

IMPRESSIONS FROM MY JUNE TRIP TO BRISTOL BAY ALASKA

My name is Rick Parkin, EPA Manager for the Bristol Bay Watershed Assessment. During the first week of June 2011, I had the privilege to take a whirlwind tour through part of the Bristol Bay Watershed with several other EPA managers.



Many people across the Bristol Bay Region welcomed us, took the time to meet with us, shared their villages with us, explained their way of life and its importance to them -- it was three of the most important and valuable days I've spent working on the Bristol Bay watershed assessment.



Our primary mission for this trip was to see the country first hand, get some insight on proposed development and listen and learn directly from the local people about how they interact with the environment and what issues and concerns they have regarding development in the watershed, especially mining.

During the tour we met with Pebble Partnership officials and toured the site of the proposed Pebble Mine. We visited the villages of Iliamna, Newhalen, Ekwok, New Stuyahok, Koliganek and Dillingham. We rode up the Nushagak, Mulchatna and Kuktuli Rivers. We met with the Newhalen Tribal Council and met and spoke with council members from the New Stuyahok, Koliganek and Curyung Tribes. We participated in public meetings in Newhalen, Ekwok, New Stuyahok and Dillingham and got to meet and talk with individuals in all the villages along the way. I have written this report to share what I saw, heard and learned along the way.



Learning about the Proposed Pebble Mine and viewing an active exploration site.

My first remarkable sights of the Kvichak and Nushagak drainages came from the air -- a landscape brimming with water in every direction as far as I could see. I viewed this expanse of watery landscape that provides an



The complex water rich landscape



important diversity of aquatic habitat in the form of large and small streams and lakes, braided channels, oxbows, pot holes, and wetlands. Also obvious, is the unfettered nature of the streams and rivers that wind about, twist and turn in wide, complex floodplains. The vast amount of aquatic habitat and the complexity of that habitat give a hint into the reasons why these watersheds harbor such large and genetically diverse salmon communities. They show the vast amount of water on the landscape. I hope to visit the area later in the year to get an idea of the water level during low flow conditions.



Upper Talarik Creek and associated wetlands near the site

The day we visited the proposed Pebble Mine site was cold, windy and rainy with a low cloud ceiling. We landed and walked around the area that could become the mine pit, which gave me a sense of the size of the proposed pit and the landscape it would cover. Although it is not as wet as the lower lands we flew over, there is a lot of aquatic habitat in the form of lakes, streams and wetlands in and near the proposed pit. We visited a current drilling site and older sites and observed that the Pebble Partnership takes care to have a light impact on the landscape and they have restored their exploratory drilling sites so well that the old sites would be impossible to find if they weren't marked.

In Newhalen, we first met with the Newhalen Tribal Council and then took a tour of the village and surrounding areas with the President and another council member. They told us a little about the challenges of life in their small rural village and the need for a sustainable economy and jobs.

I had a good time meeting and playing with this Newhalen resident and his canine companions. It highlighted the importance of making sure that any large scale development is done in a manner that will protect the fish, the environment, the community and way of life for young Alaska Natives.



Later we had a large public meeting where we learned from the communities of Illiamna and Newhalen of the economic problems facing them. Many people at this meeting expressed the hope that mining in the area can provide the economic stability they need to keep their children from moving away and to maintain their communities. We also heard from people who came to the meeting from Nondalton, Naknek, King salmon and Kokhanok. Some expressed concern about the potential effects of mining on commercial fishing and some stated hopes that mining would support their economy.

*Meeting in
Newhalen
with
community
members.*



EPA visitors to Ekwok admire the first kings of the season

In Ekwok, not only were we able to have an excellent discussion with the Tribal Council and community members, but we met a returning subsistence fisher, saw his catch and



learned how he divides the first catch among elders and others who cannot catch their own fish. We also learned how he prepares certain favorite meals from that first catch. The fisherman told us how much salmon he needs to catch and prepare to see his family through the winter and talked about other fish and wildlife he also harvests and prepares for the year's supply of food.

In Ekwok, we also heard about the berries and herbs such as wild rhubarb that are collected and put up for their year's food supply. Some told us about harvesting, cooking and eating spawned out salmon and that is a particular favorite of theirs. It was exciting to be there when one of the first Kings's of the year was brought into town. The fisherman told us to come back later that afternoon for a salmon dinner but we were off to New Stuyahok.



Listening to the community during the meeting in Ekwok



In New Stuyahok we met with a large group of over 40 people. EPA hired a translator so that Elders could speak in their native language Yup'ik.

We learned a great deal about the history of their village and the threats to their way of life that they fear will result if a large mine is located upstream from their village. We also learned about the importance of subsistence harvesting to that community. One woman told us that although she has a small cash income, she once calculated that her subsistence harvest is worth \$35,000 to \$40,000 a year.



Yupi'k translation was provided by means of headphones

From New Stuyahok we boated up the Nushagak River to the Mulchatna River and eventually to the Kuktuli River. We stopped at a cabin just downstream from where the river splits into the North and South Forks of the Kuktuli, not very far from the Proposed Pebble site. When we climbed the hill behind the cabin we had a magnificent 360 degree view.



We could see up to the possible site of the Pebble tailings pond and I think we could see all the way to Lake Iliamna. The tundra was beautiful with wildflowers struggling to bloom and there were birds everywhere. No bugs! It was too windy. It was an exquisite day in every way.



Our boat moved fast on the river, weaving back and forth to follow the deeper channels, sometimes in the middle, sometimes close enough to touch the bank or rocks. We never slowed down and there was a time or two when I was waiting for the crunch as we hit something, but we never did.

I still don't know if our guide has the river memorized or was reading the channel as we sped along. The rivers were magnificent: wild winding rivers with numerous channels, shoals and sand bars and the famous "large woody debris" everywhere.

Although the rivers were running high they were remarkably clear and clean. At 30 or 40 miles per hour, we sped past tons of birds, such as eagles, hawks, many different ducks, loons, shore birds, bank swallows and arctic terns, just to name a few.





While spending the night at a bed and breakfast in Koliganek, I learned a lot about living in that small village. Our host and hostess told us about building their house and how they heated it despite extravagant oil prices. They served us salmon and fiddle head ferns for dinner and shared how they live off the land from salmon, wild herbs and even a garden. In the morning we met with Council members from Koliganek who talked about what they had seen on tours of mine sites in Chile and the southern United States. The council was concerned that their home area would suffer similar environmental problems if a large mine was built at the Pebble site.





We then took a very windy flight to Dillingham where our pilot apologized for the bumpy landing but we didn't even notice. Members of the Curyung Tribal Council met us at the airport and gave us a tour of Dillingham. We saw the hundreds of boats being prepared to launch for the upcoming commercial fishing season. Many of the boats are snub nosed because the first 2 or 3 feet were cut off to comply with a rule that all boats must be 32 feet or less. It was a little strange.





In Dillingham, over 70 people attended a public meeting, including tribal members, commercial fisherman, tribal corporation representatives and dignitaries such as Bella Hammond, the former First Lady of Alaska and Bryce Edgmon, the State Legislator representing much of the Bristol Bay area. We could have listened for many more hours if time was available, because the oratory skills of this community are incredible and person after person told their story with passion, skill and assurance. Their message to EPA was consistent, sure and direct.



In Dillingham we ate many of the native foods and I have a confession to make. Someone prepared a plate for me and included lots of local favorite foods including beluga and salmon head stew. I was not quite sure what to do with the salmon head but I was planning to get some guidance and eat as much as I could. I wasn't sitting at a table so I put my plate on the floor under my seat in order to go to the microphone and when I came back, my plate was gone.



So to the person who cleaned up my plate for me and might have thought I was pretty rude not to have eaten the salmon head, my apologies. I later was told that I should eat the whole thing, crunch up the cartilage and everything. I promise if given another chance, I will eat my whole plateful.



A picture is worth a thousand words and a visit is worth a million pictures. The way in which the people of Bristol Bay opened their hearts to us made this trip invaluable to me and the other EPA managers. I want to express my thanks and appreciation to all the individuals who helped me understand the effect and importance of our work to their communities and their lifestyles. This trip didn't make our job easier, but it helped us develop a more personal sense of what is at stake; an awareness of the importance of future decisions.



Climbing that hill above the cabin on the Kaktoli River opens up the magnificent vista of that huge pristine watershed. Talking to the people completes the picture by superimposing over the vista an inkling of the complex issues they face to maintain their preferred ways of life. I am very pleased that lead decision makers of EPA were able to climb up that hill and listen to the stories of the people of Bristol Bay.

~ Rick Parkin



All photographs in this narrative are courtesy of David Allnutt, US EPA Region 10.