Inland drilling: A debate over mining in Upper Michigan

by Jon Magnuson in the July 29, 2008 issue

On the southern shore of Lake Superior, rugged edges of deep green forest merge with cliffs of sandstone and million-year-old granite to mark the northern boundary of Powell Township. For most Michigan citizens, this remains a remote, forgotten corner of the Upper Peninsula, an economically depressed region that economists often call America's "second Appalachia." For those who live here, it has become a battleground between an international mining company and a patchwork coalition of residents, fisherfolk, church leaders, environmentalists and an Indian tribe.

The mining company, Kennecott Minerals, is proposing to open Michigan's first metallic sulfide mine. The ore is 300 feet below the Salmon Trout River, which empties into Lake Superior. In the plan for the mine, an outcropping of a volcanic remnant made of peridotite and known as Eagle Rock would be dynamited and drilled to serve as a portal for a tunnel through which fleets of 40-ton trucks would travel beneath the riverbed down a series of switchbacks to retrieve what is estimated to be over $5 billion worth of copper and nickel.

Kennecott's investment in this project is already millions of dollars, not including an expensive contract with a prestigious New York advertising company. Critics of Kennecott's proposal maintain that questions about the stability of the mine have not been adequately addressed. They have presented evidence showing that if the crown of Eagle Rock is fractured during blasting operations, it would be disastrous for Lake Superior's watershed, contaminating its aquifer and destroying one of the last breeding populations of the endangered coaster brook trout. In addition, critics say that Kennecott, a subsidiary of London-based Rio Tinto, has one of the worst pollution records of any mining company in North America. Surveys show that 480 of the 540 citizens in the village of Big Bay, the center of the township, do not want Kennecott's operation to move forward.

In 2006, early in the mining application process, 100 leaders of local faith communities from nine faith traditions took a position against the mine, in part out of their commitment to the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community (KBIC). Tribal members still retain rights, under federal law, to traditional hunting and fishing grounds in the Eagle Rock area.

The tribe's opposition to the mine initially appeared puzzling. The mine would be a source of badly needed revenue and jobs. From the perspective of self-interest, the tribe had little reason to oppose the mine. Kennecott officials tried unsuccessfully to meet with KBIC leaders. What wasn't apparent to casual observers or to Kennecott representatives were the centuries-old perspectives that were influencing tribal leaders.

As part of a field trip with university students, I traveled to the little tribal community of Zeba on the shores of Keweenaw Bay, 50 miles from Eagle Rock, to meet with residents. We met in the fellowship hall of a church built on the site of a 150-year-old Methodist Indian mission. Inside walls of the small wood building were covered with Sunday school calendars, traditional dream catchers, embroidered medicine wheels, faded photographs and a framed copy of Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ*. Susan LaFernier, the newly elected tribal chair, is a soft-spoken church organist who, I learned, hadn't missed a Sunday morning service in 14 years. She sat quietly among other tribal elders as the group welcomed us. On a table prepared for us was an assortment of fry bread, smoked fish, jams and cookies.

When a student asked, "What do you think about the proposed Kennecott mine?" LaFernier thought for a moment, then replied, "The Yellow Dog Plains, the Salmon Trout River—that's the place my grandmother would take us to pick blueberries when I was a child. If the mine comes," she continued, almost in a whisper, "what about the wild blueberries?"

There was silence in the room. For a moment, I thought it a casual remark, meant perhaps to provide some humor, but surely no expression of what was essential in any discussion about the mine. "Wild blueberries?" I asked myself. "What does that have to do with billions of dollars of profits from Kennecott's proposed nickel mine or the polluting of the watershed or any of the central issues at hand?"

For Jon Cherry, Kennecott's project director, posing such a question would certainly elicit puzzlement, frustration and impatience. "What's at stake," Cherry says, "are

over 300 jobs and hundreds of thousands of dollars of revenue for the county. This is a great thing that could happen in Marquette County. Everything is completely legal. We're playing by the rules. We're confident the application process will turn out in our favor."

In its media campaigns, including house-to-house mailings, television ads and financial donations to highly visible local charities, Kennecott makes its position clear: the mine proposal is not about plants or fish; it's about jobs and revenue.

Several months later, I sat with Jan Schultz at her family home on a remote stretch of Highway 550, a few miles from the Eagle Rock site. Shultz, a veteran naturalist, is a botanist with the U.S. Forest Service. The subject turned to pollinators—bees and butterflies—that cross-fertilize plants and ensure ecological integrity. She was bringing me up-to-date on how essential and little understood these processes are. She mentioned a rare, fragile butterfly that inhabits the Yellow Dog Plains. "The blue-winged butterfly is the single species on which one rare boreal flower, the dwarf blueberry, depends. Without it, that flower will be lost. No one yet fully understands its importance. What we do know is the biodiversity in areas like the Huron Mountains holds a critical key that binds together a magically complex, balanced natural ecosystem." I remembered then, as if a prayer, LaFernier's remark about her grandmother, their walks on the Yellow Dog Plains, the harvesting of wild berries.

Faith communities, at their core, are brokers of meaning. They offer various ways, both practical and mystical, of looking at the world with alternative eyes. In divisive, heated community conflicts like the one at Eagle Rock, there are opportunities for such gifts to be put to work.

A foundation of Judeo-Christian belief is that life will ultimately be redeemed, but always out of broken human experience. Political positions always involve degrees of self- righteousness, shortsightedness and arrogance. Because there are no clear, ultimately perfect answers to problems, humility will always remain a signal of balance and authenticity. Cynthia Pryor, the daughter of an Episcopal priest and a community leader opposed to the mine, has quietly modeled this insight by helping to organize debates in community elementary schools. In some of the county's smallest logging and mining towns, students have debated the mine proposal in the presence of both Pryor herself and a Kennecott representative.

In the midst of hard confrontation, the resources of our religious traditions offer protection against the temptation to use inflammatory rhetoric against one another. The faith leaders' public opposition to Kennecott's mine proposal, alongside their support of KBIC's claim to treaty rights, reflected this sensitivity. They wrote: "We are not opposed to economic development or the mining industry. But in this instance . . . given the specific sulfide mining process, we are convinced there is not sufficient evidence that regulations will ensure a nonintrusive, safe operation."

In the long run, the most significant contribution faith communities bring to controversies such as the proposed mine at Eagle Rock is to ask deeper, harder questions about the meaning and quality of life. Lifting up such alternative consciousness, Bill McKibben, in *Deep Economy* (2007), echoes increasing numbers of economists in arguing that the increase of wealth is not boundless. He reminds us that technological civilizations have "arcs of expansion," and by 2050, if present trends of consumption continue, we will reach a level double the earth's capacity. Globalization has allowed people to live off others in faraway places without having to absorb social costs. We are now in an endgame.

Surprisingly, McKibben is optimistic at this point. To bring balance we need to choose to be moving, he says, into a slower paced, less consumptive lifestyle, encouraging simplicity, generosity, collaborative efforts in distributive justice, and play—modeling how to do more with less.

On Good Friday, Kennecott announced tentative plans for six more mines in the Upper Peninsula. Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality formally approved the mine's application despite a petition of opposition signed by more than 10,000 Michigan citizens. Lawsuits to stop Kennecott are pending, filed by KBIC, the Huron Mountain Club, the National Fish and Wildlife Association and the Yellow Dog Watershed Preserve.

If lawsuits fail and Kennecott moves ahead with its proposed mine, there will be, for a few short years, a flood of money, but most of it will be deposited in international banks. There will be new jobs, but a majority of them will be taken by out-of-state workers and technicians. Powell Township's land, its waters and its forests will be changed forever.

A test for religious leaders in the region will be if they can rise to the occasion and lead their faith communities in exploring deeper visions for the meaning of community. There's a chance to lift up a dream of another kind of ordered, balanced

life, not one measured by income or gross national product but one that points toward a slower, more humane, just and gentle way of living with each other.