

Valhalla Wilderness Society

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Press Release

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WILDERNESS GROUP CALLS FOR PROTECTION OF UPPER TASEKO WATERSHED INCLUDING PROPOSED PROSPERITY MINE AREA AT FISH LAKE

In the wake of the recent Federal Environmental Panel findings that the proposed open pit mine at Fish Lake (Teztan Biny) in the BC Chilcotin will cause significant effects to fish, grizzly bears and First Nations values, the Valhalla Wilderness Society (VWS) is calling on all governments to work together to protect the Upper Taseko Watershed (Dasizox). This should include Fish Lake.

According to professional and VWS bear biologist Wayne McCrory, whose technical review report told the Federal Panel that the mine would push the already threatened West Chilcotin grizzly bear population over the threshold of extinction, *"The resource conflicts will not just end if the federal government decides to stop the mine at Fish Lake based on the Panel's negative impact findings. The whole Upper Taseko is a splendid and extremely rich grizzly bear-salmon wilderness under huge threat not only from proposed open pit mining, but also from massive clearcut logging. It should be protected as soon as possible, with an appropriate designation that recognizes the high wildlife & tourism values, First Nations cultural heritage significance and aboriginal rights and title."*

Even the Federal Panel's report recognizes that the area is *"a pristine, untouched, and unique ecosystem with exceptional vistas, clear glacial fed lakes and streams, relative remoteness and abundant wildlife"*. A postcard featuring Fish Lake was issued by GoBC as one in a series promoting tourism in the province.

The proposed 56,000-hectare Prosperity mine claim area and whole Upper Taseko Watershed are surrounded by three provincial parks and the Xeni Gwet'in (Nemiah) Aboriginal / Wild Horse Preserve. The proposed mine is actually within the latter preserve. As well, the Upper Taseko was previously part of the South Chilcotin Wilderness Proposal. Unfortunately, only a smaller area was protected. In his recent submission to the Federal Panel, McCrory pointed out that: *"These aboriginal and provincial protected areas represent a huge investment by Society in preserving lasting legacies for future generations and the proposed mine and other resource development severely threaten their ecological integrity."* The only way to prevent this from happening is to now protect the whole Upper Taseko.

According to the Valhalla Wilderness Society, an appropriate protective designation for an Upper Taseko Protection Area might include the legislated conservancy approach used in the Great Bear Rainforest that provides for aboriginal stewardship and does not jeopardize land claim issues.

Valhalla's proposal follows the recommendations for more grizzly habitat protection based on a recent grizzly conservation study headed by Dr. Lance Craighead of the respected Craighead Research Institute. The grizzly bear population in the West Chilcotin region and South Chilcotin Ranges (site of Taseko's mine proposal) is the largest residual dryland population left in the Coast Ranges foothills of western North America. Their diet includes salmon, white bark pine nuts and wild potatoes. The Chilcotin still has a near intact grizzly area the size of the protected Greater Yellowstone Grizzly bear Ecosystem. However, grizzly bears in the Chilcotin are now provincially listed as "threatened".

The Federal Panel also recognized that the proposed Prosperity Mine would

jeopardize the operations of a major wilderness lodge at Taseko Lake. "*The whole upper Taseko Watershed has major wilderness tourism values,*" states McCrory, "*and has been identified as an important grizzly bear viewing and ecotour area for local First Nations tourism. The only way to ensure these long-term economic tourism and ecological values is through protection.*"

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[Grizzly bear and wilderness photos available upon request]