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The quandary: to Peel or not to Peel (Comment)

By [John Streicker](#) on August 5, 2011 at 2:49 pm

Two weeks ago, the Peel Watershed Planning Commission made its final submission: protect 80 per cent of the Peel.

With a territorial election looming and with so much competing interest at stake, deciding on the fate of the Peel is a loaded subject.

The Peel is significant for Yukoners in several ways, as traditional territory, remote wilderness and mineral potential.

Representatives of these interests have all stated their positions.

First Nations have said clearly they would like to see 100-per-cent protection, but are willing to support the 80-per-cent proposal.

Environmental groups say they would like to see 100-per-cent protection, but are willing to accept the plan as is.

Right now, the mining industry is waiting to hear from the Yukon government, but previously, the Yukon Chamber of Mines said 80-per-cent protection went too far.

When it comes to land use, what do Yukoners want? I respect that there is no such thing as an average Yukoner. But overall, what do we want?

My sense is that we want it all ways. This includes respect for First Nations traditions and culture, intact wilderness and an economy with mines which don't harm the environment.

Is this possible?

Probably not for the Peel, yet I do think we could move a lot closer to this vision for the Yukon with a few simple steps.

First in my mind would be to show respect across this debate.

When environmentalists talk about mines, we should avoid hypocrisy. Our Canadian lifestyle does depend on minerals. All of us create the demand and we do benefit from an economy enhanced by mining.

When miners talk about mining and development, it is important not to dismiss broader issues.

Sure, the business case of a mine is an important consideration, but so too are environmental and social impacts of the mine throughout its life cycle – including reclamation.

Once there is respect for and from each other, it would help to get more cross-talk happening.

For example, this past spring, both the Environment Fair and the Mining and Geology Week celebrations were held on the exact same weekend, but in different locations!

Imagine if Environment folks had a wall tent set up at the Mining and Exploration Discovery Camp, and if the chamber of mines had a booth at the Environment Fair? This would build better dialogue.

More than just talking together, I think we need to get the various groups working together.

When a First Nations partners in a mine, there is more likelihood of spin-off jobs and business being embedded in the Yukon rather than heading outside.

Having environmentally conscious engineers working on mines in the planning and production phases will help to ensure that the mines are less wasteful of energy and resources. The mine benefits on its bottom line and we all benefit with a lower-impact project.

Imagine if the environmental impacts, assessment and remediation plans of a mine were developed in direct consultation with local environmental agencies? You may think that I'm a dreamer

Let's bring it back to the Peel. The commission realized early on that it was not going to be able to accommodate all opposing interests in this one plan.

So, after a lot of work (six-plus years so far), it has recommended 80-per-cent protection.

I think we should adopt the plan, and at the same time move forward to build the broader vision around a healthy environment and responsible mining in the Yukon.

For this to happen, we now need some leadership. It is time to hear from the Yukon government.

Of course, the decisions are hard, but all sides need clarity going into and coming out of the territorial election.

We need decisions around the Peel and a road map for the future of the Yukon.

John Streicker is a professional engineer, and the Green Party candidate for the Yukon in the May 2 federal election. His column appears on the first Friday of each month.

COMMENT

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