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FREE REPORT

stop the mine

catface

CATFACE

Stop this proposed copper mine in Beautiful Clayoquot Sound, a Biosphere Reserve in British Columbia, Canada

The proposed Catface copper mine encompasses a 4,000 ha area on Catface Mountain in Clayoquot Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. Clayoquot Sound is a United Nations (UNESCO) Biosphere Reserve, and has been a cultural flash point for First Nations and a conservation hot-spot since the early 1980s. Catface Mountain is in Ahousaht First Nation territory and is a sacred place to the Ahousaht Nation. It is located 13 kilometres from the world famous fishing and tourism destination town of Tofino, BC, and offers a stunning view-scape. The mine is located in a position that will maximise its visibility from population and tourism centres.

Pristine natural environments offer Clayoquot Sound residents and visitors unparalled recreation and sustainable economic development opportunities. Many of the natural features that make Clayoquot Sound special will be jeopardized by the Catface copper mine.

Executive Summary

Copper mining interests at Catface Mountain date to 1960, but the mine was never developed because of concerns about economic viability resulting from the copper deposit being not only of poor quality, but also unusually diffuse, deep, and thus difficult to quantify.

Current plans by the mine proponents based in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada include further exploration to attempt to clarify the extent of copper and other mineral deposits and the future development of a large scale, open pit, copper hard rock metal mine. If the mine proceeds, an area of at least several square kilometres would be developed. Mine developments will include large open pit mines, a large ore-processing facility, roads, many kilometres of ore conveyor belts, a tanker port, the use of adjacent valleys to create new lake(s) with up to 80 metre high dam(s) to contain the toxic tailings, diesel generating stations, and additional areas for the dumping of up to 500 million tonnes of potentially toxic waste rock.

Copper mines are the single biggest source of environmental contamination in the mining industry. Copper, other heavy metals, and numerous other toxic elements including arsenic, mercury, lead, zinc, cadmium, uranium, thorium and radium-226 are common at mines with similar geological chemistry to Catface. Millions of citizens around the world are no longer able to consume water and fish, or do so at their peril, in the vicinity of copper mines because of their long-term toxic legacy. Once copper mines start polluting, it is virtually impossible to control.

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The Copper Mines at Butte Montana, for example, are the site of the largest and most expensive toxic mine waste cleanup in United States history, and associated cancer rates are off the charts. The copper mine at nearby Mt Washington, BC wiped out all five species of Salmon in the Tsolum River and permanently poisoned local drinking water supplies. At Catface, a stream emerging from one of the exploratory drill sites contains deadly copper at concentrations 21 times greater than that considered safe for humans, and other testing revealed copper and arsenic up to 60 times above the safe limit.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of copper mining is the discrepancy between predicted and actual levels of contamination. The most comprehensive study of copper mine pollution ever undertaken (Maest et al 2005) revealed a massive failure to keep US and Canadian mines from polluting groundwater and local environments. 64% of mines failed to meet their Mitigation Expectations (ME) resulting in a lack of ability to respond to higher than expected levels of contamination. 44% of mines failed to properly assess local Geochemical Characterisation (GC), resulting in large amounts of unexpected sources of contamination, and 24% failed to meet Hydrological Characterisation (HC), resulting in greater levels and sources of water-based contamination.

The Catface mine proposal is noteworthy, according to the most recent analysis by a mining industry contractor hired by the proponent not only by the fact that it is within an environmentally sensitive area, but also because it lacks a mining plan, and that data on project infrastructure and environmental assessment is lacking (Northstar 2004). This contractor noted that no plan has been developed that would indicate mining methodology, infrastructure and management. Additionally the contractor noted that no water management plans have been initiated, no studies on mine waste management have occurred, and that no studies of environmental effects has been proposed.

Geological Definition

Porphyry copper deposits (copper distributed at low concentrations throughout the host rock, and in isolated cracks and quartz veins deep under ground) are large ore bodies found at contact zones between two or more different host rock types. A typical such deposit is formed when hot, liquid, and copper rich quartz solutions fill cracks in rock formations and then become solid through crystallization. The up to 350 metre deep copper deposit at Catface appears to be the deeper part of a typical porphyry formation, and is overlain by hundreds of millions of tonnes of an unusually thick cap rock of contamination prone copper oxide which will have to be removed, mined and then dumped to access the copper deposits below.

The Catface mine would produce principally copper, with much lesser quantities of molybdenum, silver, gold, selenium and rhenium. According to geochemical analysis, the overwhelming majority of copper containing host rock at Catface are various forms of quartz porphyry, a leading source of contamination at copper mines around the world. Contamination from copper mines is complex and typically involves the leaching of acids from sulphide mineral sources, bases from molybdenum and other sources, and heavy metals. Pyrite for example, oxidizes in the presence of water and oxygen to produce sulphuric acid. Unfortunately, owing to the deep nature of the deposit and the notorious inaccuracy of predicting contamination from copper mines, it is unlikely that a realistic contamination scenario will be known until contamination occurs and is too late to correct.

The threat to human health and natural ecosystems from toxic pollution runoff from open pit copper mining is highlighted by Clayoquot Sound's abundant rainfall totalling about 3 metres annually.

Background — History

Copper mining interests at Catface Mountain date to 1960, but the mine was never developed because of concerns about economic viability resulting from the copper deposit being not only of poor quality, but also unusually diffuse, deep, and thus difficult to quantify. These same concerns still exist and are unlikely to be clarified to an extent that would yield definitive answers about the viability of the proposed mine.

Regardless of difficulties determining the exact location and quantity of copper at Catface, the presence of magnetic anomalies throughout the mountain suggest that the copper deposit, although low in quality, is much larger than previously thought. However, due to the great depth and diffuse nature of the copper deposit, confirmation of the exact quantity of copper ore will not be known until Catface Mountain is literally peeled apart. Questions about the extent of the copper deposit are compounded by the fact that scientific assessment techniques, although bolstered by recent technological advances, are still primitive, costly, time consuming and imprecise.

During previous exploration and analysis spanning a 50 year timeline, three primary areas of copper were located at Catface including the "Cliff", "Irishman's Creek", and "Hecate Bay". Numerous additional areas of potentially large copper deposits have been theorized to exist by the presence of magnetic anomalies. Based on analysis of the most heavily explored area, the "cliff", a rough approximation of the volume of copper ore suitable for mining was made. The current estimated deposit at the "cliff" is about 166 million tonnes of low quality copper ore, far too little for a viable mining operation. The recent magnetic anomaly and exploration data however, indicate that numerous other potential copper deposits, totalling up to 500 million tonnes of similarly low quality ore, are theorized to exist deep under Catface Mountain. Given the great depth and diffuse nature of these theorized deposits it is extremely unlikely that they will be accurately estimated through further exploration techniques.

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Based on the historic and smaller estimates of the size of the Catface copper deposit from 1960-79 drilling and exploration, contractors for the proponent have indicated that the mine would only remove the top 500 feet of the mountain, and other smaller areas. However, the more recent estimates of the potential extent of the deposit indicate that it extends many kilometres laterally, and up to 350 metres in depth. If the mine proceeds, and the deposit does in fact turn out to be economically viable, then Catface Mountain will be reduced to a pile of rubble or otherwise scarred beyond recognition for the indefinite future.

The exploration that has occurred to date at Catface has already left a toxic legacy as heavy metals and arsenic drain freely from the many holes drilled into the earth. The proponents plan to dramatically increase exploration to help clarify the extent of the copper deposit will no doubt continue this legacy of exploration-related contamination. Although exploration-related contamination pales in comparison to that which will result from actual mining of Catface Mountain, it is a factor which should be considered seriously by the local community.

Scope

Current plans by the mine proponents based in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada include further exploration to attempt to clarify the extent of copper and other mineral deposits and the future development of a large scale, open pit, copper hard rock metal mine. If the mine proceeds, an area of at least several square kilometres would be developed. Mine developments will include large open pit mines, ore-processing facilities, roads, many kilometres of ore conveyor belts, a tanker port, a small town, the use of adjacent valleys to create new lake(s) with 50-80 metre high dam(s) to contain the toxic tailings, diesel generating stations, and additional areas (ocean and or land) for the dumping of up to 500 million tonnes of potentially toxic waste rock.

Catface mine "drilling and exploration" permits were readily approved by the BC government for all previous exploration work. Now, the new proponent has applied for new permits from the BC government for a very large scale exploration regimen, and there is every expectation that such approval will be granted swiftly.

The mining property consists of 145 claims, 117 of which have been surveyed to date, and which collectively form a single mining lease encompassing 4,000 ha. The mining lease regularly increases in size as more claims are surveyed and added to the lease. An additional 400 ha of un-surveyed oceanfront areas could be added to the claim for mining or dumping purposes. Additional areas outside the mining claim would also be acquired to build lake(s) for tailings and to dump mine waste. The most optimistic mining scenario for the proponent would result in the mine and associated developments encompassing the entire west and south face of Catface Mountain, which as a result would be reduced to a pile of rubble, or otherwise scarred beyond recognition. Ironically, the mine would be positioned as to maximize its visibility from local communities and from popular tourism destinations.

The 4,000 ha Catface Mountain copper mining lease is owned by Catface Copper Mines Ltd., which is owned by Doublestar Resources Ltd, which in turn is a subsidiary of Selkirk Metals Corp. of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Falconbridge Ltd, also of Vancouver, is a principal financier of the Catface mine proposal, and will have a 50.1% option and/or a revenue sharing agreement if the mine proceeds.

Ecotourism including cultural tourism is a driving force in the economy of Clayoquot Sound. Every year thousands of residents and visitors explore the natural splendor of the region.

Efficacy

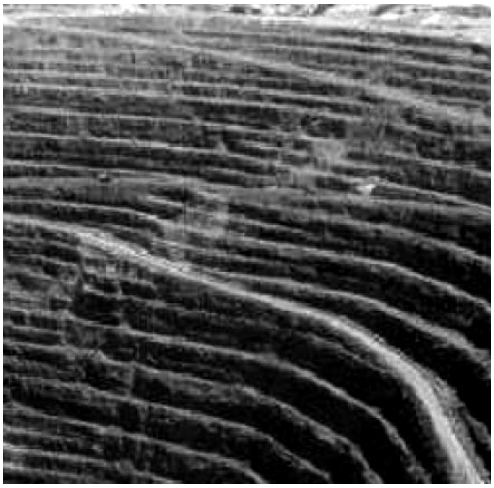
The Catface copper deposit is the lowest quality active copper mine proposal in BC. Despite a 50 year long exploration effort and recent increases in estimated volume of copper ore, both the BC government and the mining industry continue to refer to this copper deposit, despite recent increases in estimated ore volume, as “marginal”.

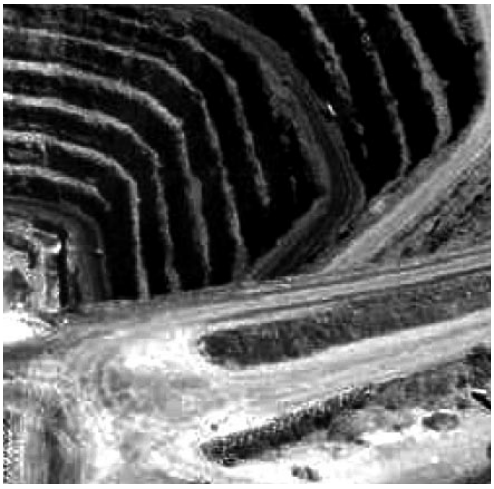
If the ore was more concentrated and closer to the surface, the copper deposit would have long since been mined. Although the extent of the deposit is theorized to be larger than previously thought, the mine proposal still meets none of the economic criteria of success: easily accessible and higher concentration copper and gold deposits.

The quality of the merchantable copper at Catface, which averages about 0.3-0.4% copper, is also among the lowest quality of any similar size copper mines in the world. A compounding negative economic factor is that small areas of higher quality copper, typically mined first and used to pay for mine start-up costs, are absent from Catface.

It is common knowledge in the copper mining industry that low quality copper deposits like that at Catface must occur at an economy of truly massive scale to be economically successful, and then only if large quantities of gold exist to supplement the copper. 500 million tonnes of low quality copper ore is generally considered a minimum threshold for economic viability.

The final size of mines such as that proposed at Catface, despite exploration, cannot be accurately predicted prior to mining because of the inherent difficulty in locating all the copper when it occurs at such great depths and in such low concentrations. Uncertainties about the actual extent and location of the copper are the principal limiting factors affecting the efficacy of mining proposals like that at Catface. No doubt the current near record high price of copper ($4/lb) is a driving factor affecting the viability of the Catface mine proposal. Speculation about possible small gold deposits is also driving the mine proposal even though the gold deposit is not proven and is thought to exist laterally to the copper deposit and will entail further mining to access.





Copper mining leaves a permanent legacy of impoversihed landscapes. At nearby Mt Washington on Vancouver Island copper mining caused the permanent extinction of all 5 species of pacific salmon from the Tsolum River and poisoned numerous domestic drinking water sources.

Photo: John Marriot

Environmental Impacts

Not only is the Catface mine of high risk economically, it is also high risk environmentally. Low grade porphyry (diffuse) deposits like Catface often feed large quantities of toxic heavy metals, other chemicals, and acid and bases into surrounding environments for decades after mining has ceased. If Catface mine proceeds, 99.7% of the mined rock will be left behind as potentially toxic waste.

Copper mines are the single biggest source of environmental contamination in the mining industry. Copper, other heavy metals, and numerous other toxic elements including arsenic, mercury, lead, zinc, cadmium, uranium, thorium and radium 226 are common at mines with similar geological chemistry to Catface. Millions of citizens around the world are no longer able to consume water and fish in the vicinity of copper mines because of their long-term toxic legacy.

The maximum estimated volume of waste rock from Catface mine (499.9 million tonnes) would fill, three times over, Vancouver's 35,000 seat BC Place Stadium. The pure copper extracted however would only fill ten large dump-trucks.

Heavy metal and other chemical sampling has been conducted intermittently at Catface for many years. However, a statistically rigorous and systematic water/sediment/life-form sampling regimen has never been implemented, despite recommendations from Catface geological consultants dating to 1969. For inexplicable reasons, the most current sampling in 2004 was limited to only 6 sites that had not been previously tested, and was limited to water sampling, rather than the much more revealing stream sediment sampling. Most of this 2004 sampling also occurred at the headwaters of streams where heavy metal and chemical contamination would not be expected to be as high.

One of the environmental samples however was taken at a former exploratory drill site (adit). This water testing of a small stream emerging from the 857 metre long drill site revealed copper concentrations 21 times higher than BC water quality guidelines for the protection of freshwater aquatic life. Although no acid rock drainage was found at the 6 sample points, neither should it have been expected, given the rock geochemistry at the sampling points. Indeed the minimal sampling that took place in 2004 seems to have been a classic example of the wrong tests being taken at the wrong place and with inadequate scientific rigour. Further, no mention was made in the 2004 sampling report of previous tests that revealed areas of high concentrations of copper and arsenic up to 60 times above the limit for healthy functioning ecosystems.

Another 2004 study which compiled and analyzed all existing data collected at Catface found that seismicity, steep terrain and extremely high precipitation make the proposed Catface mine a high risk for environmental contamination. The study also found that extensive impurities (oxides) in the surface rock overlaying the copper pose risks for additional contamination and will result in much larger amounts of surface rock having to be removed to access the copper. Other substances that occur in copper ore such as pyrites produce sulphuric acid as they are exposed to air and water.

The nearest similar copper mine to Catface is located at Mt. Washington, about 50 km distant. Here, copper leaching caused the immediate and apparently permanent extinction of all salmon and many other life forms from the Tsolum River. Copper leaching also caused the permanent poisoning of numerous other

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domestic and non-domestic water sources, and resulted in a costly toxic waste cleanup that continues today, 40 years after the mine ceased operation.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of copper mining is the discrepancy between predicted and actual levels of contamination. The most comprehensive study of copper mine pollution ever undertaken (Maest et al 2005) revealed a massive failure to keep US and Canadian mines from polluting groundwater and local environments. 64% of mines failed to meet their Mitigation Expectations (ME) resulting in a lack of ability to respond to higher than expected levels of contamination. 44% of mines failed to properly assess local Geochemical Characterisation (GC), resulting in large amounts of unexpected sources of contamination, and 24% failed to meet Hydrological Characterisation (HC), resulting in greater levels and sources of water-based contamination.

Limited stream and sediment geochemistry examinations conducted by the former owner (Falconbridge Ltd.) found numerous chemical and heavy metal anomalies in the soil and water, including arsenic and copper, up to 60 times higher than the upper limit for healthy functioning ecosystems. Former mining consultants at Catface recommended that extensive sediment, water, and life-form sampling occur throughout the entire area. Such testing never occurred.

Uncertainties

The proponent claims that there is no indication that the Catface porphyry copper deposit exists in the typical porphyry geology, characterized by fractured rock with high potential for heavy metal and chemical contamination and acid/base contamination. The proponent claims this is so because no acid is currently draining from the one and only significant drill hole (adit), and by the fact that Catface exists at the juncture of two geologic formations with different contamination potentials.

However indications from many sources, including geochemical mapping, previous geological analysis, on-site testing, and data from other similar and adjacent mines suggest that the Catface deposit is in fact similar to other local copper porphyry mines, and that it will be a source of contamination if mined.

Geochemical studies at Catface suggest that the rock type is prone to heavy metal groundwater and/or sediment contamination from copper and other toxic pollutants. Geologic examinations of the Catface area suggest that the copper deposit was indeed formed by quartz veins that intruded older fractured volcanic rock and contain pyrite, chalcopyrite, other sulfides and oxides, heavy metals, and other toxic elements characteristic of copper mine contamination.

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Other uncertainties of the Catface mine include issues of managing the ore once it has been mined. Answers to questions such as how the millions of tonnes of ore will be moved to the on-site ore processing facility with minimal environmental damage, and how the processed ore will be transported to the dumping grounds remain unclear. The proponent claims that “gravity” will be used to transport the ore to the processing facility, but whether this means rolling up to a half billion tonnes of rock downhill, or the use of house sized dump-trucks on a series of new industrial roads, or kilometres of polluting conveyor belts spewing particulates into the air remains unclear. The ships used to transport the processed ore will require large loading, docking and port facilities. Many environmental effects are associated with the use of container

ships because of the use of toxic bunker fuel, the largest global source of transportation-related air pollution and source of greenhouse gases.

Other uncertainties involve how the proponent will remove the copper from the hundreds of millions of tonnes of oxide rich cap rock. Typically, sulphuric acid is used to leach the copper out of such rock, but new less polluting technologies are being developed. Regardless, the proponent has been silent on most of the major practical issues of mine management and feasibility.

Status of Current Proposal

The Catface mine proposal is noteworthy, according to the most recent analysis by a mining industry contractor hired by the proponent not only by the fact that it is within an environmentally sensitive area, but also because it lacks a mining plan, and that data on project infrastructure and environmental assessment is lacking (Northstar 2004). This contractor noted that no plan has been developed that would indicate mining methodology, infrastructure and management. Additionally the contractor noted that no water management plans have been initiated, no studies on mine waste management have occurred, and that no studies of environmental effects have been proposed. The contractor was critical of the proponent for advancing the Catface Mine proposal without such plans and studies. Although not noted by this contractor, the limited environmental studies that occurred historically, and in particular those that found evidence of contamination from exploration activities, seem to have been ignored by the Catface mine proponent.

Despite extensive copper explorations, testing of Catface sediments, water and life-forms for contaminants has lagged and/or occurred in the wrong places and at the wrong time. Additionally, environmental testing results have come principally from areas that would not be expected to contain high levels of contaminants. Further, testing was intermittent, limited in scope, failed to follow standard scientific methodology based on similar situations, and the results used selectively and improperly to minimize environmental concerns.

Recommendations

Historic Catface Mine copper exploration permits, given the multiple environmental sensitivities, economic impacts, and public concerns, should never have been approved by the BC government. The mine proposal and associated exploration permits should be immediately withdrawn from consideration. However the recent spring 2008 expiry of historic exploration permits presents a unique opportunity for the British Columbia government to take corrective action and quash this mine proposal once and for all.

The British Columbia Ministry of Mines is currently reviewing the mine proponents new exploration permit application. The application should be thrown out. However, if the application is approved, multiple other agencies will also be involved in secondary reviews including the Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Forests, the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and other regional and local government agencies including the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District and the Clayoquot Sound Central Region Board. All levels of government involved in the exploration and mining permit and approval process should be subject to public education

If exploration is approved, rigourous stream, sediment and life-form toxicity testing by independent scientific bodies should occur at Catface because copper mining has a controversial history of site contamination, poor reclamation and remediation, and inadequate environmental and cultural decision making precisely because thorough pre-mining site analysis, cumulative effects risk assessment, and other comprehensive economic, social, cultural and environmental effects analysis has rarely, if ever, been conducted (Kuipers et al, 2006).

and awareness campaigns highlighting the inherent environmental and socio-economic risks of the proposed Catface mine proposal.

The BC government should also adopt policies to exclude the staking of mineral reserves in key areas where First Nation culture and spirituality, environmental sensitivities, and socio-economic concerns predominate.

Copper Mining – A Primer

Most of the worlds roughly 100 active porphyry copper mines (like Catface) have deposits ranging from 0.8 – 2% copper, much higher than the Catface deposit. Thus, there are many uncertainties regarding the long-term economic viability and environmental effects of the proposed Catface mine. Unfortunately, because of the complexity of accurately assessing such deep and diffuse copper deposits, these uncertainties will only be clarified with certainty after strip mining has commenced and the scale of the deposit can be physically determined.

Most of the worlds' high quality copper deposits have now been exhausted, and this has resulted in increasing dependency on deposits where the copper is in low quality porphyry (distributed at low concentrations throughout the host rock, and in isolated cracks and quartz veins deep under ground). The only economically viable method to remove such copper is through large scale strip mining, and then only if gold, silver, and molybdenum deposits can augment the low value of the copper. The result is that there are currently a record number of copper mines in production, producing more waste and occupying a larger footprint, and spreading their toxic legacy across larger landscapes.

Global copper deposits are still relatively abundant, but mostly in deposits containing less than 1% copper. As many of the large profitable copper mines were exhausted over the past 10 years, and as demand for copper grew from developing countries, principally India and China, the price of copper increased from about $1 per pound in 1995 to about $4 per pound today. This led to a massive increase in development of low quality copper deposits. Today, there is a glut of copper on the global market because of over-production, and the price is gradually decreasing from a high of about $5 per pound in 2007. Copper values are expected to stabilize for the short term at about $3-$5 per pound.

Historically copper was mined in areas of the world where it occurred in much higher concentrations than at Catface, such as Montana (USA), Peru, and central Mexico. These sites contained massive quantities of higher quality copper that sustained local communities for decades. Now however, the worlds' large supplies of high quality copper are exhausted and the mine sites have contaminated large areas. The copper mines at Butte, Montana, for example, are the site of the largest "Superfund" toxic mine waste cleanup in US history. The citizens of Butte continue to suffer a host of illnesses, and the highest rates of bone and brain cancer in North America. These cancers have been positively linked to toxic chemicals present at the former copper mining sites.

The citizens and government of Puerto Rico, when exposed to the reality of a series of low quality porphyry copper mines similar to that proposed at Catface, had scientists conduct extensive soil, water and rock analysis, and studied the environmental effects of other copper mines. They subsequently passed laws prohibiting such mines from occurring in Puerto Rico.

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Catface Mountain is a sacred site for the Ahousaht First Nation, whose community Ahousaht, on Flores Island, is closest to and likely to suffer the greatest negative consequences from, the Catface copper mine. Ahousaht First Nation citizens built a scenic 11 km long trail with interpretive signage on Flores Island in the late 1990's to showcase the natural splendor of their sacred territory.


Photo: Thomas Kitchin/First Light

take action to protect Clayquot Sound!

Take a moment to let your government know how you feel about this proposal and help keep Clayquot Sound a wilderness area to be enjoyed by generations to come.

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