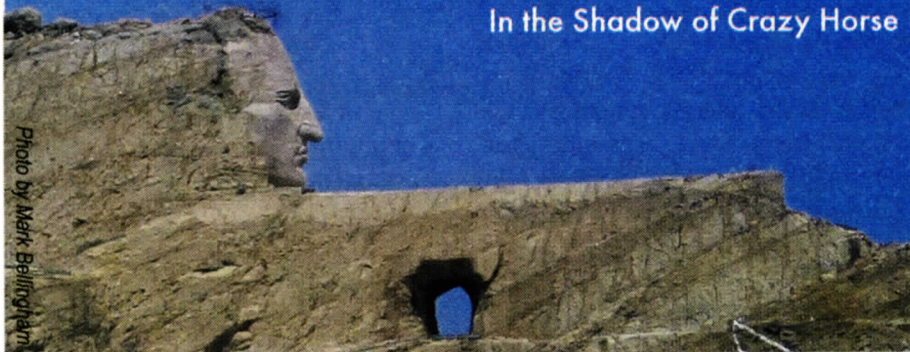


Wild Times

In the Shadow of Crazy Horse



by Joe Foy

When news broke of the disastrous August 4th tailings dam failure at Imperial Metals' Mount Polley copper and gold mine, I wasn't in BC. On a summer vacation with my wife, we were at the Crazy Horse Memorial in South Dakota. It was agonizing to read of the unfolding catastrophe at home, and to be so far away.

What made it so difficult was the lack of information in the news reports. What is the true extent of the damage? What is the risk of future pollution from acid mine drainage now that the mine waste had broken free of the tailings pond into the surrounding environment? I combed the various news reports on line, but this only increased my frustration. How could the mining company and the provincial and federal governments have been caught so unprepared?

There was after all good reason for the company and our governments to be on guard. In the shadow of Crazy Horse in the USA where I was visiting, copper mines have produced a much larger amount of mine waste compared to other types of metallic ore mines. The US Environmental Protection Agency estimates that, between 1910 and 1981 copper mining accounted for half of all types of metallic ore mining waste.

In copper mining, a huge amount of rock has to be ground up to get at

the copper ore – and that produces a lot of mine waste and a lot of risk to the environment.

In BC, notable copper mine disasters include the Britannia Mine, located on Howe Sound and the Mount Washington Mine on Vancouver Island. Both mines ended up heavily damaging fisheries resources by producing acid mine drainage and have cost the BC taxpayer dearly through expensive efforts to clean up the mess. In both these cases the mining companies were largely successful in wriggling out of paying for the full clean-up bill.

My mom always told me, "Clean up your own damn mess."

Around the world, copper mines have made a mess of things: at Anaconda Mine, Nevada, USA; Maracopper Mine, Philippines; Mamut Mine, Sabah, Malaysia; OK Tedi Mine, Papua New Guinea; Bingham Canyon Mine, Utah, USA; and Mount Morgan Mine, Queensland, Australia, to name a few.

So why weren't those in charge, both government and industry, more vigilant at Mount Polley?

I pondered that question, there in the Black Hills of South Dakota under the massive stone face of Crazy Horse looking out over the vast landscape.

I thought of the Tsilhqot'in Nation and how they had successfully stepped up at great cost in time and money to protect their lands and waters from being wrecked and ruined by a proposed copper mine. And not only their lands and waters, for the Tsilhqot'in are guardians of a salmon resource that benefits people all along the Fraser River and into the Pacific.

I came to the conclusion that we all need to be learning from the Tsilhqot'in example. We all need to be taking greater responsibility to defend our environment and not wait for our governments or the corporations to tell us what to think.

I say it is time to ban tailings dams and so-called tailings ponds in BC. Only dry tailings storage should be considered – and in cases where this is not economically feasible, then the mine should not be allowed until it is. After all, I've never heard of a copper deposit going bad because it was left in the mountain for a century or two.

Some copper mines should not be allowed under any circumstances because they are just too risky. The copper deposits in Clayoquot Sound, in the Manning/Skagit Park area and along our wild border with the Alaska Panhandle area should be left in the ground for good.

As for the Mount Polley tailings dam failure, my mom always told me, "Clean up your own damn mess." We all need to make sure that Imperial Metals follows this basic mom justice to the letter and promptly. Some say the cost could end up at \$500 million or more. We need to take care that the taxpayers of BC are not left with the impacts and costs of mining gone bad – again.



Joe Foy is the National Campaign Director for the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, Canada's largest citizen-funded membership based wilderness preservation organization.