



# Wild Times

## Waiting for the call on Fish Lake

*Text and Photo by Joe Foy*

**I**t was late September, and I was walking through the forest with a friend looking for the cultural youth camp we had been invited to.

We looked up to see a swirl of campfire smoke break free of the pines then disappear in the wind gusting off the lake. Depressions from winter pit houses formed ancient craters on the forest floor, a sure sign that people had called this place home for a very long time. We could hear drumming and singing coming from the direction of the campfire smoke. Time seemed to swirl with the smoke, blurring past centuries with the present in a breeze of sights, scents, and sounds.

We were near the shore of Teztan Biny, known as Fish Lake in English. It's located in the heart of Tsilhqot'in territory, west of Williams Lake, BC. Fish Lake is also at the heart of a fight that will shape both the Tsilhqot'in people and Canadians for decades to come.

Stepping through the last of the trees toward a campfire ringed by drummers and singers, we arrived at the cultural youth camp. We were there to photograph, video and interview members of the Tsilhqot'in Nation about their views on a proposed open-pit copper mine slated for the forested meadow right at the outflow of Teztan Biny.

In a reasonable world, that should have been that – the First Nations people living around the mine don't want it, so that's it.

Taseko Mines' so-called New Prosperity mine proposal would create a massive open pit up to 1.6 kilometres across and over half a kilometre deep. Mine tailings and potentially acid-producing rock would be stored underwater in a huge area impounded by dams and dykes four kilometres long, constructed just two kilometres upstream from Fish Lake. The tailings impoundment would require long-term maintenance. A huge de-

posit of waste rock, tailings and impounded water would cover much of Fish Lake's upstream catchment area, including Little Fish Lake and surrounding feeder streams and wetlands.

This catchment area now supplies much of the water that flows into Fish Lake and a great deal of the trout spawning habitat that provides the watershed with some of the best fishing in all of BC. Because so much of its headwaters would be cut off by the tailings pond, Fish Lake would need pumps to recycle its outflow water, much like a backyard goldfish pond.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that the Tsilhqot'in Nation does not want this mine. Every one of their elected community governments have voted against the mine proposal because of its potential impact on Fish Lake and their surrounding territory.

In a reasonable world, that should have been that – the First Nations people living around the mine don't want it, so that's it. But the mining compa-

ny has kept pushing to build the mine. Many native and non-native groups joined with the Tsilhqot'in to oppose the project, and still the mining company has kept pushing.

As the group of youth and their elders drummed and sang at Fish Lake, the most recent environmental assessment report was being sent to Ottawa, where Canada's Minister of Environment would ponder it before making a final decision. The report is scathing and calls into question the very survival of Fish Lake were the mine to be built.

It's been a long, tough environmental assessment process. While it is true that the organization that I represent, the Wilderness Committee, has been very critical of the mine project in our communications around the en-



vironmental review process, we were still caught off guard when Taseko Mines Ltd. launched a court action against us in early 2012 because of what we had written. That case has yet to be heard in court – but I can tell you it has made it much more costly and time-consuming for us to speak out against the mine project.

Meanwhile, the company has just threatened more court action, apply-

ing for a judicial review of the report from the Environmental Assessment Agency if the Environment Minister doesn't give approval for the project.

Has the mining company dug itself into a public relations hole they can't get out of? Perhaps. One thing is for sure: the Tsilhqot'in people and their allies will not rest until this terrible mine project is abandoned and Fish Lake is saved for all time.

In the meantime, we all wait for the Environment Minister's call on Fish Lake.



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

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