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Transboundary Watershed Alliance

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The Unuk River Watershed of Southeast Alaska/Northwest British Columbia



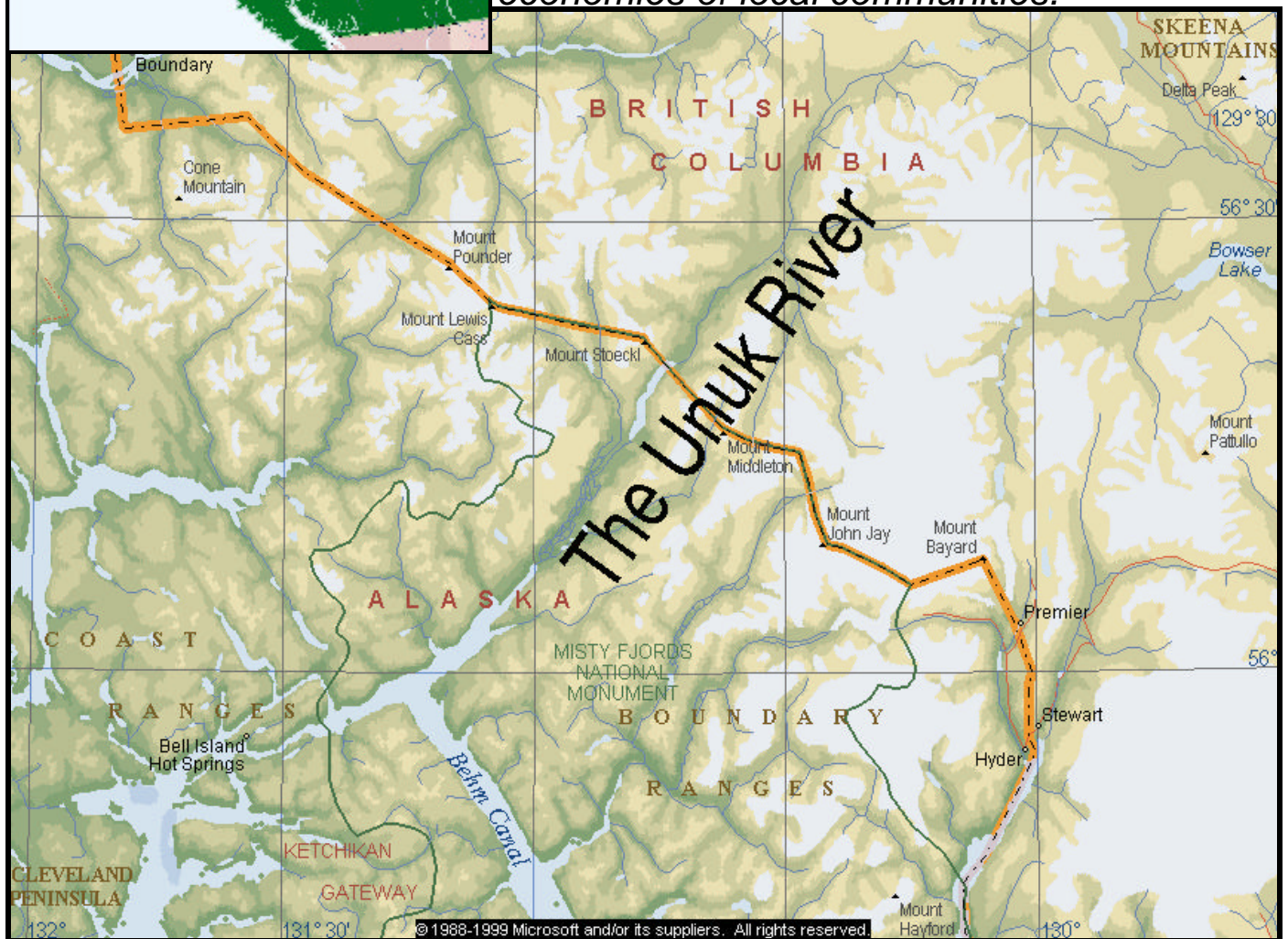
Photograph courtesy of the EarthWild International/The River League

Backgrounder

The Unuk watershed is a spectacular river system and an internationally significant wilderness ecosystem. Though one of the smaller and more remote watersheds of the northern transboundary region between British Columbia and Southeast Alaska, U.S. conservationists early on recognized its importance and worked hard to have the entire lower portion of it protected within Misty Fjords National Monument. More recently, Canadian conservationists negotiated a small provincial park near the border. In spite

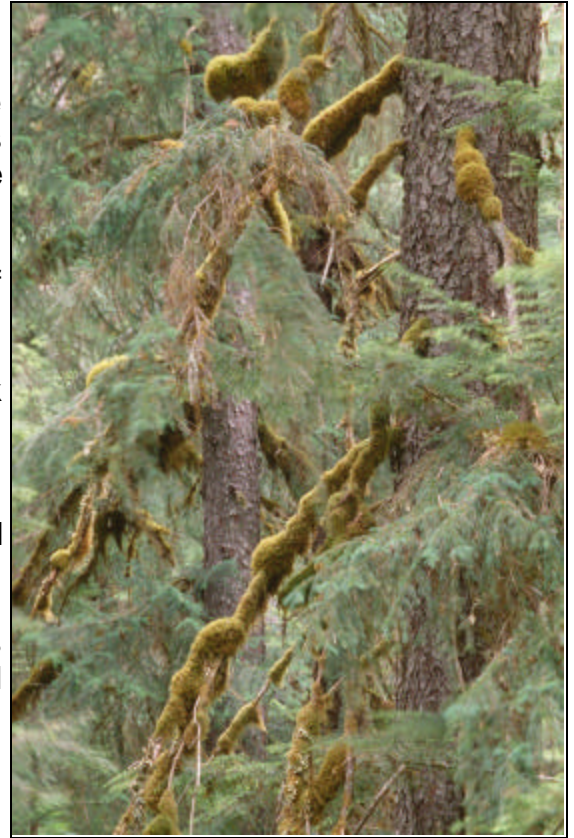
of those protected areas and the Unuk's importance as a salmon river, very little is known about the watershed. The mining industry has long been interested in the heavily mineralized headwaters on the Canadian side so a rise in metal prices could rapidly put the watershed at risk of industrial development. Any road into the watershed would also make industrial exploitation of the Unuk's forests financially feasible. The recent Alaska State initiative investigating the feasibility of pushing a transboundary road into the area does not threaten the Unuk directly, but the adjacent Craig, Iskut and Stikine rivers are at risk. Increased public

awareness of all of these wild transboundary watersheds is key to promoting region-wide, conservation-based planning and avoiding their piecemeal fragmentation. Their survival hinges on the region's recognition as a vast series of varied and essentially intact ecosystems that nurture the cultures and economies of local communities.



ECOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

The Unuk River is just over 80 miles long and drains an area of 1500 square miles. Though small relative to some of the other transboundary watersheds, the Unuk is surprisingly diverse. At least four biogeoclimatic zones are represented in the watershed: Alpine Tundra, Engelmann Spruce-Subalpine Fir, Mountain Hemlock and Coastal Western Hemlock. The valley hosts populations of terrestrial fauna that include wolf, lynx, grizzly bear, black bear, fisher, mountain goat, moose, and black-tail deer. The Unuk is the largest producer of king or chinook salmon in southern Southeast Alaska and sockeye, coho and Dolly Varden trout are also present in the watershed. Among non-salmonids, the eulachon that come to spawn in the Unuk each year also support an annual fishery. Bird species are numerous, including many migratory species, bald eagles and gryfalcon. It is suspected rare peregrine falcons may also inhabit the watershed. The marine areas adjacent to the Unuk are also rich with life, including Dahl porpoise, sea lions, harbor seals, and even orcas. Intact coastal temperate rainforest covers much of the Alaskan portion of the watershed.



Photograph courtesy of the EarthWild International/The River League

SOCIOCULTURAL OVERVIEW

The coastal portion of the watershed forms part of the traditional territory of the Tlingit people, and they still use the area for subsistence and commercial fishing. While numerous traditional use sites can be found in the watershed, there are no permanent settlements in the Unuk. Much of the interior portion of the watershed was the domain of the Tsetsaut people, an Athapaskan people that fished for salmon in the summer but lived for most of the year on game they hunted in the interior.



Photograph courtesy of the EarthWild International/The River League

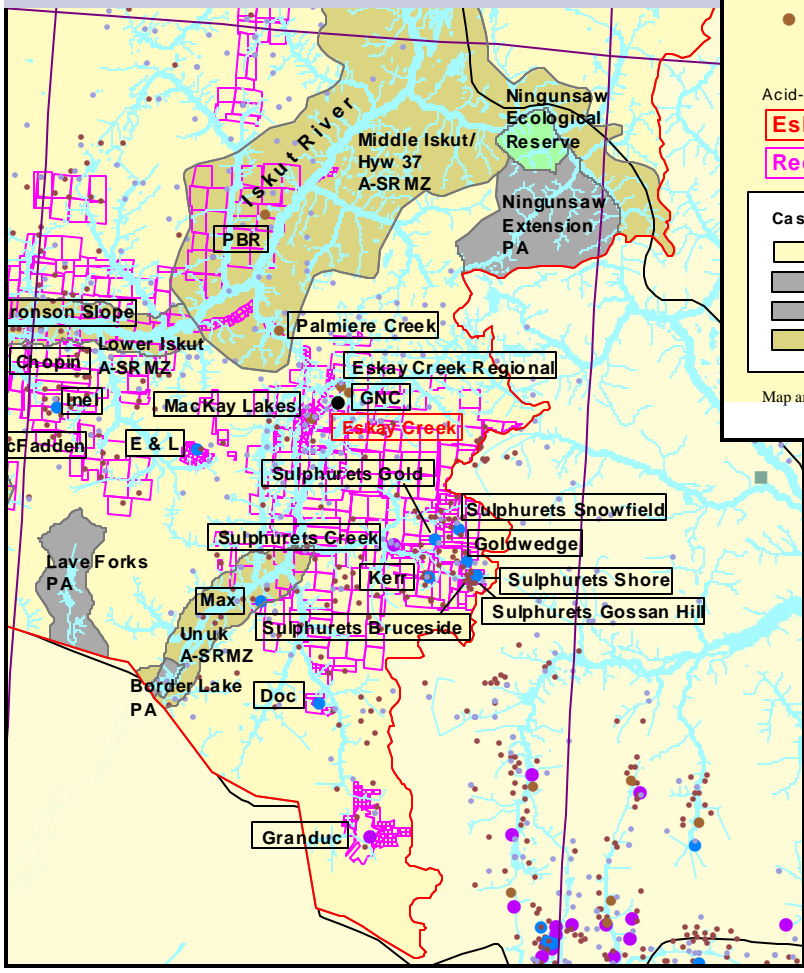
Warring with the Gitksan of Kitwancool and the Nassgotin, the southernmost band of the Tahltan Nation, so reduced the population of the Tsetsaut that in 1885 the remnant people assimilated into the Nisga'a community of Kincolith. The distinct Tsetsaut language has been extinct for close to one hundred years. In the British Columbia Treaty Process the interior portions of the Unuk and Iskut watersheds are claimed by the Tahltan Nation.

Though there are no settlements in the Unuk, the river is central to the commercial, subsistence and sport fisheries out of Ketchikan and Wrangell. There are subsistence, recreational and commercial harvests of salmon, and eulachon are taken in subsistence and commercial fisheries. Hunters and photographers are drawn to the superb wildlife within Misty Fjords National Monument and thousands of tourists visit every year. The only industrial development thus far in the watershed is Homestake Canada's Eskay Mine, which recently began operations in the headwaters of a tributary of the Unuk on the Canadian side. More information on the Eskay Mine will be provided in a following section.

THE FUTURE OF THE UNUK RIVER

Historically, transboundary rivers are at greater risk of mismanagement and have frequently had their ecological integrity undermined by industrial development. In the transboundary region of Southeast Alaska and Northwestern British Columbia, the watersheds are the shared domain of Canadian, U.S., Alaska state, British Columbia provincial and First Nations and American Indian governments. This complex jurisdictional divide has not generally been conducive to integrated, conservation-based planning, and less so to landscape-level planning for the entire transboundary region. Instead, the region has been characterized by the same, albeit delayed,

Mineral tenures and activity in and around the Unuk Watershed



Legend

- Closed/Abandoned Mines
- Producing Mines
- Exploration Sites
 - In Environmental Assessment
 - Advanced Exploration
 - Exploration Highlights
 - Developed Prospects
 - Other Exploration Sites
 - ARIS-Registered Projects, 1990 or later
 - Notice of Work filed Jan.-Aug., 2000 (excluding reclamation work)
- Acid-Generating Sites
 - Eskay Creek Actual
 - Red Chris Potential
- Cassiar Iskut-Stikine LRMP Outcomes
 - General Management Direction
 - New Protected Areas (PA)
 - New Protected Areas with Access (PA-A)
 - Area-Specific Resource Management Zones (A-SRMZ)
- Transport Routes
 - Local Road
 - Main Road
- LRMP Boundary
- Streams
- Lakes, Rivers, Ocean
- Existing Protected Areas
- Existing Mineral Tenure (summer, 1999)
- City or Town
- Village

Gnat Pass
Labeled mine sites and mineral occurrences include all producing or closed mines, developed prospects, advanced exploration sites, exploration highlights, and notice of work sites.

Map and legend courtesy of the Environmental Mining Council of British Columbia

pattern of road construction followed by resource extraction and environmental fragmentation that has occurred in the coastal watersheds of southern British Columbia. Development of the Eskay mine involved the construction of an access road to Tom MacKay Lake high in the Unuk drainage. That road now stares into the valley below where it could be extended if another of the many claims in the area results in a mine proposal.



In the environmental impact assessment on the Eskay mine, cumulative effects were said to be negligible since no other logging, mining or tourism operations exist in the area to exacerbate the impacts of the mine. That analysis did not take into account the cumulative impacts generated by road access itself in an area that has considerable resource development potential. A 1989 study done for the British Columbia Ministry of Energy, Mines and Resources identified lack of road access as a major impediment to developing the logging, mineral, and tourism values of the region and studied the potential for road routes into the Unuk watershed, as well as the Craig and the Iskut. The Eskay mine road to Tom MacKay Lake provides a first step towards accessing the Unuk while the concentration of mineral values there (indicated on the map on the previous page) make pressures to extend the road inevitable. Timber values are significant enough that a mining road into the Unuk valley would invariably lead to industrial logging in the Unuk.

As mentioned previously, the pressures for road access in the transboundary also come from Alaska. A bill was recently passed in the State Legislature to look into the feasibility of

constructing of a number of pioneer roads in the state, including at least two transboundary routes: a road from Juneau to Atlin and a Bradfield Canal road. While the protection afforded the Unuk by Misty Fjords National Monument leaves it, at present, free from the threat of transboundary road construction, the watersheds directly to the north do not enjoy that same security. The proposed Bradfield route threatens the Craig, Iskut and lower Stikine rivers.



The mineral and timber values in the unprotected upper Unuk drainage will inevitably lead to a new development proposal. It is therefore urgent that we take a close look



at the Unuk River now and appreciate the value it holds in its pristine state. Even more importantly, there is time to attempt to reframe the planning debate in the entire transboundary region so that each threatened watershed benefits from a cautious and conservation-based planning approach.

Photographs courtesy of the EarthWild International/The River League