Midwest Mining Rush Threatens Water: Part III: Michigan: A River Runs Through It

Tuesday, 09 November 2010

Written by Tiffany Danitz Pache

On a span of Michigan's storied Upper Peninsula that includes the largest ancient forest east of the Mississippi River, a sacred Native American site called Eagle Rock, the Salmon Trout River and the shores of Lake Superior, the London-based Rio Tinto has gained the rights to mine sulfide ore and extract nickel and copper in exchange for a handful of local jobs. It is dubbed the Eagle Project.

Rio Tinto's subsidiary, Kennecott, owns the mineral rights to 245,000 acres in Marquette County, Michigan, and has leased 5,500 acres of public land and 4,000 acres of mineral rights on privately held lands. With the Eagle Project, the company plans to invest $489 million to build the nickel and copper mine making it the primary nickel mine in the United States when construction is completed and production begins in 2013. They will be building an underground mine, surface facilities, rehabbing an existing mill and developing a multiuse access road. They expect to mine 17,300 tons of nickel and 13,200 tons of copper annually for six years. Rio Tinto has been projected to make around three billion dollars in profit from the Eagle Project, and it is expected to take 90 percent of the value of the ore mined out of the community and state, according to a study on the risks and economics of the Eagle Project by the Wolf Pack, a group of 60 Michigan professionals that was founded in 2001 to help Michigan grow its economy while preserving its ecology.

"It hits the little guy," says Martha Bush, who owns Little Tree Cabins, "Those of us with little money against a multinational corporation that can pull money from anywhere." Bush runs a year-round resort that rents out cabins and sponsors outdoor activities including hikes up the rocky, wooded hillside across the road from where the mine is currently under construction.

Some of the land being mined is publicly owned, some is under treaty with the Native Americans who have hunting and fishing rights. There is also an ancient holy site on location called Eagle Rock that is used for worship. The rest of the land that will be mined has been used to promote a burgeoning tourist market), bringing hard won jobs back to an economically-depressed area. The land, including the worship site Eagle Rock, will be scraped down to the dirt.

For thousands of years, Native Americans have worshiped at the bedrock outcropping called Eagle Rock. Numerous tribes and European Americans held a protest camp at the site late last spring and early summer. Some protesters even spent time in jail to try and stop the demolition of this historic place. But the demonstrations ended in July when the federal EPA ruled that Kennecott did not need a Clean Water Act permit to move forward with the mine construction. The EPA made this ruling even though the Eagle Mine will have discharges that are "hydrologically connected to the surface water."

The UP draws tourists from Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, lower Michigan and the rest of the world because of its natural setting. In 2005, Sherman Travel rated the UP the tenth place worldwide as a travel destination. Tourism is thriving and emerging as the number one industry in many parts of the UP, which is why some residents in nearby towns fear that the economy will

tank as access to hunting, hiking, skiing, snowmobiling, rock climbing, kayaking, fishing and nature are closed off. "Basically you have to drive right through the mine site to get to the McCormick Wilderness Tract which is popular for back packing and fishing and rock climbing," explains Bill Thompson of Downwind Sports.

The battle has become so bitter that the Director of Marquette's Visitor's Bureau, Pat Black, has been instructed to keep quiet. "My Board of Directors has asked me to zip my lips when it comes to Kennecott," she said. In some parts of Marquette County, tourism is the *only* industry, according to Black.

Former Michigan Governor William Milliken has said the Eagle Project is "a terrible idea for the Great Lakes."

One reason the Kennecott mine is so divisive is that generations of Uppers have worked in traditional mines. Iron mining has been a way of life, and many local miners believe new mines will bring new jobs. This mindset is entrenched even though less than two-thirds of one percent of Michigan's economy directly employs mine workers, according to Michigan's Department of Labor and Economic Growth. Workers also have faith in the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality to monitor the mine as it moves forward to protect workers and the environment.

Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the Environment Communications Director, Debbie Munson Badini, explains that the people who work for the state agency tasked with monitoring the mine live in the area, too, and they are "personally invested." A sincere Badini adds, "It would be heartbreaking for us if anything went wrong."

But UP Rep. Bart Stupak remains skeptical writing, "Given Michigan's continuing budget problems, it seems unlikely the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the Environment will have adequate resources to ensure Kennecott is complying with safety and environmental standards."