largest open pit in the world. Only 0.4 percent of this rock will contain useful ore. Much of the remainder will be maintained in man-made lakes, covering nineteen square miles and contained by massive dams. Mountains of waste rock will be stored nearby. A slurry pipe will transport the milled ore to Cook Inlet on the coast, a haul road running perhaps 104 miles alongside it. Somehow, 300 megawatts of energy will have to be delivered or developed on site to supply not only mine operations, but the supporting construction town. Much, if not all of this, will remain forever in an area that today stands pretty much pristine.

There will inevitably be serious direct impacts on salmon and other resources within the immediate mine excavation and haul road areas. That much we already know. Certainly, that is the conclusion of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency based on its three-year study of the Pebble Mine. Just building the mine would destroy

between twenty-four and ninety-four miles of salmon-supporting streams, and between 1,300 to 5,350 acres of wetlands. Such losses are startling given that everywhere else we are struggling to maintain or recover these very same assets. Let us please not forget the lessons from the Columbia River Basin.

By far, however, the greatest concerns with Pebble relate to acid mine drainage. What if the expanse of acid-laden waters behind those dams escapes by leakage or breakage? The cost to the overall natural system, and to salmon in particular, would be potentially devastating. While we might all agree that the fisheries are not in immediate danger, any reasonable person must ask what happens as the mine expands and eventually closes. Who will be standing then to guarantee the integrity of the dams, or offer responses to problems that must inevitably arise? Barring major spills, even small leakages of toxic material could have serious effects on salmon, and thus on the entire ecological fabric that the salmon in this region support. Who can guarantee that man-made infrastructure is unbreakable, unbreachable, or unsinkable? Remember Chernobyl, the New Orleans levees, the Titanic, and maybe, for good measure or relevancy, the Exxon Valdez?

Perhaps it is not surprising that an unusual coalition has emerged to fight the Pebble Mine proposal. This is, after all, an iconic confrontation. One does not have to be an extreme environmentalist to wonder about the wisdom of building this mine in this particular place, nor does one have to be a visionary to realize that this debate is truly about frontier, asking us all, hunters, fishermen, trappers, bankers, lawyers, and businessmen alike, if we do not draw the line here, then when and where? What place will be deemed more sensitive, more critical to wildlife, to fish and to people, and this state and nation? What, if this mine is approved, are we prepared to say no to?

Most of us in the conservation and hunting world share a belief that reasonable economic development is essential to national progress, and we recognize that such development has costs. As the founders of the conserva- continued on page 42



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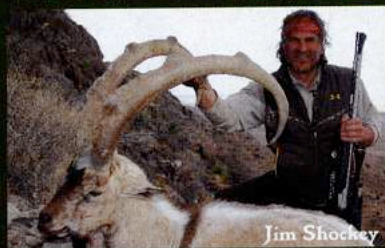
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Conservation Corner/continued from page 40

tion movement determined so long ago, it is not non-use that we wish for, but wise use. Our movement, that great social and political transformation that launched the challenge to unbridled exploitation of resources, and that included such a wide range of viewpoints and players, is now recreated in the coalition against the Pebble Mine. From fishing guides to a majority of native peoples, from jewelry companies like Tiffany & Co. to arms manufacturers such as Ruger, to international wildlife advocacy organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund, an incredible array of politics and opinions have coalesced against this development. It is especially significant just how many hunting and fishing groups have voiced opposition to this mine. Leadership by sportsmen for the conservation of a place most of us will never see . . . that is exactly as it should be. Remarkable for its diversity, this coalition might just win the day, and if it does, the effort will stand as a milestone in conservation history.

I say this not just because stopping Pebble Mine would be the right thing to do, nor even because it will send a signal that profit alone will not be the shepherd of development. I say this because this coalition is what some of us dream about, a great tidal force of diverse peoples and interests united in their common cause for the natural world and the human communities that depend upon it. In its glow we see the one chance that salmon, bears, and great wild places have in this increasingly fractured world. And, yes—it is the only chance we have as well, hunter and non-hunter alike. Ultimately a political decision will determine the fate of Pebble Mine, but in the end our coalition of citizens, with hunters and anglers leading the charge, will be the real gold dug from the heart of wild Alaska. In that, we can all take pride. 🐾

Learn more about the Pebble Mine issue at www.SportsmansAlliance4AK.org.

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