

Copper mine tailings poison Jordan River

Salmon runs that supported original Pacheedaht villages have collapsed



STEPHEN HUME

The site where the Pacheedaht people originated — their Garden of Eden — is stunning.

The Jordan River exits a 500-metre-deep canyon, then tumbles toward the sea through a jumble of immense boulders polished as smooth as beach pebbles.

It was here, about 70 kilometres west of Victoria, in a past so ancient it predates legends of a great flood that inundated the world, that the Pacheedaht took their name from foam on the river.

Today, there's still foam on the river. It signals not the birth of a people, but the death of their river.

Barely an hour's drive from where the B.C. government we trust to protect the environment convenes in the capital that prides itself as the City of Gardens, the Pacheedaht's Garden of Eden has been poisoned for more than 40 years by toxic residues leaching from an abandoned mine.

Salmon runs that supported the original Pacheedaht villages at the river mouth collapsed. Below the mine site with its eroding tailings dumps and litters of rusted debris, the junk-strewn river bottom appears devoid of life.

And the Pacheedaht, forced out of their ancestral homes a century ago, now live 40 kilometres further west around Port Renfrew. Yet, deep emotional attachments to the place from

which they came endure.

"It's one of our most important sites," says Helen Jones, a Pacheedaht fisheries manager who has swum the Jordan River attempting fish counts. The band wants to establish spawning channels in the lower river that could help restore runs, but how effective can that be if contaminants continue to seep upstream?

After clambering down a steep washout and spending several hours, I saw not one juvenile fish. There weren't even water insects. No waterfowl. The face of the tailings dump was crusted with green scabs. Scummy foam left intricate patterns on the pools. The river bottom was coated with a furry reddish brown.

Between 1962 and 1974, about 1.5 million tonnes of ore milled in an underground cavern yielded copper, gold and silver. Following a blowout during mining operations in 1963, the mine flooded. A large volume of material from the mine was ejected onto the banks and into the Jordan River. Operations were restarted, but a decade later abandoned.

Today, copper concentrations downstream from the abandoned mine site consistently exceed levels prohibited under the province's regulations for contaminated sites. In some cases, concentrations are up to 30 times the maximum allowable standard.

As is often the case with mining ventures, this enterprise, which began in 1915, shuffled through a Byzantine maze of holding companies, and who knew where legal responsibility might lie?

Law student Mathew Nefstead at the University of Victoria's Environmental Law Centre



Moves are afoot to restore the Jordan River on Vancouver Island, which has been polluted by tailings from an abandoned mine for the past 40 years. Teck Resources is being asked by B.C. to remediate the site. STEPHEN HUME

undertook the painstaking detective work through company registries on behalf of Ken Farquharson, who's been working since 2005 to try to help restore salmon runs to Vancouver Island's industrially ravaged rivers.

Now, Teck Resources Inc. is being asked to remediate the site by the B.C. government.

Farquharson says that when people interested in saving the river met in 2012 "everyone was very pessimistic about its future due to the long-term contamination by copper from the mine waste dump. More worryingly, nobody seemed interested in getting the situation corrected."

Perhaps he wasn't far off.

ELC director Calvin Sandborn says the Jordan River is symptomatic of a much bigger problem — the province's apparent failure to adequately monitor for similar environmental legacies from the mining industry. He points to a report from the auditor general that said the government's regulatory performance has been "highly deficient" and that it is "at risk of regulatory capture" — placing the interests of corporations its supposed to regulate before the public's interests.

"We're asking for a review of all the streams in the province," Sandborn says.

Nefstead and Sandborn wrote to Teck in 2013 about the Jordan River.

On Aug. 25, 2016, the province finally ordered a remediation plan for the abandoned mine by June 1, 2017.

"Progress has been slow," Farquharson wrote, "but I believe that improvements for the Jordan River are at last underway." "We want to breathe life back into that river again," says Jones.

Maybe, just maybe, with goodwill from everybody involved, perhaps it's possible to find a way back to the Garden of Eden. shume@islandnet.com