

March 2001

# *Transboundary Watershed Alliance*

## **The Taku Watershed of Southeast Alaska/Northwest British Columbia**



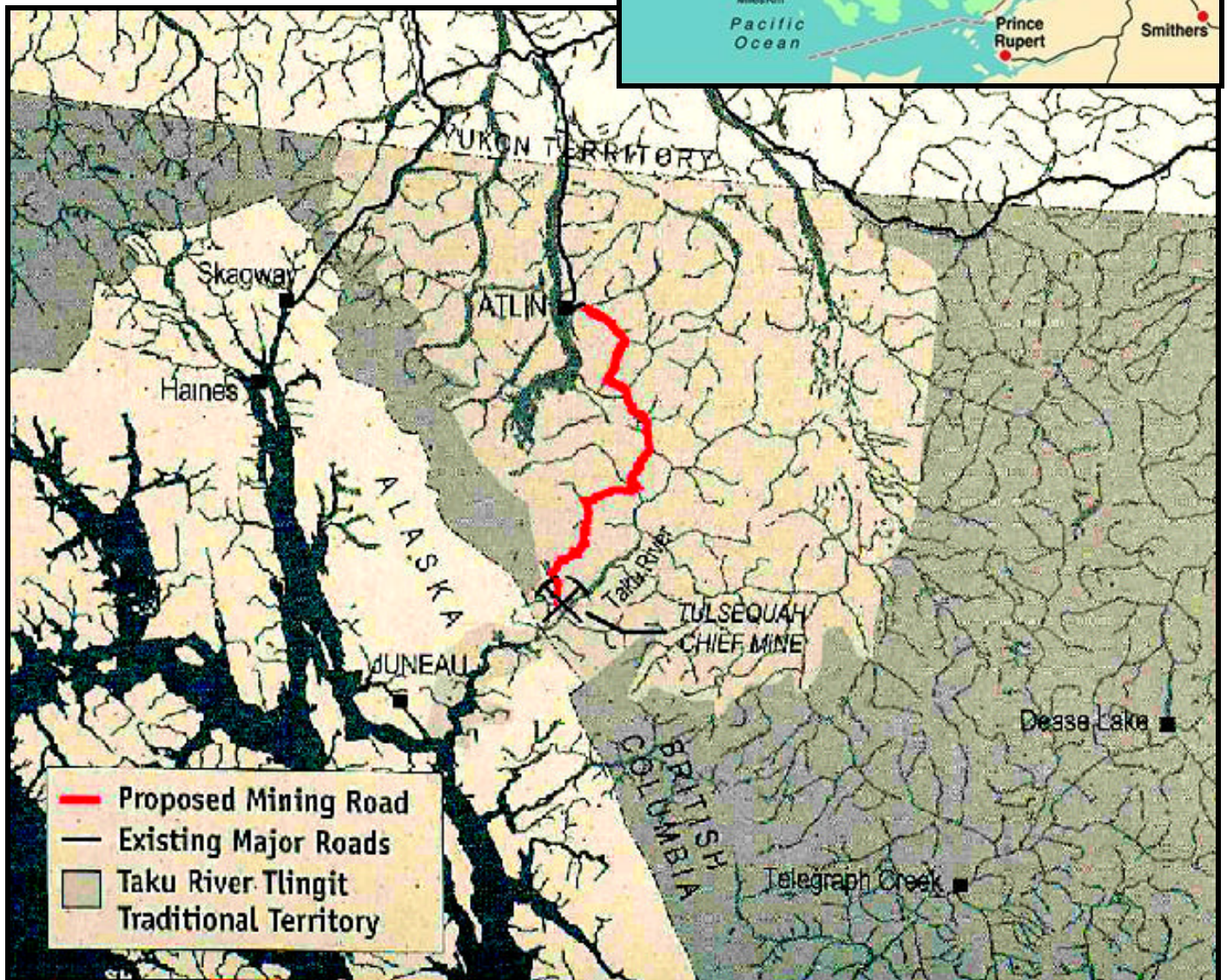
### **Backgrounder**

*The Taku is a vast and complex ecological, cultural and social mosaic which influences the lives of individuals and communities on both sides of the international border. This document contains a basic ecological background of the Taku watershed and some insights into the political, cultural and social issues at play there.*

*Transboundary watershed planning discussions hold the promise of maintaining the long-term ecological health of the Taku River system and ensuring that this watershed continues to support the cultures and economies of northern communities. Both this paper and the river trip the Transboundary Watershed Alliance is offering on the Taku this summer are contributions we are making to support such discussions. We also hope the trip will provide an opportunity for some of the people who will be involved in those key policy discussions to personally experience the region.*

## ECOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION

The Taku River watershed is an 18,000 square kilometer (1.8 million hectare) unroaded area in northwestern British Columbia, Canada and Southeast Alaska. It is the largest pristine and unprotected watershed on the Pacific shore of the Western Hemisphere. Before reaching its mouth at the end of Taku Inlet in the lush coastal western hemlock zone of the Alaska side, the Taku and its tributaries pass through a vast area of forests, mountains and plateaus to the north and west. Fully seven biogeoclimatic zones are represented in this surprisingly diverse northern drainage: Alpine Tundra, Boreal White and Black Spruce, Coastal Western Hemlock, Engleman Spruce/Subalpine Fir, Mountain Hemlock, Sub-Boreal Spruce, and Spruce-Willow-Birch. The Taku is unique among northern watersheds given the proximity of the coastal rainforest to the boreal forest. It is one of a very small number of places in the world where salmon travel upriver into a boreal ecosystem. The Tulsequah River is a key tributary of the Taku. Its glacial waters empty into the mainstem of the Taku River not far from the border with Alaska.





This immense watershed, more than three times the size of Prince Edward Island, contains some of the richest wildlife habitat on the west coast of North America. It is home to globally significant populations of large mammals including carnivores such as grizzly bear, black bear, wolf, coyote, wolverine, fox, coyote, lynx, and ungulates including moose, mountain goat, bighorn, stone, and Dall sheep, and woodland caribou. Without roads to fragment habitat and introduce

corollary impacts, these species play out their historic predator-prey relationships and move across the landscape as they always have. Bald eagles and many species of migrating birds, including the Trumpeter swan, also populate the watershed. The Taku River is home to runs of all five species of Pacific salmon and is estimated to be the largest salmon producer of all the northern transboundary rivers. It also hosts salmonids such as Dolly Varden, Bull and Rainbow trout and steelhead, as well as whitefish and eulachon. The healthy populations of all of these species, terrestrial and aquatic, can be attributed to the area's essentially untouched nature. It is accessible only by floatplane, riverboat or by foot.

## **SOCIO-ECONOMIC DESCRIPTION**

The intact Taku watershed is of profound cultural importance to Tlingit people on both sides of the border, and contributes substantially to the economies of Atlin, British Columbia and Juneau, Alaska. The salmon fisheries on both sides of the border depend on the water quality and prime salmon habitat that characterize the Taku and its tributaries. Tourism in the region also hinges on the intact watershed and the wealth of flora and fauna it supports.

Almost the entire Taku River watershed falls within the traditional homeland of the Taku River Tlingit, a transboundary Nation. They began treaty negotiations with the Canadian Federal and British Columbia Provincial governments in 1993. While most of the Taku River Tlingit people have permanent homes in and around Atlin, British Columbia, many continue to make seasonal use of the Taku and its tributaries for salmon fishing, hunting, gathering, and cultural activities.



On the Alaska side of the border, the Douglas Indian Association represents the interests of the Coast Tlingit people in the watershed. They view all of the lower Taku drainage as a part of their traditional territory where they have an interest in maintaining and safeguarding the land and resources. Like the Taku River Tlingit, the Douglas Indian Association Tlingit participate in a subsistence food harvest of salmon, and Tlingit people on both sides of the border earn a living through their participation in the commercial fishery.

The commercial salmon fishery on the Taku is a vital part of the economies of Atlin and Juneau. The Alaskan allocation, 85% of the fishery, supports gillnet, purse seine, and troll fisheries. Three of the Taku's five salmon species are fished commercially and the value of the catch in-boat is approximately U.S. \$4 million annually. The value of the salmon to seafood processors is in addition to that, and both the fishing and processing economies generate numerous indirect economic spin-offs in Juneau.

While the Canadian allocation of the commercial fishery is smaller, at 15% of the catch, it is equally important to the people of Atlin. Tlingit and non-Tlingit people fish commercially on the Canadian side and their catch has to be transferred to bush planes, packed on ice, and flown to Atlin, generating employment and a demand for services during the fishing season.

The sports fishery is another important contributor to the economy on the Alaska side, where Taku anglers directly spend over U.S. \$7 million annually in Juneau. Taku salmon also support the Alaska tourist economy in other ways. Every year thousands of cruise ship passengers tour the lower reaches of the river to marvel at the wild beauty of the watershed and dine on Taku River salmon.

The tourist economy on the Canadian side is based out of Atlin and relies mostly on the intact wilderness of the watershed. Small but increasing numbers of back-country adventure enthusiasts head to Atlin year-round to back-country ski, hike, river raft or kayak in the Taku.

Decisions that affect the watershed need to take into account the economic and cultural needs of all the communities in the region. The legitimate need for economic development must be looked at in terms of its long-term impact on the region as a whole and must be measured concurrently with the social and cultural needs of the communities of the region.



## THE ISSUE

Since the Taku River watershed is transboundary, Canadian federal departments, British Columbia provincial ministries, U.S. federal agencies, Alaska State agencies, and Native/First Nation governments on each side of the border have an interest in planning and decision-making that affect it. Optimally, decision-making processes will involve representatives from all of those levels of government and take the integrity of the entire watershed into account. The input of local residents and stakeholders is also essential, since they are often the most knowledgeable about, and have the most at stake in ensuring protection of watershed values.

Both First Nations and local stakeholders have a special interest in planning for the best use of the watershed since they are the ones who currently benefit from its unique, undeveloped state. As indicated in the previous section, the tremendous fish and wildlife values supported by the naturally functioning systems of the Taku are central to local subsistence and cash economies and must be protected from development decisions that could irrevocably diminish the watershed's natural productivity.

## THE FUTURE

The following are four elements of the evolving management and planning environment in the Taku watershed. We feel that each holds promise for addressing some of the issues raised above and that some could have an important and wider role in future deliberations relating to all of the northern transboundary watersheds.

### THE INTERNATIONAL JOINT COMMISSION

The International Joint Commission (IJC) is the body that oversees the implementation of the Boundary Waters Treaty. Historically, they are the body to which transboundary disputes between Canada and the United States regarding water quantity and quality are referred for recommendations.

The IJC has identified transboundary watershed management as an important tool for avoiding, managing, and resolving disputes. Under its current authority, the governments of the United States and Canada could direct the IJC to establish a watershed board for the Taku River watershed, with the initial task of facilitating the adoption of a watershed plan by the affected jurisdictions. The IJC could provide a neutral venue for cooperation of all stakeholders on both sides of the border under the aegis of a trusted, independent third party.

### **FIRST NATION ISSUES**

The people of the Taku River Tlingit First Nation (TRTFN) are profoundly committed to sustaining their culture and the local economy of the Atlin region. They are negotiating Treaty rights over their entire traditional territory, which includes the Taku watershed. They have simultaneously embarked on their own process to responsibly plan land-use in their traditional territory in a manner that fortifies their culture and promises a future for their children on the land. Without proper planning at the landscape level, industrial development could impact on wildlife populations and the productive salmon fishery in the Taku and thereby jeopardize the Treaty process, but more importantly undermine the Tlingit's efforts to play a lead role in land-use and economic development planning in their traditional homeland.

### **INTERNATIONAL WATERSHED PLANNING**

A cooperative approach to developing a management plan for a region is the optimal situation to properly meet all jurisdictional needs. A watershed plan is most successful when stakeholders as well as governments are involved in its development and implementation. While various stakeholder groups have emerged during the review of the proposed Tulsequah Chief mining project, concerted outreach and education would be required to ensure that all affected stakeholders are knowledgeable about, and able to participate in, the development of a watershed plan. There are various successful models that could inform the establishment of a process specific to the realities, promise and challenges of the Taku watershed.

### **THE PACIFIC SALMON TREATY**

The Pacific Salmon Treaty, recently signed by the Canadian and U.S. governments, includes a commitment to protect transboundary rivers and to establish a panel to deal with issues that arise that effect both countries. The Taku River is a prolific producer of all 5 species of salmon, which are fundamental to the First Nations and commercial fisheries on the Canadian side of the border, and Southeast Alaska's subsistence, sport and commercial fisheries. Cooperation provisions in the Treaty and the experience of past successful, joint salmon enhancement projects could be drawn upon as the basis for a successful planning process.

