Toxic Myra Falls Mine 2024 and BC's "Protected Areas": Are We Waiting for the Time-bomb to blow up?

Back in 2017 Dr. Tom Pedersen warned that Myra Falls Mine contamination was a time bomb waiting to explode, particularly after a closure. Last December (2023) the Myra Falls mine closed, and on January 2 we had a flooding accident and a near miss. Should we be concerned?

Over the past four years BC's government has granted expansion permits to the new owners of the Myra Falls mine, without any public consultation. On December 18, 2023, after a couple of years of mine expansion activity that was supposed to boost investments and productivity, the "new mine owners," the Trafigura group of Singapore, filed for protection and announced the closure of the mine. In December a story, largely unreported in the provincial press was broken by The Financial Times (5 December 2023) that Trafigura is currently caught up in "one of the largest scandals to rock the metals industry" involving an alleged fraud of over $600 million. In 2010 Trafigura was also found guilty by a Dutch court of illegally transporting and concealing cargoes of toxic waste, after having been found guilty of similar activities in Angola in 2006.[1] And the list goes on.

Clearly, Trafigura is a company with a well-publicized shady environmental record, available to anyone who cares to do a quick Google search. Nonetheless BC's regulators treated Trafigura as a respectable business, and gave it more than a free pass at Myra Falls. This is a failure of government responsibility to the public. This should remind us that there is an urgent need for more public oversight of and action on the management of public lands. Enforcement and oversight by government cannot be trusted, anymore than it has been at Mount Polley where Imperial metals was found "not liable."

The history of little-understood and little-discussed impacts of the Myra Falls mine on Strathcona Park and Buttle Lake is particularly relevant today as BC heads into another cycle of mining expansions and booms. Having now completed the Transmountain and Coast Mountain Pipelines at great social costs to First Nations such as on Wet'suwet'en territories, and publicly acknowledged irreversible

[1] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-10735255

ecological damage in countless salmon streams,[2] BC is now set to shift its energy-focus from the environmental damage of fossil fuels to damage associated with rare earth metals in the pursuit of "green energy."[3] The mining industry announced in January that it is set to open 14 rare earth mines. Most of these mines will involve First Nations business partnerships under DRIPA (*Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*), which together with UNDRIP which forms the backbone of Canada's federal "30 by 30" strategy for protected areas.

The environment is a serious concern, particularly at a time of climate and biodiversity crises, when governments now seek to enhance their sagging public environmental credibility by claiming to create "protected areas." While the public may be misled into believing that "protected areas" are protected from development, only a very small percentage (about 3%) have effective protection from development. Most protected areas are open to anthropogenic impacts if governments approve permits. In BC under Bill 4 : *The Park Amendment Act* (2014) gas and oil and other industrial interests have access to BC Parks and "protected areas," if it is a government or ministerial priority. The reality is that parks and protected areas in BC, as elsewhere in Canada, are really "paper parks" as long as the public does not act as an oversight over government and industry, which are often one and the same, as witnessed at Fairy Creek and elsewhere.

Although the public has protested the presence of the Myra Falls mine since at least 1966, its continued presence is not really an anomaly within the framework of legislation largely designed to protect industry before the environment. It is a significant Trojan Horse within the park system for mining interests. It helps sustain the illusion that mining can co-exist with conservation. Few people ask about, or are aware of, the actual costs of this presence and dangerous co-existence.

Given the growing number of studies on the subtle impacts of noise, air and water pollution on biotic processes supported by local flora and fauna, such as this

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[2] https://www.thenorthernview.com/news/new-habitat-damage-allegations-levelled-at-northwest-b-c-pipeline-project-5998788 ; https://globalnews.ca/news/10067651/trans-mountain-pipeline-bc/; https://thetyee.ca/News/2023/07/25/Alberta-Pipeline-Endangers-Threatened-Fish/ ; https://rosslandtelegraph.com/2023/10/12/many-infractions-by-coasatal-gaslink-ignored-by-bcs-energy-regulator/

[3] https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/economic-benefits-critical-minerals-mining-in-b-c-1.7082260

week's study of the impact of air pollution on pollinators,[4] nothing seems further from the truth than the illusion of peaceful co-existence. Mining is a blight that only people unaware of the nature and value of intact ecosystems can ignore. This tenure and the current closure need to raise questions not just about the loss of 300 mining jobs, but about the entire validity of the protected areas strategy, in which protected areas are not really protected but open to licensing of companies like Trafigura, which can perpetuate damage and then walk away to protection from creditors.

This concern is even more urgent as British Columbia enters a new era of increasingly unpredictable weather extremes which accelerates erosion and increases the vulnerability of closed and abandoned mine sites. Less than a month after its closure The Times Colonist reported that on January 3 the mine narrowly averted a flood after the area received heavy rainfall.[5] While, as is customary, company representatives assured the public that there had been no adverse environmental impacts, *"One former worker says the recent flooding is significant and happened in an area that had just been actively mined a few weeks ago. The person also says the hydropower has been lost, and the operation is limping on backup power."*[6] Flooding and loss of power are a concern for leachate treatment at a mine site, which has always been a major problem at Myra Falls. As it has for the past six decades the reality of the Myra Falls mine's impacts on Strathcona Provincial Park and the waters of Buttle Lake has often been largely at odds with official re-assurances.

The environmental history of the park is a cautionary tale. While Buttle lake may seem to the general public to be a beautiful natural area flanked by snow-capped mountain, it is less so in the eyes of environmental professionals. While preserved from some of the worst of industrial depredations for the last forty years, the Buttle area is in fact, like so much of British Columbia today, a highly impacted legacy of colonial industrial exploitation often bordered by recovering and exhausted forests with a history of tragically contaminated waters, just waiting for a disaster to happen.

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[4] https://www.science.org/content/article/night-pollution-keeps-pollinating-insects-smelling-flowers

[5] https://www.timescolonist.com/business/flood-contained-at-myra-falls-mine-in-strathcona-park-8062090;

[6] https://www.cheknews.ca/province-investigating-flooding-inside-myra-falls-mine-1184238/

After the release of tailings in Buttle in 1966, the once prolific populations of rainbow trout and Dolly Varden collapsed, never to return.[7] Public protest called for an investigation of the contamination as of 1966. In 1982 Dr. Tom Pedersen from UBC's Department of Oceanography was asked by the mine owner to determine once and for all the source of Buttle's contamination. The tailings leach copper, lead, zinc and cadmium as well as other heavy metals. Pedersen and Dr. Malcolm Clark of BC's Waste Management Department, determined that zinc contamination alone was 100 times above allowable levels for human consumption and lethal to salmonids.

The contamination that was ongoing from 1966 to 1982 never just went away. The mine was subsequently ordered to control leaching by collecting water from its waste dump and settlement ponds and treat the effluent. While the process reduced most of the leachate, there still is residual contamination. It is not perfect and requires constant supervision at best of times. This is a monitoring-intensive process designed for an operating mine and therefore, as reported by Catherine Gilbert in a 2017 interview with Pederson:

" Pedersen is doubtful about the lake's long-term future. What will happen when one day, the mine closes and there is no longer supervision over the remaining waste? He considers that the waste dump at the mine is a "time bomb" that will exist for centuries to come, and contends that the tailings ponds constructed in 1982 are another source of sulphuric acid and there could be consequences from an earthquake in this seismically sensitive zone."[8]

Well the mine is now closed and those are the real facts of the matter. The January flooding accident should be an alarm bell for BC's poor mining practices and the vulnerability of our "protected areas." It is time to re-assess the future of this mine, restore it as a natural area to Strathcona Provincial Park and take serious steps to diffuse this ticking time bomb. A responsible government should not wait for the bomb to go off.

There is no place for a mine in a protected area associated with Campbell River's water supply, and least of all in a provincial park. The provincial park association only falsely creates the illusion that the water supply is "pristine." After sixty years of industrial pollution and contamination of a public water supply, it is time

[7] https://niche-canada.org/2021/12/10/acid-mine-drainage-pollution-a-ticking-time-bomb-in-vancouver-island-waterways/

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to let foreign investors and the mining industry know that protected areas are protected for the public good, and not for industry's profits.

It is time to close the Myra Falls mine, and rather than subsidize foreign investments, this should be viewed as a time to invest in the training of the next generation of British Columbians in the fields of conservation and restoration. Myra Falls is an educational opportunity, if only to address the problems that are likely to emerge from the 14 more rare earth mines planned by BC's mining industry to promote "green energy."

Canada and British Columbia are committed under the landmark agreement on biodiversity signed in Montreal, just a year ago in December 2022, to the restore of "degraded lands." Myra Falls mine is a golden opportunity to implement the commitments made at COP15. It is also an opportunity to give substance to the rosy aspirations of the Ministry of Water Land and Resource Stewardship's *Draft B.C Biodiversity and Ecosystem Health Framework*, if only because it is not healthy for an ecosystem to sit on a "ticking time bomb."

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