



No Trespassing



by Joe Foy

A couple of eagles stared down at us from the top of a gnarly old pine tree as clouds scudded across the sky. Golden cottonwood leaves fluttered amidst the dark green pine forest. Sitting in a small boat and being guided along the Chilko River by an experienced guide on such a stunningly beautiful October day was exactly the kind of medicine we needed.

Videographer Jeremy Williams and I were on a 10-day road trip, using a drone to document some of BC's mine tailings ponds – including the infamous Mount Polley Mine tailings pond that had spilled its toxic guts the year before. It was soul-sucking work, but it's important to capture the images so that people could see what is happening in BC's outback.

We took a detour to the Tsilhqot'in Nation's Dasiqox Tribal Park, located west of Williams Lake, for a bit of a spiritual pick-me-up. Earlier, the Tsilhqot'in people had fended off a massive open-pit mine proposal at Fish Lake, which is now in the heart of

their tribal park. When a local lodge offered us a guided boat tour on the nearby Chilko River, we jumped at the offer. The Chilko River is within the lands over which the Tsilhqot'in recently won their Aboriginal title in a groundbreaking court case.

Fed by streams and rivulets which flow from the glaciers and snowfields of the very highest reaches of the Coast Mountains, Chilko Lake

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is one of BC's largest high-elevation lakes. The Chilko River spills from the lake, and then braids itself with tributaries like the Taseko to join the Chilcotin and then the mighty Fraser, as its waters rumble through canyons, forests, grasslands, and farmlands to the ocean.

The Chilko River in mid-October is filled with thousands and thousands of sockeye salmon at the end of their life cycle. To get here to spawn, these

fish have climbed more than a kilometre in elevation from the faraway Pacific Ocean. They are tired. Many are dying after spawning. The eagles know this and have gathered for the feast.

Our guide pointed to a stone river beach. A grizzly bear gingerly emerged from the forest of pine and cottonwood to wade in the river and scoop out a sockeye, then lingered to dine.

Wow. Even though I spend a fair amount of time in BC's bush country, actually seeing a grizzly is a pretty rare and fleeting event. Even the eagles seemed impressed with the river-side grizz.

What happened next blew me away. More grizzlies appeared. A grizzly bear with two cubs. Another grizzly with three cubs. More grizzlies than I have ever seen in my entire life. The hour spent on the Chilko River with all those bears filling up on salmon still occupies my dreams.

Unfortunately, I can't get the tailings ponds we saw out of my head either. One so-called "pond" we visited during our expedition was just under

ten kilometres long, held back by a massive dam that looked as sandy as a dam made by kids at the beach – except this one was almost as tall as the tallest Vancouver skyscraper. Some of the ponds had water the blue-green colour of a South Seas resort, with white sand tailings beaches. We could see ducks swimming on the surface of one tailings pond.

At the Mount Polley Mine we were aghast at the sheer power that was unleashed when the tailings dam there failed in August 2014, levelling a massive swath of forest and spewing down Hazeltine Creek into Quesnel Lake. We could see huge trucks and excavators pushing the muck around to hide the damage under a layer of bark mulch. Meanwhile underwater, in the Quesnel Lake salmon nursery, no one knows what kind of toxic trouble is mixing up.

All the tailings ponds we visited had some things in common. They were all in the headwaters of major salmon-bearing rivers. They were all surrounded by “No Trespassing” signs to keep people away from their toxic contents. At the Mount Polley Mine site, there was even a phone number you could call to report trespassers.

But what will protect the salmon rivers from chemical trespass? Can anyone believe that there won't be future disasters like the one at Mount Polley, or that these massive tailings dams won't leach and leak into the environment in the coming years, decades, and centuries?

BC's salmon rivers are an amazing force of nature. To protect them, it's time to ban tailings ponds completely – to clean up the old ones and to move to more modern methods of

tailings storage, such as dry stacking.

I figure that we could start with the “No Trespassing” signs at BC's 90 existing tailings ponds. The signs should be turned around to face the toxic brew, and altered to say “No Chemical Trespassing.”



Joe Foy is the national campaign director for the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, Canada's largest citizen-funded membership-based wilderness preservation organization.

PHOTOS:

Top Left: Grizzly eating salmon in Chilko River by Joe Foy

Top Right: Highland Valley Copper Mine tailings pond by Jeremy Sean Williams

Bottom Left: Sign at the Bralorne Gold Mine tailings pond, located near Bralorne BC by Joe Foy

Bottom Right: Copper Mountain Copper Mine tailings pond near Princeton BC by Jeremy Sean Williams

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