The Sacred Headwaters

THE FIGHT TO SAVE THE STIKINE, SKEENA, AND NASS

Wade Davis

Principal photography **CARR CLIFTON**

Foreword **DAVID SUZUKI**

Afterword **ROBERT F. KENNEDY JR.**

THE SACRED HEADWATERS

WADE DAVIS

The Sacred Headwaters

THE FIGHT TO SAVE THE STIKINE, SKEENA, AND NASS

Principal photography **CARR CLIFTON**

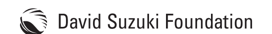
Foreword **DAVID SUZUKI**

Afterword **ROBERT F. KENNEDY JR.**

With contributions by **TREVOR FROST**

and **PAUL COLANGELO**

Additional photography
PAUL COLANGELO, WADE DAVIS, SARAH LEEN, CLAUDIO CONTRERAS, GARY FIEGEHEN, BRIAN HUNTINGTON, TOM PESCHAK, JOE RIIS, and **FLORIAN SCHULZ**



D&M PUBLISHERS INC.
Vancouver/Toronto/Berkeley

Copyright © 2011 by Wade Davis
Principal photography copyright © 2011 by Carr Clifton
Other photography copyright © 2011 by the photographers credited on page 145
Foreword copyright © 2011 by David Suzuki
Afterword copyright © 2011 by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

First U.S. edition 2012

11 12 13 14 15   5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher or a license from The Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). For a copyright license, visit www.accesscopyright.ca or call toll free to 1-800-893-5777.

Greystone Books
An imprint of D&M Publishers Inc.
2323 Quebec Street, Suite 201
Vancouver BC Canada V5T 4S7
www.greystonebooks.com

David Suzuki Foundation
219-2211 West 4th Avenue
Vancouver BC Canada V6K 4S2

Cataloging data available from Library and Archives Canada
ISBN 978-1-55365-880-1 (cloth)
ISBN 978-1-55365-881-8 (ebook)

Editing by Nancy Flight
Jacket and interior design by Jeremy Eberts
Jacket photograph by Carr Clifton
Maps by Carl Mehler and Gregory Ugiansky
Printed and bound in China by C&C Offset Printing Co., Ltd.
Text printed on acid-free paper
Distributed in the U.S. by Publishers Group West

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the British Columbia Arts Council, the Province of British Columbia through the Book Publishing Tax Credit, and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund for our publishing activities.

Frontispiece
From the pond beyond the granite boulders, water flows in two directions to give rise to the Spatsizi, a high tributary of the Stikine, and to the Skeena. Just beyond the mountain lightened by the sun is Nass Lake, source of the Nass, third of the great salmon rivers born in the Sacred Headwaters.

CONTENTS

Foreword DAVID SUZUKI vii

The Sacred Headwaters 1

Afterword ROBERT F. KENNEDY JR. 139

Take Action 141

Acknowledgments 143

Photo Credits 145

Foreword David Suzuki

IN THE SUMMER OF 2006, my wife, Tara, and I stood in the Klabona meadows in northern British Columbia, overlooking the Sacred Headwaters, the point of origin of three of the province's great rivers—the Stikine, Skeena, and Nass. In a moving ceremony, elders representing all of the First Nations of these drainages—Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en, Carrier and Sekani, Tsimshian, Nisga'a, Haisla, Tlingit, Haida, and Tahltan—poured water drawn from their own rivers into a single cedar box created for the occasion. The Tahltan and all their neighboring tribes had managed to halt, at least for the time being, the industrial activities of Shell Canada, part of the second-largest corporation in the world. This was an extraordinary accomplishment. Both Tara and I felt immensely grateful and honored to be with them in that moment on their land.

As we listened to the hypnotic drumming and singing, my mind went back many years to when the great Nisga'a leader James Gosnell told me about his first encounter with a clear-cut. He had been walking along a path through the forest when suddenly he encountered an opening among the trees. "I couldn't breathe," he said. "It was as if the land had been skinned. I couldn't understand who could do such a thing to the earth."

Memories came to mind of another old friend, Watson Price, Chief Gaahlai of the Haida Nation, who died in 2007 at the age of 101. As we gathered to celebrate his life, I reflected on all that had happened during his long life. Not long before his birth, flocks of passenger pigeons containing as many as two billion birds darkened the skies over much of North America. The wide prairies trembled beneath the hooves of tens of millions of bison ranging along the central corridor of the continent. Grizzly bears fed on those bison and flourished all the way east to Ontario, north to the Arctic, and south to Texas. They were plains animals, now left in tiny pockets of mountain refuges. We hear of northern cod off Newfoundland, once so numerous it took only a wicker basket dropped into their midst to pull them out, and whales so abundant that the atmosphere was fetid with their humid breaths hanging in the air after they passed.

Within living memory of our elders and the stories passed on to them from their elders, the planet has been transformed by the explosive growth in human numbers, technological prowess, consumptive demand, and a global economy. Hungry for space for farms and cities and resources for industry, we are pushing into evermore remote frontiers—the ocean floor, steaming jungles, mountaintops,

deserts, Arctic tundra, and deep below Earth's crust—and thus threatening to undermine the very systems that suport all life on the planet.

The groundbreaking UN report "Our Common Future" (1987), led by then–Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, recommended protection of 12 percent of the land for nature, a significant figure at the time but one that implied that 88 percent could be taken over by one species—us. Because there may be 15 to 30 million other species on the planet, as we co-opt more and more land and photosynthetic potential for human purposes other species are driven to extinction.

In our haste to keep the economy growing, we forget that it is the web of all living things that creates and maintains a biosphere habitable for animals like us. Were we to go back 4 billion years before life arose on Earth, we would find a totally inhospitable world. Lacking oxygen, the air would be deadly. There would be no plant or tree roots, soil fungi, or bacteria to filter heavy metals and toxic compounds from the water. Since all of our food was once alive, there would be nothing to eat and no soil on which to grow food. And without plants there would be no sunlight captured in photosynthesis to provide us with energy to move, grow, and reproduce; nor would there be any fuel—dung, peat, wood, oil, gas, coal—or even fire to burn such material if it existed. All of those "services" are provided for us by the rest of creation; yet we are tearing it apart without any knowledge of how life maintains the conditions for our lives.

As we drive tens of thousands of species to extinction by bulldozing, burning, polluting, or flooding ecosystems, we lack the knowledge to rebuild and restore the planet's diversity and productivity. Thus, every remaining intact ecosystem becomes a priceless hedge against our ignorance and offers the opportunity to learn nature's secrets. Today, as you will see in the exquisite photographs in this book, the homeland of the Tahltan is one of the few remaining places on all the earth where such natural abundance can still be found, where herds of caribou mark the horizons and grizzly bear and wolves are commonly encountered. Yet this beautiful and pristine wilderness area is under industrial threat. Todagin Mountain, just one of the places in Tahltan territory facing such a threat, is home to the largest population of Stone sheep in the world, and yet it may be laid to waste to produce copper and gold to feed foreign markets.

As more and more of us move into highly urbanized communities, few of us ever go into the wild. Yet as we turn our backs on the hinterlands, a flood of unprecedented development is overtaking much of this precious wilderness, nowhere more so than in the Sacred Headwaters of British Columbia, where not only the land but also the cultural survival of the First Nations is being threatened. Much of this industrial activity is occurring in a vacuum of silence as critical decisions with profound long-term consequences are being made by a few individuals in a bureaucratic process that has largely gone unnoticed by the Canadian public.

If, as this passionate and persuasive book suggests, the meadows of Klabona can be the Sacred Headwaters of all Canadians, indeed, for all peoples of the world, then all of us must act. Canadians especially should make their voices heard. We must all listen to the stories of the Tahltan people, learn from them, and celebrate the wonder of this remarkable place, if for no other reason than the survival of our children.

Ealue Lake, in Tahltan
Eya-luweh, meaning
"Sky Fish."

Rainbow over the Skeena,
at the heart of the Sacred
Headwaters.

These Sacred Headwaters are the lifeblood of our people. This water is a symbol of our unity as First Nations people. Just as this water will flow back into the three great rivers that sustain our people, we will return to our territories and protect our lands. At the Sacred Headwaters, we are drawing a line in the sand; this country bestowed to us by the Creator will be protected.

RHODA QUOCK

If there is anything happening in this land, we should be the ones who can tell them where they can and cannot go. That is why we have a voice. The land belongs to us.
ERMA BOURQUIN

You can have $10 million in each hand and in every pocket, but when it is time to leave this earth, you know what? You are going to go the way you came, with nothing. A lot of people don't realize that. They still want everything. If we stand in front of that mountain with the gold, they don't see us; they only see the gold.
AUGUST BROWN

Those companies come from everywhere else in the world. They don't live here. We have to live here. We have to survive after them.
DEMPSEY BOB

The fight is not over yet. We got a long way to go. We are just breaking ground.
PETER JAKESTA

The rivers and lakes at the heart of the Sacred Headwaters.

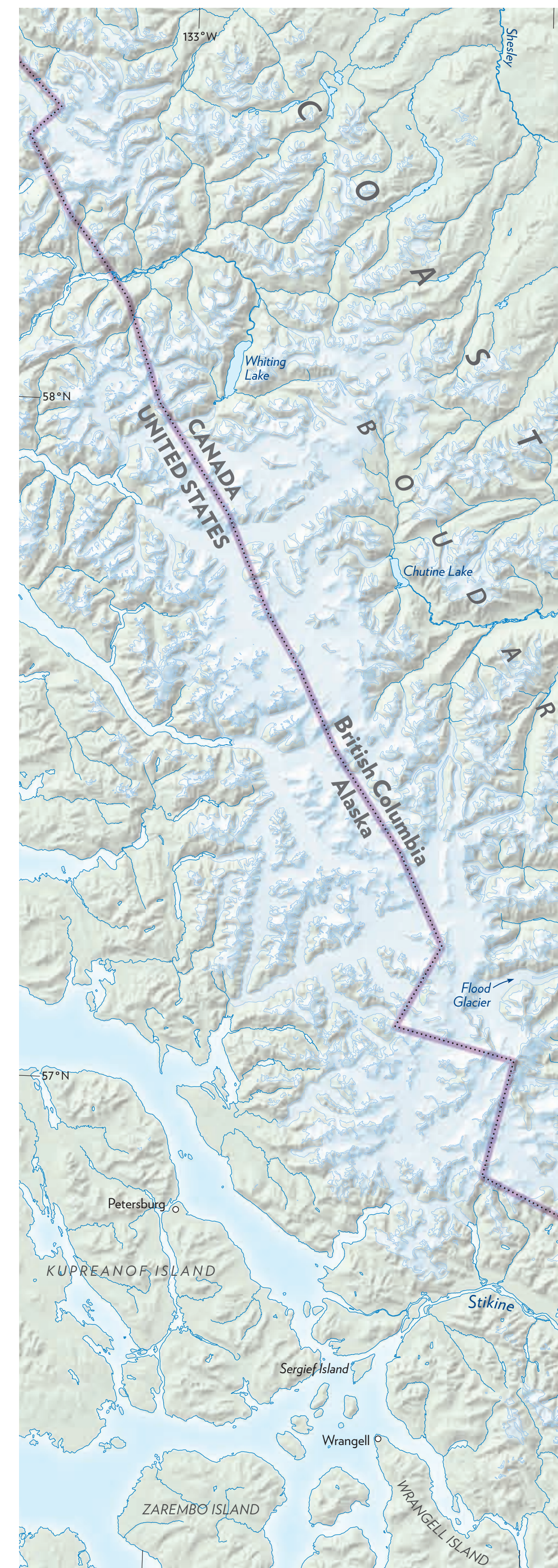
The Sacred Headwaters

In the summer of 1879, John Muir went prospecting for glaciers, a journey that led him a thousand miles up the coast of British Columbia to Alaska and the mouth of the Stikine River. He disembarked at Wrangell, gateway to the interior, but was not impressed. Gold had been found on the lower reaches of the Stikine in 1861, and a later, richer strike farther inland in the Cassiar had brought a rush of dreamers and drifters, thousands of miners whose presence stunned the native Tlingit and transformed Wrangell into a "lawless draggle of wooden huts."

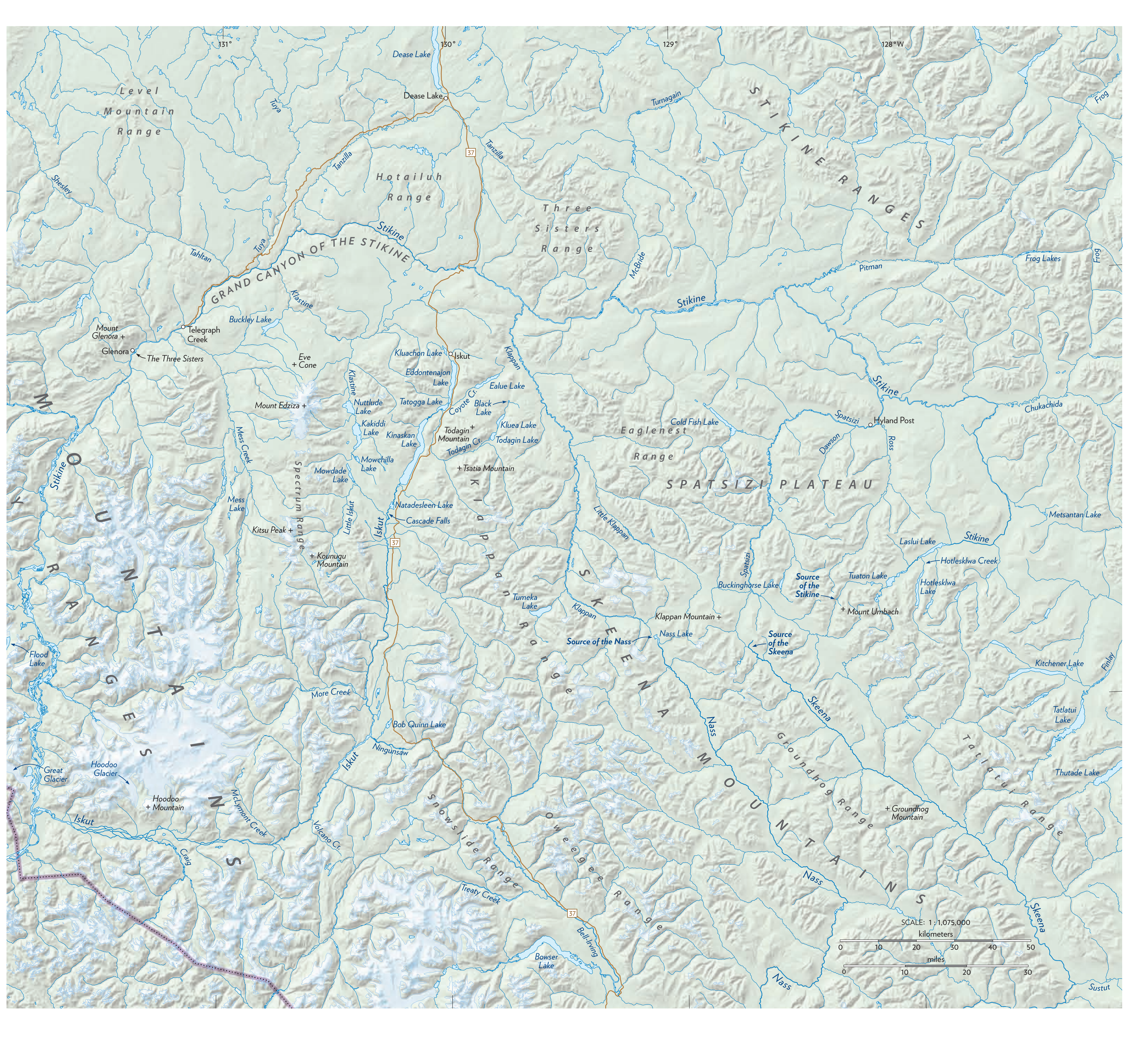
Once upon the river, however, moving by paddle wheeler steadily through the islands of the delta, where eagles gathered by the thousands to feast on salmon runs so rich they colored the sea, his mood shifted to delight. In every direction he saw signs of the wild. Immense forests of hemlock and Sitka spruce rose to soaring mountain walls adorned in waterfalls and ice. Grizzly bears and white wolves walked the shoreline amidst clouds of cottonwood down. The entire valley, wrote Muir, was a flowery landscape garden, a Yosemite, as he described it, a hundred miles long. In a long day's journey, he counted over a hundred glaciers.

Reaching the tent settlement at the head of navigation, Muir was keen to see more. As soon as opportunity permitted, he climbed Glenora, a rocky crag rising directly from the river to seven thousand feet. From the summit this veteran of a thousand strolls in the Sierra Nevada looked west toward the Coast Mountains, through which he had just traveled. "I never before had seen," he later wrote, "so richly sculptured a range or so many awe-inspiring inaccessible mountains crowded together." From this vantage, he tallied another two hundred glaciers. With night drawing near, "I ran down the flowery slopes exhilarated, thanking God for the gift of this great day." Returning to California, Muir named his beloved dog Stikine, after this river of enchantment.

Standing today on the summit of Mount Glenora, in an August snow squall, with raptors scraping the sky and ravens yielding to the ice, one cannot help but think of this grand old man of conservation. His visit to the Stikine was fleeting, mere days, and what he saw of the river was but the lower third. Had his eyes turned north and east, down the snowmelt gullies and past the tangled spruce, beyond the rivers, lakes, and jagged peaks, they would have fallen upon uninhabited valleys larger than entire countries, a wild horizon where Canada could hide England and the English would never find it.



The Stikine, Skeena, and Nass Rivers, born in the Sacred Headwaters, flow through an essentially roadless wilderness three times the size of Switzerland.



131°
130°
129°
128°W
Dease Lake
Dease Lake
Level Mountain Range
Tuya
Turnagain
STIKINE RANGES
Frog
Tanzilla
Tanzilla
37
Hotailuh Range
Shesley
Three Sisters Range
Stikine
GRAND CANYON OF THE STIKINE
Tahltan
Tuya
McBride
Frog Lakes
Frog
Pitman
Stikine
Klastine
Buckley Lake
Telegraph Creek
Mount Glenora
Glenora
The Three Sisters
Eve Cone
Kluachon Lake
Iskut
Klappan
Eddontenajon Lake
Ealue Lake
Stikine
Mount Edziza
Klastine
Nuttlude Lake
Tatogga Lake
Coyote Cr.
Black Lake
Chukachida
Cold Fish Lake
Spatsizi
Hyland Post
MOUNTAINS
Kakiddi Lake
Kinaskan Lake
Todagin Mountain
Klua Lake
Todagin Cr.
Todagin Lake
Eaglenest Range
Dawson
Ross
Mess Creek
Spectrum Range
Mowdade Lake
Mowchilla Lake
Tsatia Mountain
SPATSIZI PLATEAU
Stikine
Mess Lake
Little Iskut
Natadesleen Lake
Cascade Falls
Klappan Range
Little Klappan
Metsantan Lake
Kitsu Peak
Iskut
37
Kounugu Mountain
Laslui Lake
Stikine
Hotlesklwa Creek
BOUNDARY RANGES
Spatsizi
Source of the Stikine
Tuaton Lake
Hotlesklwa Lake
Buckinghorse Lake
Tumeka Lake
Klappan
Klappan Mountain
Mount Umbach
Flood Lake
Source of the Nass
Nass Lake
Source of the Skeena
Kitchener Lake
Finlay
SKEENA MOUNTAINS
More Creek
Skeena
Tatlatui Lake
Bob Quinn Lake
Nass
Groundhog Range
Tatlatui Range
Iskut
Ningunsaw
Great Glacier
Hoodoo Glacier
Thutade Lake
Hoodoo Mountain
Snowslide Range
Oweegee Range
Groundhog Mountain
McLymont Creek
Iskut
Volcano Cr.
Craig
Nass
Treaty Creek
37
Skeena
SCALE: 1 : 1,075,000
kilometers
0 10 20 30 40 50
miles
0 10 20 30
Bell-Irving
Bowser Lake
Nass
Sustut

Summit of Glenora Mountain.

Opposite
The Grand Canyon of the Stikine.

What would he have made of the soaring plateaus of the Spatsizi, land of the red goat, a vast wilderness aptly named the Serengeti of Canada for its herds of Osborne caribou and great populations of Stone sheep, mountain goat, moose, grizzly bears, marmots, and wolves? Or of the depths of the Grand Canyon, Canada's largest, where the Stikine disappears into the earth, a raging torrent that flows for more than sixty miles beneath cliffs of basalt and sedimentary rock rising twelve hundred feet straight up from the river's edge? To the south of the canyon looms Edziza, Ice Mountain, a towering dormant volcano veiled perpetually in cloud and capped at nine thousand feet with an ice field eight miles across. To reach Edziza from the north can mean crossing a lava field so rough that local guides whimsically measure distance not in miles but in pairs of boots worn out by the effort.

For the Tahltan people, whose traditional territory encompasses all twenty thousand square miles of the upper Stikine drainage, Edziza was said to be alive; like a wild animal, it could only be approached from downwind by those who had earned the right, through ritual purification, celibacy, and daily immersion in cold water for eight months. It was a place to hunt, to seek visions, but also a source of wealth, for beyond the southern flanks are vast fields of obsidian, what the Tahltan call the "black blood of the mountain." Scattered for miles are tens of thousands of shards and worked stones, great boulders of volcanic glass, and everywhere evidence of ancient sites that sent this precious commodity along trade routes that reached across the sea to Haida Gwaii and east and south as far as the Great Plains.

Had John Muir been free to follow the Stikine into its canyon, he would have found canyons within canyons, great walls of vertical rock and immense individual buttresses, each cut off from the next by deep clefts that defy easy passage. Two miles on the map consumes a day, assuming a track can be found through the deadfall left behind on the rim by the fires that regularly sweep the mesas, fueled by stiff winds that blow each afternoon from the coast. Muir would have relished the isolation, the sense of emptiness. Beyond the muted rush of the river far below, and the odd cry of a kestrel, there is a silence so profound that small stones dislodged by wildlife ring like bells as they drop against the canyon walls. Stepping toward the edge of the

precipice, he would no doubt have been enchanted as scores of ravens spun ever and ever-tighter spirals above his head. It is the way the birds kill mountain goats, dulling their senses until, dizzy with vertigo, the animals fall to their deaths on the rocks below.

If Muir had emerged from the Grand Canyon of the Stikine and followed the traditional trade route to the interior, within three days he would have reached the most enchanted land of all, Klabona, a wide and high, stunningly beautiful valley known to the Tahltan and other First Nations as the Sacred Headwaters. Thanks to the labor of Tseskiye Cho, the Big Raven who forged the world, Klabona is the land of origins, the birthplace of all waters, the source of three of North America's most important salmon rivers: the Stikine, the Skeena, and the Nass.

The Stikine begins as a snowmelt trickle on the flank of Mount Umbach, just above the Skelhorne Pass, doorway to the Spatsizi. The Nass is born of a lake nestled in a rugged knot of mountains across the valley just to the south. At the very heart of the Sacred Headwaters lies a still cobalt-black pond. From one end issues a creek that flows into the Spatsizi, a high affluent of the Stikine. From the other side, the waters go east to birth the Skeena. Nearby is a remarkable stone, as elegant in form as a Henry Moore sculpture, cleft perfectly in half as if to mark the divide. A leaf floating on the surface of the pond could go either way, 340 miles down the Stikine through the canyon to the sea or down the Skeena some 360 miles to Prince Rupert and out to the salmon waters of Haida Gwaii. Thus, in a long day, perhaps two, it is possible to walk through open meadows, following the tracks of grizzly, caribou, and wolf, and drink from the very sources of the rivers that inspired so many of the great cultures that cradled the civilization of the Pacific Northwest: the Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en, the Carrier and Sekani, the Tsimshian, Nisga'a, Haisla, Tlingit, Tahltan, and Haida.

Grizzly bear in the meadows of the Sacred Headwaters.

Opposite
Nass Lake, birthplace of the Nass, river of life for the Nisga'a people.

JOHN MUIR WAS VERY MUCH ON MY MIND when I first went north to the Stikine, in the summer of 1978. For some years I had worked as a seasonal ranger, gradually making my way from the increasingly crowded parks of the Canadian Rockies to those such as Naay Kun, on Haida Gwaii, where every river and forest glen and all the wind-swept beaches and broken shorelines remained indisputably the homeland of the Haida. I was living on the islands when I first heard of plans for a new provincial park, well to the north in a place called Spatsizi. I knew nothing of the country save what I saw on the map, which was astonishing. The prosposed boundaries encompassed some 1.5 million acres, making it easily British Columbia's largest wilderness park. Just to the west was another protected area, Edziza, spreading across an additional half million acres and, like Spatsizi, without road access.

In the continental United States, the farthest one can get away from a maintained road is twenty miles. The map

Spatsizi, early fall, with ice on the lakes and willow and birch already golden.

Following pages
A pond feeding the Little Klappan River, a headwater tributary of the Stikine.

showed that in the entire northwest quarter of British Columbia, an area the size of Oregon, there was but one road, the Stewart-Cassiar Highway, a narrow sliver of dirt and seal-coated gravel running north along the eastern flank of the coastal ranges to the Yukon. It was really no highway at all but rather a series of logging roads and cat tracks spliced together and only brought to some semblance of completion in 1972. Distance and driving times were best measured in tires, axles, and engine parts.

Even then, studying that map, I noticed the rivers, the Stikine, Skeena, and Nass, together with their main tributaries—the Spatsizi, Klappan, and Iskut, the Bell-Irving, the Sustut, Babine, Bulkley, and Kispiox—all running free as they drained the remote reaches of a hinterland three times the size of Switzerland. In the United States, outside of Alaska, only one river flows as much as a thousand miles without a dam, the Yellowstone. The Columbia River has been tamed by no fewer than 250 dams, which choke off 99 percent of returning salmon. The flow of the Colorado, the iconic river of the American Southwest, is controlled at eleven dams by technicians responsive to electrical demands in Las Vegas and the water needs of Phoenix and Los Angeles. The volume of water diverted is so high that the river never reaches the sea. Its delta dry, the Colorado enters the Gulf of California a river only in name.

Every year more than 5 million people visit Grand Canyon National Park, and some 27,000 descend the river from Lee's Ferry in rafts. The Grand Canyon of the Stikine, Canada's greatest canyon, often described as the K2 of white-water challenges, was not successfully run by kayak until 1985; since then fewer than fifty men and women, all world-class athletes, have made it through. No rafting party has ever done so.

John Muir first beheld the wonder of Yosemite in 1868. Today the equivalent of the entire population of Los Angeles visits the park every year. In Yosemite Valley, an area of a mere seven square miles, nine thousand people camp each night during the summer peak, and every year there are roughly six hundred car accidents and some four thousand visitors cited for breaking the law.

Yosemite remained pristine during the lifetime of my own great-grandfather. As recently as 1950, three years before I was born, no more than a hundred people had gone down the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. Like many in my generation, I had always longed to experience the wild as John Muir had in all of his travels. Spatsizi was clearly a chance to do so, and in the spring of 1978 I eagerly joined an old friend and colleague, Al Poulsen, as the first and only ranger team in the park. Our job description was deliciously vague—wilderness assessment and public relations. Aside from the guide outfitters, Reg and Ray Collingwood, and their small crew of wranglers, cooks, bush pilots, and hunters, we encountered in two long seasons perhaps a dozen visitors to the park.

This left us free to wander, and on one memorable day we came upon an old native grave, perched on a bench above the willow and birch thickets that hugged the shore of Laslui, a headwater lake of the Stikine. A picket fence lay on the ground, and on the headstone, carved in wood, was a simple inscription: "Love Old Man Antoine, Died 1926." Curious about the history of the grave, I crossed the lake to the mouth of Hotlesklwa Creek, where the Collingwoods had established a hunting camp at a site long used by the first people of the land. There, I found Alex Jack, a legendary native guide, whose Gitxsan name was Axtiigeenix, "he who walks leaving no tracks." Alex knew of the grave, and he knew who had laid the body to rest: his own brother-in-law. Old Man Antoine, Alex told me, was a shaman, crippled from birth but gifted as a healer and clairvoyant.

Intrigued by this link between a living elder and a shaman born in the previous century, I left my job with the

Alex Jack.

Opposite
Looking east across Ealue Lake toward Spatsizi and the Sacred Headwaters. The site of Imperial Metals' proposed open-pit mine is but three miles to the south.

government and went to work for the outfitters. As Alex and I wrangled horses, repaired fences, and guided the odd hunter in search of moose or goat, he shared stories of the old days, the myths of his people and the land. He spoke of his youth and family, of hunting forays that brought meat to the village, his first moose and grizzly kills. Encounters with animals made up much of the narrative of his life.

Alex's hero as a boy was the outlaw Simon Gunanoot. A prosperous Gitxsan merchant from Hazelton, on the Skeena, Gunanoot had been accused of murdering two white men, found dead after they had been overheard in a bar making threatening remarks about his wife. With no chance of justice, he gathered his extended family and fled Hazelton in 1906, the year of Alex's birth, and remained on the run for thirteen years, living much of the time beyond reach of the law in Klabona, the Sacred Headwaters.

Alex's father, a friend of the fugitive, had followed Gunanoot north, settling his family for a time at Bear Lake at Fort Connelly, an old broken-down outpost of the Hudson's Bay Company. There, Alex met and married Madeline Louie, a Sekani woman fifteen years his senior, and together they moved farther north, eventually setting up a trapline on Kitchener Lake at the headwaters of the Finlay River. For nearly two decades, living much of the time alone in the bush, they followed a seasonal round, trapping in the winter, hunting caribou and moose in the fall, killing a black bear in the spring, seeking goat and sheep throughout the year. Alex's only contact with the outside world occurred in Telegraph Creek, where twice a year he traded his furs for flour, sugar, blankets, felt cloth, matches, sewing needles and thread, and ammunition for his 30.06 rifle.

As a storyteller, Alex drew from many sources, as might be expected of a man who spoke six languages. His father was Gitxsan, his mother Carrier. His grandmother was Cree, possessed of the medicine power. From his wife, Madeline, and her people, he picked up Sekani, the language of the Finlay River. He learned Tahltan from the families of the Sacred Headwaters, many of whom traced their roots to the canyon country around Telegraph Creek. From the Dease River and the settlements of Good Hope Lake and Lower Post came other Dene people, who were Kaska and spoke the Kaska dialect. Alex learned English from the priest, and he chose his words carefully, as one does when speaking a foreign language. One must never suffer an animal, he always said. He never used "hurt" in such a context, and he was correct, for the word means "to cause bodily harm," and a hunter by definition must kill what he loves most to survive. "Suffer" implies shame, disgrace, pain, and sorrow, and these, Alex said, must never be imposed on a living creature. I recall once passing an encampment where Alex's people had settled for several years. He did not describe it as a place they had lived. "Here," he said, "is where we survived."

Todagin Lake (foreground) and Kluea, the lake chain that will be most directly affected by the proposed Red Chris mine. Out of view beyond Kluea is Black Lake, which Imperial intends to bury in 183 million tons of toxic tailings. The mine will also generate 307 million tons of waste rock, which will need to be treated for acid mine drainage for some two hundred years.

Mountain goats in the Grand Canyon of the Stikine.

Opposite
A cow moose and a calf crossing the head of Ealue Lake.

THROUGH ALEX I MET OTHER traditional elders, all extraordinary men and women who had spent much of their lives in the Spatsizi and in the adjacent reaches of Klabona, the Sacred Headwaters: Loveman and Sarah Nole; Robert and Jenny Quock; Charles Quock; Joe, Peter, and James Dennis; and Charlie Abou and his wife, Martha. None had come from a tradition of literacy. Their souls had not been crushed in the residential schools. They had all been raised on the land, hunters and trappers like their parents before them, and each shared intuitions and sensibilities about the natural world that I could only admire. In the same way that some people can hear the voices of characters when they read a novel, these men and women, all hunters, could hear in their minds the voices of animals.

Charlie Abou, who came into the Spatsizi at the age of sixteen from Fort Ware, on the Finlay River, was Alex's protégé and by reputation the finest hunter, with an uncanny ability to find game. Reg Collingwood tells of being with Charlie on a hunt and watching as he reined in his horse at the bottom of a draw. Charlie turned to his left, lifted his arms as if pointing a rifle, and said very quietly, "Gotch ya right in ma eye. Can't get away now." Reg couldn't see anything. But as they crested the rise, there at the base of an esker, quite out of sight from where they had been, was a large bull caribou, waiting for the kill. That's how Charlie explained a hunter's success. Each animal was a sacrifice, a gift to man that people might live, all with the understanding that human respect in turn had to be given so that all wild creatures might thrive.

When some years later my family and I built up a modest fish camp on Ealue Lake, we named it Wolf Creek after a story Alex often told about Charlie. Ealue, in Tahltan *Eya-luweh,* means "sky fish," and it refers to the setting of the lake, which is higher than the surrounding lakes. It lies between Todagin Plateau to the south and to the north Sky Mountain, *Eya-dzitla,* "the only mountain that touches the sky." Six miles to the east is the border of Spatsizi and the valley of the Klappan River, *Hok'azi,* the traditional route to Klabona and the Sacred Headwaters.

To the west the waters of Ealue flow down Coyote Creek into a stunning lake chain that runs some fifty miles the length of a broad valley to give rise to the Iskut River, the principal tributary of the Stikine. The names of the lakes from north to south are Kluachon, Eddontenajon, Tatogga, Kinaskan, and Natadesleen. Draining the far side of the Todagin Plateau to the south are Kluea, Todagin, and a cobalt jewel known as Black Lake. Nine bodies of water altogether, each more beautiful than the next, and all supporting an astonishing wealth of fish and game: rainbow trout in every stream and eddy, moose in the fens, grizzly and black bears in white spruce forests that skirt the upland plateaus, which nurture populations of sheep and mountain goat as abundant as any known to exist in the world.

The entire Iskut Valley is a garden, a neighborhood where moose and caribou outnumber people but a neighborhood nevertheless, brought alive and given meaning by generation upon generation of indigenous men and women, living, breathing, and dying, leaving in their wake history, culture, and myth. The river is an artery of life, the lakes the pathways of the ancestors, with memories of elders now gone, names that live on in new generations of the same Klabona families: Tashoots, Nole, Dennis, Jackson, Louie, Reid, and Quock. Along these iconic lakes, so deeply associated with the Tahltan people, young hunters and trappers still travel today, especially in winter when frozen surfaces allow easy access for snowmobiles.

In Alex's day movement was quieter, snowshoes and sleds, the sound of runners passing over soft snow. According to his story, one of his favorites, he and Charlie had left Telegraph Creek with their dogs before first light on a crisp winter morning in March, a time of good ice. With a partial moon illuminating the way, they had followed the traditional route that skirts Buckley Lake to the north of Edziza and then runs up and along the Klastine River to reach Kluachon Lake and the old camp at Iskut, where Pete Tashoots and Susie Quock stayed while working their trapline.

For unknown generations Iskut and Kluachon Lake had served as a locus and a crossroads for all of the Klabona families who hunted and trapped the Iskut Valley and beyond to the Sacred Headwaters. It was a place where people overwintered and where families could stay as the men hunted deep into the interior to Buckinghorse Lake and the Spatsizi, along the length of the Ross River and across the head of the Dawson, and north as far as the unequaled moose habitat of the Pitman River, a tributary of the upper Stikine. Throughout the year Iskut offered shelter to a small but constant traffic of hunters moving north to south up the lake chain of the valley and trappers such as Alex and Charlie heading for Telegraph with their furs or returning home with staples, great wooden bins of flour and sugar.

From Iskut trails ran in all directions. One crossed a height of land north of Sky Mountain to reach the Klappan River and in a matter of days Spatsizi and the Sacred Headwaters. When running dogs, Alex preferred a longer but faster route, down Eddontenajon and up Coyote Creek to Ealue Lake, which in winter offers five miles of clear going and an open fen at the far end that reaches close to the Klappan. The only challenge at Ealue is spotty ice—that and the threat of wolves, which for reasons that even Alex did not fully understand gather there in great numbers.

On the day in question, Alex had run up the north side of the lake and just reached the shallow bay where our lodge stands today when he found himself and his dogs suddenly surrounded by a dozen black and gray wolves, all menacing. He reached for his rifle and to his surprise found his scabbard empty. He had left his gun with Charlie, who was far behind, out of sight. Defenseless, Alex pondered his fate until suddenly one of the wolves fell over dead. This was quickly followed by the collapse of another, and then a third until his dog team was fully enveloped by a circle of dark carcasses inert on the snow. Charlie Abou, from a distance that muffled all sounds of rifle fire, had effortlessly picked them off one by one.

Alex lived to be 92. His wife, Madeline, was 105 when she passed away, in 1996. When my daughters were young, we would go to see her at the beginning of every summer. Blind and increasingly frail, Madeline would run her fingers over their faces and clothes, reading them like braille as she determined how much they had grown over the winter. Invariably pleased by their progress, she would stretch out her arm to a glass jar of candies and give each girl a small handful, a reward for having done well, for having survived and become stronger with the passing seasons.

Alex used to visit us at the lake, and after Madeline died he spent the last three summers of his life there in a cabin of his own. Every morning and evening he would come down to the main house and sit in an easy chair on the porch and tell some story. He filled the rest of his days with chores, cutting kindling, peeling poles. One day we went with my daughter Tara into Iskut to paint the picket fence that he had put up around Madeline's grave. The cemetery sits on a high bench above the community, and we watched as a dark storm gathered over the valley. Just as the winds grew strong and rain began to fall in great sheets, I was astonished to see Charlie Abou, said by then to be crippled, appear over the rise. An act of sheer will and respect had carried him on foot up the steep grade leading to the graveyard. Charlie was always the trickster, raven and coyote rolled into one. Alex was grounded like a bear. Nothing much was said, but I had a keen sense of being in the presence of greatness, knowing full well that neither man was long for this world.

UNTIL THE BUILDING of the Panama Canal, the northwest coast of North America was about as far from Europe as one could travel. At a time when the Amazon had been explored by the Portuguese and Spanish for nearly three hundred years, and the city of Montreal was about to enter its third century, the Tahltan still lived as they always had, with only the vaguest sense of a foreign world that was about to shatter their lives and tear asunder their culture. The first European ship did not arrive at the mouth of the Stikine until 1799. In 1824 Samuel Black, working for the Hudson's Bay Company, crossed the Rocky Mountains to reach the headwaters of the Stikine from the east. At Metsantan Lake he encountered a curious polyglot of men and women from several tribes, living together in mortal fear of the Tahltan. Black sought a route to the Pacific, but the people forced him away from the Stikine and across a height of land that led to a river that carried him so far from his goal that finally, in frustration, he turned again and went home—hence, the name Turnagain River, which joins the Kechika and Liard, rivers that flow into the Mackenzie and ultimately to the Arctic.

The first direct if fleeting contact for the Tahltan occurred in 1838, when Robert Campbell, also with the HBC and traveling overland from the east, established a trading post at Dease Lake. Through a long winter and a hungry spring, Campbell was constantly harassed, both by the Tlingit and the Tahltan, who fiercely coveted their control of trade to the interior. Within two years Campbell was gone, and the land again breathed free.

The Tahltan, Crow and Wolf, were a people of power. Five great extended families, subtribes, or clans, each with vast domains, collectively controlled the entire basin of the Stikine. Their influence in fact reached far beyond the limits of the drainage to include all of the Sacred Headwaters and the upper reaches of both the Skeena and Nass Rivers. In the north they met the Taku River Tlingit at Shesley, at the great divide, and they reached deep into Kaska territory, dominating the southern half of Dease Lake, though the lake drains north into the Arctic. They had the Stikine Canyon and all of Edziza and dominated the forested uplands south as far as Treaty Creek, well beyond the Ningunsaw Pass, where as late as the 1860s they did battle with the Nisga'a. Their relationship with the Tlingit on the lower Stikine was more complex. Tahltan held the river as far down as the confluence with the Iskut; yet the Tlingit had privileges allowing them on a strictly seasonal basis to come up the river to a specific shore where they might dry salmon and berries for the winter. Such access came at a price, and the Tahltan monopolized all trade to and from the interior in eulachon grease, obsidian, abalone shell, and other precious commodities.

In one of the terrible ironies of history, these prosperous trade routes, the very source of Tahltan power and authority,

Graveyard overlooking the Stikine at Telegraph Creek. The Anglican mission vehemently opposed the Tahltan Declaration. Writing in the Church newsletter, the Rev. T.P. Thomson remarked, "There looms up the first real setback we have had. The British Columbia Native Land Agitation has reached here with all its evils."

with the arrival of Europeans became vectors along which passed pathogens destined to destroy nations. No accurate estimate of the Tahltan population at the time of contact exists, for long before a young girl spied a cluster of white men making morning bannock, bread from white flour, which she understood to be the cause of their sallow and blanched complexions, Tahltan families had already been ravaged by smallpox, measles, influenza, and even the common cold. The first epidemic swept up the Stikine in the 1830s. Another outbreak occurred in 1847–49, and yet a third in the 1860s, in the wake of the discovery of gold on the banks of the river. The first paddle wheeler hissed and roared up the river in 1862, and two years later scores of men arrived intent on stringing a telegraph line overland through Alaska and Siberia to Europe, an epic scheme that ultimately collapsed with the successful laying of the transatlantic cable, but not before bringing into being the town of Telegraph Creek at the head of navigation on the Stikine. The discovery of gold on Dease Lake in 1873 brought another wave of adventurers, more white men than the Tahltan had ever seen, yet in their numbers nothing compared with the influx a generation later when in 1898 the Stikine was promoted as the effortless all-Empire route to the Klondike. Miners arrived by the hundreds to face what was in fact the most daunting of all approaches to the Dawson goldfields, an impossible overland portage that soon became known as the trail of blood. At Telegraph Creek steamer trunks and pianos, along with granite blasted from bluffs, provided the fill that protected the town from spring floods. The tent city of Glenora, twelve miles downstream, sheltered more than 3,500 men in the summer of 1898, all frantic to find fortune in the Yukon.

An Anglican missionary who arrived in Telegraph Creek that year estimated the total native population at no more than 225. "Decimate" implies the loss of one in ten. The Tahltan were not decimated by disease. Like so many First Nations throughout the Americas, their losses tallied no less than 90 percent of their people. Year by year the outer reaches of their homeland grew silent as the haunted survivors pulled back to a new settlement, a refuge built on a high plateau, just north and west of the confluence of the Tahltan River and the Stikine, ground still resonant with mythological significance even in the wake of a biological holocaust.

It was at this point that the colonial authorities made a stunning miscalculation. The Royal Proclamation of 1763, one of a handful of seminal documents upon which rest the origins of Canada, decreed that every tribal group encountered during British settlement of the continent had to be strictly and deliberately engaged, with fair, just, and equitable agreements, treaties negotiated and signed that would acknowledge precisely the terms by which these two worlds would meet and find common destiny. In the east, obliged by circumstances, the founding fathers made

arrangements, treaties signed by all parties, which, just or not, paid homage to the law. But as the frontier reached west, and the First Nations beyond the mountain cordillera lay weak with disease, seemingly destined for final annihilation, the British elected to ignore their obligations, fully expecting that with patience and time there would be no native people with whom to treat.

But history took an unexpected turn. The First Nations of British Columbia did not disappear. As the province joined Confederation in 1871, none of the issues regarding aboriginal rights and title had been resolved. Treaties had been neither negotiated nor signed. Not a single First Nation had been defeated in battle, and by legal definition none had settled with the Crown or relinquished title to their lands. By every definition of British law and jurisprudence, the country of the vanquished remained indisputably theirs. Which is precisely what the Tahltan said on October 18, 1910, when Chief Nanok and eighty-two surviving tribal leaders signed the Tahltan Declaration. "We claim sovereign right to all the country of our tribe—this country of ours which we have held intact from the encroachment of other tribes, from time immemorial, at the cost of our own blood." This was not a desperate gesture; it was a statement of legal fact.

Not that it staunched the flow of misery. In 1918 Spanish flu proved as devastating in Tahltan country as it had throughout the world. The Great Depression had no impact at all, for no one had any money to lose, and the price of silver fox furs soared. The Second World War sparked another boom as supplies came up the Stikine and were pushed overland for the construction of the Alaska Highway. But 1944 brought new epidemics—measles in the spring, influenza in the fall, forty dead in a month. In Telegraph Creek Willy Brown took on full-time work as a carpenter, building coffins. With peace and the 1950s came the residential school era, when young kids were

torn away from their families and sent south, forbidden to speak their language, beaten for no reason, humiliated by men the families came to know as the black robes. Two Tahltan children sent away to Burns Lake escaped and tried to walk home, five hundred miles through the snow. They froze to death, and still nothing changed. Tahltan mothers and fathers, obliged to endure the shame, were themselves humiliated at every turn. Men today can recall watching their fathers, who still live, kneeling and kissing the rings of bishops, even as their wives and children and revered elders had to seek permission of priests just to leave the confines of reservations that were little more than ghettos without walls.

The one enduring economic activity that allowed Tahltan men and women to thrive, as it had since the turn of the century—and was in retrospect the key to their ultimate rebirth and the regeneration of their culture—was guide outfitting. On the trail as wranglers, or tracking sheep in a summer blizzard, native guides from Telegraph such as Fletcher Day and John Creyke took ancient skills into a modern economy that attracted big-game hunters, men who ran international corporations, princes who ruled nations, dreamers from all parts of the world. All these privileged strangers wanted was authenticity in their lives, and this was something that Tahltan guides and hunters, not to mention the country, could provide in spades.

Yet even here there was the possibility of betrayal. In 1948 an Englishman from Bella Coola, Tommy Walker, with his wife, Marion, and a small crew rode several hundred miles north, overland to the Spatsizi. Daughter of a prominent lawyer in Victoria with close ties to the government, Marion Walker had learned of plans to delineate and privatize individual guide outfitting areas, which might be bought and sold like any other commodity. The Walkers knew the Spatsizi only by reputation as the land that supported the largest populations of Stone sheep and Osborne caribou, moose, grizzly, and wolf in North America. Their goal was to establish an outfit before anyone else could claim the territory. After several weeks on the trail they reached Metsantan Lake, and there they met Alex Jack, who walked out to greet them. He was by then chief of a band that included Bear Lakers, Sekani from the Finlay River, Tahltan from the lower Stikine, all independent families living as trappers and hunters a week or more on foot from the nearest settlement.

Walker asked for three men to guide him over the Spatsizi Plateau to Cold Fish Lake, where he intended to set up his base. Alex Jack, Charles Quock, and Watson Moyez volunteered, offering to show the stranger the way. Within days of reaching Cold Fish, the Walkers flew out on a floatplane, leaving the three Metsantan men with instructions to clear a camp, erect a number of cabins, and then drive the horses down to Hyland Post, on the Spatsizi, where they might overwinter. Watson Moyez, though young and strong, succumbed to galloping influenza and died at

All rivers run to the sea. Coastal wolves await the tide to feed on salmon.

Opposite
Osborne caribou on the slopes of Klappan Mountain, where Fortune Minerals seeks to establish an open-pit coal operation, producing between 1.5 and 3 million tons of anthracite a year.

Watson Lake. Alex and Charles Quock made it through at Hyland Post, and not a single pony was lost.

Come spring 1949 Tommy Walker and his wife returned by air and found to their surprise that the entire community of Metsantan had moved over and set up camp at Cold Fish Lake. Concerned that the natives might shoot out what he now considered to be his game, Walker concocted a story suggesting that the children of Metsantan were undernourished and in some cases starving. By all accounts this was untrue, but the report nevertheless prompted the Indian agent to remove from the Spatsizi all native men, women, and children, save those deemed necessary to staff Walker's big-game hunting operation. Knowing little of the country, he needed men to show him the trails and guide him to the wildlife. Alex Jack, Charlie Abou, Charles Quock, their wives, and a number of other families were chosen, and for some twenty years they found seasonal work with the Walkers. But the majority of Metsantan people, including many Klogotine, or Wolf Clan families, were sent out of the country in the harsh winter of 1949. Hearing of their plight, a number of Klabonot'een men of Crow Clan families of Iskut went into the Spatsizi to help. At Walker's base at Cold Fish Lake, the Tashoots brothers, Jack and Edwin, gathered up two dogsled loads of Antoine Louie's children, all nieces and nephews of Alex Jack. Loveman Nole, Alec Dennis, and his son James, working their Spatsizi traplines at the time, packed Antoine's gear onto their sleds and started west toward the Klappan. Traveling on good snow, the party reached Iskut by noon the following day. Alec, James, and Loveman continued on to Telegraph, reaching the Hudson's Bay trading post with their furs by the morning of the fourth day.

Once all had gathered at Iskut, and even as the Klabonot'een families took in many of the children from the interior, it became clear that the influx of families from Metsantan was indeed going to overtax the food supply of the country. Moose became harder to find. Salmon runs on the lower Stikine offered certainty, and many of the families, both Klabonot'een and Klogotine, Crow and Wolf, elected to move down to Telegraph, where they settled across the river from the town on a patch of land that was formally designated the Stikine Nomad Reserve.

Over the years friendships naturally developed; young people came together; intermarriages occurred. The two peoples were not complete strangers to each other; families of Tahltan blood had lived at Metsantan, and men and women from the interior had for two decades traded their furs in Telegraph. But tensions nevertheless remained. The Tahltan of Telegraph tended to look down on those they dismissed as Bear Lakers, who were for the most part Sekani, Gitxsan, Carrier, and Cree. Eventually the situation became untenable, and the people from the interior—the Bear Lakers from Metsantan—decided to abandon Telegraph and move back above the canyon to Iskut, where they had been so well received in 1949. With them went a number of Klabonot'een families, leaving the Stikine Nomad Reserve a ghostly warren of tent frames and empty cabins. Iskut meanwhile grew into a settlement, with an increasingly sedentary way of life, as families had greater access to the cash economy. In 1962 it was formally established as a town.

A DECADE WENT BY, and with it came a curious shift of fortunes. As river traffic on the lower Stikine declined, the Tahltan of Telegraph Creek became increasingly isolated even as the people of Iskut, a community defined less by ethnicity than by common experience and family ties, found themselves perched on the edge of a new transportation corridor, the Stewart-Cassiar, a dirt highway linking southern British Columbia with the Yukon and the Alaska Highway.

In time a third node of Tahltan life grew up at Dease Lake, another roadside town that burst into life in the 1970s

with the completion of the highway, the discovery nearby of a mother lode of jade, and the frenzy of activity prompted by one of the largest construction projects in the history of Canada, the extension of the British Columbia Railway from Fort St. James hundreds of miles across the northwest quadrant of the province. Although at the time it was little more than a broken-down cluster of Hudson's Bay sheds, a few cabins, and a floatplane base, Dease Lake was selected as the terminus. More than $1 billion were spent, serious money in 1972, but in the end a railroad project intended to spark an explosion of industrial development fell into bankruptcy before a mile of track could be laid.

Dease Lake subsequently suffered a dozen small deaths. The Cassiar asbestos mine, a hundred miles to the north, where a generation of Tahltan men had been hired to bag raw asbestos by hand in warehouses thick with dust, shut down; the town site was stripped bare until all that remained was a manmade mountain of waste rock and fiber. The population of the entire Cassiar District dropped by half as the miners and their families abandoned the country. Government offices at Dease Lake, overstaffed in anticipation of a boom that never came, had no choice but to shed employees. The new airstrip at Dease became for a time the symbol of all that had gone wrong. Built at enormous cost and designed ostensibly to handle 747s, it was so poorly engineered that a pilot at one end could not see over the rise halfway down the tarmac to the far end of the runway. Absent a control tower, the airport never quite realized its promise; one took off even in a small Cessna at some peril.

Living in the Stikine through the 1980s and early 90s, one became almost numb to the endless series of grandiose if ill-conceived megadevelopment plans. Even as the government struggled to explain to the public what it intended to do, absent a railroad, with a new multimillion-dollar railway bridge spanning the Stikine, BC Hydro, then a Crown corporation and part of the same government, came along with a plan to place five dams on the Iskut and Stikine, two of which were designed to be seventy stories tall. Had the scheme gone ahead, the railroad bridge over the Stikine, along with Canada's greatest canyon, would have disappeared beneath reservoirs fully anticipated to inundate hundreds of square miles of prime wildlife habitat. BC Hydro spent more than $30 million on preliminary studies before the project, which made little sense economically, collapsed under the weight of its own stupidity. A few years later, another whirlwind swept the Stikine as the Ministry of Forests, having already permitted logging outfits from Alberta to use the Stewart-Cassiar Highway as a mainline as they skimmed off the forests of Meziadin, arbitrarily decided to quadruple the annual allowable cut for the entire Cassiar Forest District. Again local opposition prevailed, and the plan's proponents ultimately slipped quietly out of the country.

In the late 1990s, however, a seismic shift took place as the economic boom in Asia, led by the steroidal growth of China, broke like a tsunami over virtually every wild corner of the planet. In two generations China's economy had expanded by an astonishing 1,500 percent, leaving the nation the largest consumer of virtually every commodity: steel, zinc, cement, coal, aluminum, gold, and copper. Demand and scarcity drove the international markets; within four years the price of copper quadrupled, even as gold rose to $1,500 an ounce. Within six months of Vancouver securing the successful bid to host the 2010 Winter Games, the projected cost of the Olympics would double simply because of an increase in the price of steel and cement.

In northern British Columbia, soaring commodity prices unleashed a surge of exploration and speculation. Dozens of companies, ranging from well-established multinational corporations to minor stock plays with less history than a dog, made their way up the Stewart-Cassiar Highway,

often overwhelming those leaders in Telegraph Creek and Iskut charged with both promoting job creation for their people and protecting lands such as the Sacred Headwaters that were the heart and soul of their nation. Few at Iskut or Telegraph were against all industrial development; everyone wanted a more robust economy. But the question soon became jobs for whom and mines for whose benefit and at what cost to the land?

The total population of men and women of Tahltan descent in Canada is roughly 5,000. Many choose to find their destinies in urban centers, not simply because of a dearth of opportunities at home, but for the same reasons people all over the world are drawn to city life. Those living in their traditional territory number no more than 1,500. Many are children or elderly, and many of those of working age are already gainfully employed in jobs that are not going to disappear. They are teachers, merchants, administrators, trappers, guide outfitters, nurses, maintenance workers, truck drivers, and technicians. As Jerry Asp, the leading Tahltan advocate of the mining industry, has repeatedly noted, two mines—GoldenBear, north of Telegraph, and Barrack Gold's Eskay Creek, which employed but 132 native individuals—reduced Tahltan unemployment from 86 to 6 percent. Full and sustainable employment for the entire resident Tahltan population over thirty years would require perhaps three hundred to five hundred jobs, not all of which would come from the mining sector.

The people of Iskut, in particular, rallied around the promise and potential of one mine per generation, even as they anticipated with dread the social, ecological, and economic consequences of absorbing seven or more mines in a single spasm of development. No one wanted a flood of outsiders taking away resources and job opportunities from future generations. Yet by 2004 this was the very prospect at hand, as Tahltan leaders struggled to cope with as many as forty-one industrial proposals coming at them from all sides.

Some of these held considerable promise. Over its lifetime Eskay Creek, in many ways a model mining project, produced four hundred tons of gold and more than five thousand tons of silver. Something on the order of $135 million went back to the Tahltan First Nation in the form of wages and contracts awarded to the Tahltan Nation Development Corporation, a native-owned heavy construction company. Teck Cominco/NovaGold anticipated producing from its Galore Creek holding some 13 million ounces of gold, 156 million ounces of silver, and 12 billion pounds of copper. Geographically isolated, with relatively few ecological points of conflict and capable of providing full employment for at least a generation of local residents, native as well as non-native, Galore could generate true prosperity in the region, without fundamentally compromising the social well-being of the communities or the integrity of a Tahltan homeland so worthy of respect and protection.

Unfortunately, the developments most likely to proceed, should the government and people of Canada fail to act, are situated not at the periphery but rather at the very heart of the most beautiful country in the land, the one region sacrosanct to all Tahltan, and indeed to all First Nations throughout the Pacific Northwest—the Sacred Headwaters, the place of origins. These are not trivial initiatives; they are projects of such scale, with such certain impacts, that they imply the complete industrialization of the wild and the violation of all that Tahltan elders hold dear.

TODAGIN IS LESS A MOUNTAIN than a great upland plateau sweeping the horizon above the headwater lake chain of the Iskut River. Flanked on one side by Ealue Lake and on the other by the sister lakes of Black, Kluea, and Todagin, with the skyline to the west dominated by Edziza, the soaring expanses of the massif are as stunning and evocative as any landscape in the Canadian north; in Tahltan, Todagin

means "beautiful valley." Home to the largest lambing herd of Stone sheep in the world, Todagin is a sanctuary in the sky, wildlife habitat so rich that the resident sheep never leave, even as they attract to the heights an astonishing abundance of predators: wolves, grizzly bears, golden eagles, black bears, and wolverines. So remarkable are the wildlife values, and so accessible is the mountain—a steep trail from the Stewart-Cassiar reaches the height of the plateau in three hours—that the government long ago severely restricted hunting; no rifles are permitted. Were Todagin to be found in any other, more settled region of North America, it would have almost certainly been either protected as a national park or cherished as a world heritage site. Unfortunately, in a haunting reminder of the fate of Glen Canyon on the Colorado, flooded out before most Americans were even aware of its existence, Todagin is today the mountain that nobody knows, even as plans are being set in motion to lay it to waste.

Like all the rugged uplands of the Sacred Headwaters, Todagin was long ago staked out with mineral claims, the first dating to 1956, well before there was even a dream of the road that became the Stewart-Cassiar Highway. Over time any number of companies, mostly long gone and forgotten, made plays for the mountain: Conwest Exploration, Great Plains Development, Silver Standard, Ecstall Mining, Texas Gulf. All took a look, and all passed, selling their stake to the next outfit to come along. From 1981 through 1994 there was a hiatus, and no mineral exploration at all occurred on the plateau. With the government having finally recognized the unique wildlife values of the area, there was every hope that Todagin might be protected.

Then, in 1995 a new entity appeared, American Bullion Minerals, with an amped-up exploration program focusing on a potential copper-gold deposit on Todagin's eastern flank, at a site long known as Red Chris. Like all exploration companies, American Bullion was primarily focused on generating interest in the property, with the goal of selling out to a larger enterprise with the capitalization and capacity to develop a mine. When in 1996 Teck Corporation had a look and declined to invest, American Bullion's prospects plummeted. Out of the ashes, however, emerged another small player, bcMetals, which began a more aggressive drilling program, again with the intent of attracting a major player to buy out the claim, develop the mine, and not incidentally make the original principals of the company wealthy men.

Initially bcMetals sought a partner in China, and on October 10, 2006, it issued a press release heralding a joint venture with Global International Jiangxi Copper Mining Company (GIJCM). Based in Hong Kong, GIJCM was owned by Shanghai Shenxin Investments, with a 49 percent share being held by Jiangxi Copper Co. Ltd, a firm that did not exist until 1979. Today it is China's largest copper producer, controlling fully a third of the China's copper reserves. For

Fireweed on Klappan Mountain.

Following pages Sunrise over Little Bob Quinn Lake.

An abandoned mineral exploration camp in the Boundary Ranges of the Coast Mountains.

a time it appeared not only that Todagin might be destroyed to feed copper to Asian markets but that Chinese interests would own a piece of the mountain even as they leveraged its destruction.

Even as it negotiated with the Chinese, bcMetals deflected a second unwanted suitor, Imperial Metals, a midlevel mining outfit out of Vancouver with just two producing mines in its portfolio. The bcMetals board strongly recommended that its shareholders reject Imperial's unsolicited bid as "financially inadequate and not in the best interests of bcMetals shareholders other than Imperial and its affiliates." Four months later, after the Chinese deal had fallen through, they changed their tune and eagerly sold out to Imperial for $65 million.

For Imperial, Canada's seventy-fifth-largest metals and mining company by market capitalization, it was a somewhat desperate move. New discoveries at its Mount Polley mine, near Williams Lake, had shown considerable promise, but its only other active holding, the Huckleberry mine, near Houston, was coming to an end, with production anticipated to stop in 2012. The Red Chris ore body was of uncertain quality, and by Imperial's own projections the mine could only be viable if power was subsidized by the extension of the 287-kilovolt Northwest Transmission Line up the Stewart-Cassiar Highway corridor to Bob Quinn Lake, a capital project expected to cost Canadian taxpayers $404 million. Many living in the northwest supported the extension of the grid, though few realized that $130 million of the proposed funding would be drawn from Canada's Green Infrastructure Fund (formerly the Canada EcoTrust for Clean Air and Climate Change). Canadians would be surprised to know that public money set aside to stimulate "green" enterprise and transform the carbon economy was being used to construct a power line, conceived in part to subsidize the exploitation of a deposit at Red Chris so marginal that without such support the mine could not go into production.

Opposition to the Red Chris mine has always been strong in the Tahltan community, especially at Iskut, home to families who have hunted the Todagin Plateau for generations. Men who worked the rich lode at Eskay Creek joked that Imperial would be better off working the tailings pile left over there than starting from scratch at Red Chris. That a handful of unknown men in Vancouver and Calgary might grow prosperous by exploiting a government subsidy to gamble away a place of such global significance struck many as unconscionable. There are over four thousand copper mines in the world. To place one on Todagin, given its location and the extraordinary economic significance and beauty of the headwater lake district that it anchors, is like drilling for oil in the Sistine Chapel.

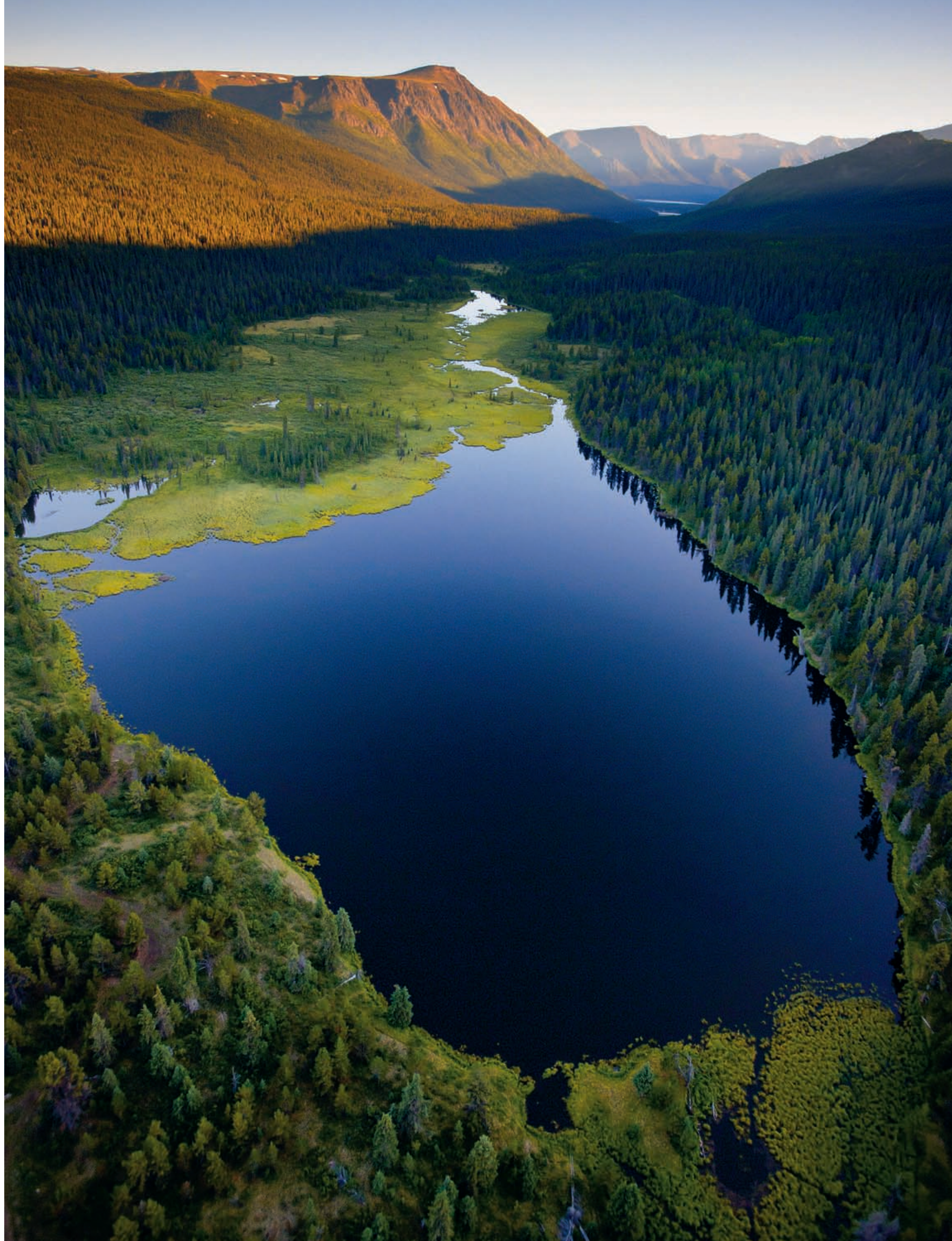
But this is precisely what Imperial intends to do. As the people of Canada absorb the costs of building a 287-kilovolt transmission line 210 miles to nowhere—for its terminus,

Bob Quinn Lake, is today nothing but a highway yard—Imperial will construct its own smaller line 70 miles south to tap into the provincial grid. The government will speak of expanding provincial infrastructure, Imperial of its private investment. There will be no talk of subsidies, even as Imperial, with the approval of the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Energy and Mines, begins construction of an open-pit copper and gold mine projected to process 30,000 tons of rock and ore a day for twenty-eight years. Its tailings pond, if constructed, will bury Black Lake and drain directly into the headwater lake chain of the Iskut River, threatening six world-class sport fishing lakes—Ealue, Kluea, Todagin, Tatogga, Kinaskan, and Natadesleen—not to mention the commercial salmon fishery of the lower Stikine. A second fork of the proposed tailings impoundment reaches across a divide to destroy fish habitat in a headwaters tributary of the Klappan River, which also flows into the Stikine. Over its lifetime, according to Imperial's forecasts, the Red Chris mine will generate 183 million tons of toxic tailings and 307 million tons of waste rock, which will need to be treated for acid mine drainage for over two hundred years. Ten generations of Klabonot'een families from Iskut will bear the burden, for they will still be there. The same cannot be said for the descendants of those now plotting for their own personal gain the destruction of a mountain they have never known and the homeland of a people they have never met.

GROUNDHOG MOUNTAIN IS THE ENGLISH name for a height of land known to the Tahltan as *Teka-che Dediye,* meaning "frog groundhog." The native name refers to the frogs that hang around the entrances of groundhog dens catching flies that live on the feces. Tahltan hunters on *Teka-che Dediye* used to watch as groundhogs crawled out of the ground, their fur black with coal dust. Alex Jack told me that Simon Gunanoot and his outlaw companion, Peter Hamidam, were the first to notice that this was a different kind of coal. At Hazelton coal-fired stoves were commonplace. But if you tried to burn what came out of Klabona, you ended up melting a hole in your stove. It was anthracite, and, unbeknownst to Alex, the deposit would in time attract those prepared to tear into the headwater valley on a massive scale, with plans for open-pit coal operations that would level mountains.

Groundhog, in the meadows of the Sacred Headwaters.

Fortune Minerals, a small company based in London, Ontario, is the key player, owner of the subsurface rights to some forty thousand acres. Its goal is to produce between 1.5 and 3 million tons a year from a deposit estimated to contain some 2.5 billion tons of coal. To yield a cubic meter of coal typically implies the removal of twelve cubic meters of overburden; 90 percent of such excavations consist of waste rock that must be managed indefinitely for acid drainage, sulphates, nitrates, selenium, and other toxic runoff. In dismantling Mount Klappan, an iconic promontory soaring



above the Sacred Headwaters, Fortune will construct its own mountain of rubble, burying traditional camps where generations of Tahltan families have gathered to celebrate their young, hunt moose and marmots, and in the old days lay to rest their dead. Should Fortune actually meet its production projections of 3 million tons of coal each year, the entire valley would resound with the cacophony of machinery, as each seven minutes another 40-ton truck laden with anthracite would roar down the Skeena or along a route carved into the valley of the Bell-Irving to reach the Stewart-Cassiar Highway and the road south to Stewart and the sea. The coal, shipped west to Asia and used to make steel, would add each year 10.5 million tons of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, fully a sixth of British Columbia's total output today.

THE LARGEST PROJECT, proposed by Shell Canada, involves plans to extract methane gas from shallow coal deposits spread across an enormous tenure of close to a million acres. To secure its eight-year license, the company in 2004 paid the government a fee of $9.5 million; there was no public consultation. Should this project go ahead, it would imply a network of several thousand wells, linked by some 2,200 miles of roads and pipelines, laid upon the entire landscape of the Sacred Headwaters.

Coal bed methane (CBM) recovery is by all accounts a highly invasive process. Gas held under pressure in the coal is liberated by the removal of underground water, with each well yielding a volume sufficient to fill several Olympic-sized swimming pools. Highly saline, and tainted with arsenic, barium, ammonia, boron, manganese, and radium fluoride, this toxic water must be quarantined on site in holding ponds, removed by tanker to be stored or dumped elsewhere, or injected back into the ground. The greater the number of wells and the more closely they are spaced, the more quickly water may be removed and the field brought into production. To increase the rate of methane release, technicians may fracture the coal seams with hydraulic injections of chemical agents under high pressure, as much as 350,000 gallons at a shot. Along with diesel, methanol, sodium hydroxide, the carcinogen benzene, and the radioactive element radium, more than nine hundred different chemicals are registered for use, but for proprietary reasons companies do not have to disclose the identity of the solutions employed at any given site.

Unlike conventional oil and gas production, in which a single well with innovative technologies can tap a vast reservoir of supply, with CBM recovery there is a clear incentive to increase the number of wells, despite the initial cost of installation. Each well requires a cleared pad roughly the size of a stadium baseball field, and linkage to two pipelines, one to remove water, the other to transport the gas to diesel-run compressors that pump it into higher-pressure pipelines for transmission to markets. Until the wells are fully producing, the gas must be flared, adding to the constant hum of machinery the hiss and smoke and glare of scores upon scores of flaming wells. Shell estimates that some 8 trillion cubic feet of gas await extraction from its tenure in the Sacred Headwaters. But the technology is relatively untested, and it has never been imposed in a landscape of salmon-bearing rivers. Where it has been exploited, the results have in many instances caused problems. The extraction of groundwater has altered the water table, decreased surface flows, rendered cropland infertile, and left fish-bearing streams void of life. Methane has entered aquifers. Water wells have exploded, and in some Alberta homes it is possible to set tap water aflame.

Black Lake is one of nine lakes that form the headwater lake chain of the Iskut River, the principal tributary of the Stikine. If the Red Chris mine goes ahead, Black Lake and its entire valley will be buried beneath a mountain of toxic tailings and waste rock which inevitably in time will leech into Kluea and Todagin Lakes, seen here in the distance.

THE TAHLTAN FIRST NATION has never signed any treaties, and title to its land has never been extinguished or relinquished. By legal precedent, upheld by the Supreme Court of Canada, no industrial project can go ahead in

Tahltan territory, or in that of any First Nation, unless the parties involved, both government and industry, formally seek "accommodation and consultation" with the indigenous people. The Tahltan, and most especially the people of Iskut, have consistently voiced opposition to any initiative that threatens Klabona and the Sacred Headwaters. In the summer of 2005, as we shall see, they went as far as to establish a blockade for 62 days at the head of the only point of access, a dirt road that runs 15 miles from the Stewart-Cassiar past Ealue Lake to cross the Klappan River and reach the abandoned railroad grade, which can be followed south 125 miles to and beyond the head of the Skeena and the Sacred Headwaters. Given the extent of Tahltan opposition, it is curious that any one of these three major industrial initiatives is being considered by government, let alone actively promoted and in the case of the Red Chris mine subsidized with provincial and federal funds.

The problem in part lies with the language of the law. Just what defines proper consultation, and what determines the appropriate limits of accommodation, is open to interpretation. For the Tahltan the situation has been further complicated by the lack of a clear central authority, broadly endorsed by the people and authorized to speak in their name. Indian and Northern Affairs, the administrative arm of the Canadian government, has effectively reinforced disunity by recognizing the Tahltan Indian Band at Telegraph Creek and the Iskut First Nation as two distinct entities, unaffiliated by law. Each community elects its own chief and band council and is responsible for its own funding.

In 1975, with the creation of the Association of the United Tahltans, which in 2000 became the Tahltan Central Council (TCC), an attempt was made to convene an umbrella organization that could speak as a single voice about concerns common to all Tahltan people. From the start there were challenges, not least the weight of history separating the people of Telegraph from those at Iskut. By then the majority of Tahltan had left the Stikine and found lives in distant cities; their priorities did not always coincide with the interests of those who had elected to stay home, rooted in the land. Also undermining the authority of the TCC was the legal means by which it had been formed. Incorporated through the British Columbia Society Act, it was simply a society with little ethnographic justification or historical grounding in the culture of the Tahltan First Nation. A later attempt was made to create a governing council with representatives of the ten main Tahltan families based on traditional matrilineal descent. Though consensus was the goal, further tension was the unfortunate consequence. Iskut effectively had but three seats at the table.

Seeking certainty and a single entity with which to negotiate, industry and government have consistently recognized the TCC as the paramount Tahltan authority. It has been in their interests to do so, and neither sector has been inclined to inquire whether the TCC at any particular point was actually representing the Tahltan and Iskut people in a manner that was democratic, transparent, and untainted by corruption. As events unfolded in 2004, even as the TCC was being widely heralded by industry, it became clear to the people of both Telegraph and Iskut that something was amiss.

IT WAS A BLEAK AFTERNOON in late August, steel gray skies and the first signs of a bitter fall, when John Nole, son of Loveman Nole and Sarah Tashoots Nole, brother of Erma, one of our closest friends at Iskut, came down the road to our place at Wolf Creek. As John got out of his pickup, he was shaking with rage. Without consulting anyone at Iskut, the Tahltan Nation Development Corporation had sent a construction crew to improve the Ealue Lake road. In addition to widening and brushing out the right-of-way, the TNDC had reconfigured the turnoff

from the Stewart-Cassiar Highway to facilitate access for heavy equipment, large trucks, and drilling rigs destined for the Sacred Headwaters. In doing so they had plowed a new road right through and over a traditional camp that had been used by Klabonot'een families for generations. Even before the new right-of-way had been finished, a caravan of construction camp trailers wheeled their way around the old right-angle turnoff from the highway and drove on to the interior.

Neither the families using the camp nor the Iskut Band Council had been consulted. No authorization had been granted, and as it turned out, no one in the government offices in the regional center of Smithers had been notified. It was not even clear who was paying for the work. John assumed it was Shell, though the company would later deny responsibility. That Tahltan employees of the TNDC had done the deed only added humiliation to the Nole family's sense of having been violated. That the work had been scheduled for the very day that, as everyone in the valley knew, the Tashoots family would be away, burying one of their elders at a distant cemetery, reflected a level of insensitivity and disrespect impossible to reconcile with the traditional values of the Tahltan people.

By 2004 the TNDC had grown into the largest native-owned and -operated heavy construction company in Western Canada, largely on the strength of no-bid "life of the mine" catering, housekeeping, road building, snow removal, and maintenance contracts negotiated on its behalf with the mining industry by the Tahltan Central Council. Although shareholders nominally included both the Telegraph and Iskut Bands, the TNDC was dominated by the outsized personality of Jerry Asp, who founded the company in 1985. Until 1993 Asp served as president and CEO, and in 2004 he remained chief operating officer. Raised outside of Tahltan traditional territory at the Kaska town of Lower Post, Asp had as a young man dropped out of high school and found work as a miner, which led to an itinerant life as he moved between mining camps in northern British Columbia and the Yukon. With the growing success of the TNDC, he established the Canadian Aboriginal Minerals Association, where he served as vice president and leading public spokesman.

Jerry Asp sincerely believed that the mining sector was the ticket to prosperity for the Tahltan Nation, and he traveled widely as an advocate of industry, spreading the news that the First Nations of British Columbia in particular welcomed investments in their territories. He took some delight, as he remarked in an interview, in "traveling all over the world on somebody else's nickel. They are calling me every week to go somewhere." Indeed, in the three years before 2005 he had toured Australia, gone twice to the United Kingdom, and on three occasions visited South America.

Jerry Asp's close ties to the mining industry, and his leadership at the TNDC, brought certain benefits to the Tahltan, not the least of which were contracts that put men and women to work for a decade at Eskay Creek. By 2002, however, as it became clear that the lion's share of all mineral exploration and development in British Columbia would occur in Tahltan territory, Asp was not content merely to serve as TNDC's chief operating officer. Power still rested with the band councils in Iskut and Telegraph, and with so much at stake Asp sought political office. Iskut was out of the question, and Telegraph was a problem, for he had never lived there. But in a pivotal 1999 ruling known as the Corbiere Decision, the Supreme Court of Canada, in order to force compliance with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, had required First Nation bands to allow all tribal members, not just those living on reserves, to vote in Indian Act elections. Asp saw his opening and ran for chief in Telegraph in 2002. With considerable financial backing, he successfully canvassed Tahltan

A network of exploration roads and drill pads mark the site where Imperial proposes to establish an open-pit copper and gold mine, processing thirty thousand tons of material a day for thirty years. The drainage in every direction falls away into lakes that feed into the Iskut and Stikine Rivers.

living in Vancouver and other cities, and with the support of his large extended family and employees of the TNDC, he became one of the first chiefs in Canada elected in the wake of the Corbiere Decision. The people of Iskut did not participate, and the total number of votes cast in the election was, according to one report, less than four hundred. By Asp's own admission 90 percent of his support came from Tahltan living off reserve, but this was enough to put a man described by the *Vancouver Sun* as the "government's pro-development poster boy" in a position to promote the very mining projects that the company he ran, the TNDC, stood to profit from in the form of no-bid construction contracts. "The on-reserve people don't control anymore," Asp was quoted as saying, "and they don't like it."

What the local people in fact disliked was Jerry Asp's complete embrace of every mining project that came along. Rejecting the "one mine per generation" slogan as naïve and impractical, he argued that every proposal had to be welcomed, as one never knew which might fly. Although there was some logic to this, it did not obscure the obvious conflict of interest. Asp naturally wanted all projects to go. He was fully aligned with industry, and both he and the TNDC stood to benefit financially from each mine, for the precedent had been established that all basic road-building and maintenance contracts would go to the TNDC. The Tahltan Central Council did not object. At its helm was Curtis Rattray, an Asp relative who saw much to admire in his older cousin. Curtis had his own challenges. His interest in the well-being of the Tahltan was sincere, and as one of the first of his generation to attend university and study political science, he reveled in his role as primary negotiator for the Tahltan Central Council. Many in the community, however, fairly or not, saw him as a spokesman for his cousin's interests.

For all his entrepreneurial energy, Jerry Asp remained a man of limited vision, vested in what was essentially a colonial model; the most that he could envision for the Tahltan was an increase in the size and number of construction contracts scattered their way, which would allow him to buy more trucks and machinery but made little financial investment in the future of the nation. In a decade the Barrick Gold Corporation, owners of the Eskay Creek mine, had extracted billions of dollars of value from Tahltan land; altogether some $135 million went to salaries and contracts for Tahltan workers and the TNDC.

But when Eskay shut down for good in 2008, Iskut remained exactly as it was before the mine opened, a community with limited infrastructure and none of the opportunities for both young and old that most Canadians take for granted. There was still no hockey rink, no swimming pool, and no place for elders to gather. There were no trust funds in place to enable students to attend university or seek technical training or that might allow small businesses to secure low-interest loans. At Galore Creek NovaGold

anticipated producing $6 billion of gold, with copper and silver adding additional billions to the bottom line. According to an agreement negotiated by Curtis Rattray, NovaGold agreed to pay the TCC $1 million a year for the duration of the mine, along with a trivial share of net concentrate sales after a certain point in the mine's life. Given the scale of the development and its projected revenues, these too were token payments and nothing upon which to build the future of a nation.

The situation came to a head at a general assembly of the Tahltan First Nation held at Dease Lake from January 8 to 9, 2005. To help defray costs, NovaGold had donated $100,000, allowing the Tahltan Central Council to charter buses and pay for airplane tickets that brought back into the territory Tahltan supporters from as far away as Ottawa and Vancouver, many for the first time in years. Distant relatives mixed uneasily with those still living in the country, men and women who had the most to gain and to lose should a wave of development sweep over the region.

From the start of the meeting, NovaGold representatives set an awkward tone by insisting they were not present to seek approval for their mine. Consultation and accommodation had already occurred with the TCC, which had endorsed the project. Their sole purpose in sponsoring and attending the assembly was to inform the general Tahltan community of their hopes and projections for the mine: five hundred permanent jobs to be created and 65,000 tons of rock to be excavated each day for twenty years. In passing, they implied that the Tahltan could not possibly expect to have the final say as to what happened on their lands. Such control was impractical from a business perspective; it would shadow the investment opportunity and frighten off capital. To avoid such a calamity and attract investment, the representative from NovaGold continued, the company had worked in close collaboration with the TCC to forge with government a memorandum of understanding designed to streamline the process of accommodation and consultation. In a document finalized two months earlier, in November 2004, the TCC, in exchange for an annual payment of $250,000, had agreed to work proactively to facilitate the review and approval of all mining, forestry, and hydroelectric projects slated for Tahltan traditional territory. The goal was to provide industry and government with certainty. Projects to be fast-tracked included NovaGold's Galore Creek mine and Coast Mountain Power's Forest Kerr hydroelectric initiative, as well as three developments slated for the Sacred Headwaters: Imperial's Red Chris mine on Todagin, Fortune Mineral's anthracite project on Mount Klappan, and Shell Canada's coal bed methane proposal. Among those endorsing the agreement on behalf of the Tahltan people had been the mining industry's closest native ally in the north, Jerry Asp.

The audience was stunned. The sheer number of major industrial proposals came as news to many, and virtually no one was aware that a deal had been cut that had the TCC accepting money from the very corporate interests with which it was expected to negotiate on behalf of the entire Tahltan First Nation. According to Monte Paulsen, a reporter writing at the time for the *Walrus,* a highly symbolic moment came when Jerry Asp was seen returning from a private lunch with NovaGold executives, while the Tahltan elders huddled together in the assembly hall. "That meeting was the last straw," recalled Oscar Dennis. "They paid all these educated young people to fly in and present information. To the outsider it must have looked like they had this awesome meeting. But in fact it was a bunch of young people who did not grow up on the land."

Among those most outraged that the TCC had misrepresented the interests of the people was a highly respected Telegraph elder, Bobby Quock, seventy-five, who later shared his concerns with his older brother, Roy, who was

eighty-six. Together they decided to act. A week after the gathering in Dease Lake, they called a meeting in Telegraph Creek, and on January 17, 2005, joined by thirty-three other elders, aged fifty-five to eighty-six, they marched to the band office and asked to see the chief. Jerry Asp, they were informed, was in Calgary, meeting with Shell Canada. The elders sat down, and that night they did not leave. The following morning they issued a statement, supported by no fewer than sixty Telegraph elders, which demanded the immediate resignation of Jerry Asp as chief. It read in part: "Our land, resources and rights are being sold out from under us. This day will go down in Tahltan history as the day the elders took back their power. Asp and his family have learned the white man's ways well and are now using this knowledge against their people. They have mistakenly discounted us, saying we do not have any educated people. Our traditional knowledge goes back to time immemorial. Back to a time without papers, computers, and contemporary law."

Refusing to be forced out of office, Asp dismissed the elders as dissidents and obtained a court order to have them removed. Although the ruling was never exercised, the elders interpreted the gesture as a betrayal. "The use of courts and laws to repress those without the financial means to employ legal representation is well known," read their response. "However for an aboriginal person to do the same is shameful. Asp is prepared to repress the dissenting voices in order to maintain a strangle hold on his people."

Among the leading figures in the revolt were some of the most respected men of Telegraph—Henry Quock, Earl Jackson, August Brown, Pat Carlick, the legendary hunter Pat Edzerza—and any number of powerful women—Edith Carlick, Nancy McGee, Lucy Brown, and Lillian Moyer, known to all as Tiger Lil. Sleeping on the floor, sharing food brought in day and night from families up and down the valley, these remarkable men and women maintained their occupation for 265 days and with each passing week grew more defiant, even as they drew strength in the knowledge that what they were doing had no precedent, that their act of civil disobedience would be as a flash to the heart, marking the renewal of their people. On the eleventh day of the occupation, they issued another statement: "Mining companies will destroy our country in the name of profit. Leaders like Jerry Asp, Curtis Rattray and Clarence Quock have stated that there is nothing we could do. We think not. We believe not. The elders are the keepers of land, culture and language. When we stand with them, we stand with our ancestors, whose spirits have been with us every day of the occupation. We are spiritual people, we believe in ourselves. The collective is stronger than any one person, family or belief. The Tahltan world view or philosophy though unwritten runs strong through our hearts, our minds, and our veins."

On February 19, the thirty-third day of the protest, the elders sent out a press release declaring a complete moratorium on all industrial projects, even as they repudiated every agreement negotiated on behalf of the people by the TCC. On this day, the document declared, "we the elders reclaim our legitimate place within Tahltan law and custom. All agreements negotiated with industry and government to date are hereby declared void." Nancy McGee, mother of three, grandmother of many, spoke in less nuanced language. Responding to a proposal that promised to violate her family's traditional trapline, she declared, "You're gonna shit on my land."

AWARE OF THE STAND OF THE ELDERS in Telegraph Creek, the Iskut community rallied. Louis Louie, nephew of Madeline and Alex Jack, who had led Iskut as chief for thirty difficult years, along with Oscar Dennis, who spoke on behalf of his mother, Mary, and his father, James, whose family for generations had lived in Klabona, the Sacred

Headwaters, and whose very spirit had brought the land alive, joined forces to defy Royal Dutch Shell, the second-biggest corporation in the world. On February 25, 2005, the Iskut elders put Shell on notice as having failed to "consult and accommodate." In doing so they declared a moratorium on all industrial activities in their homeland.

On March 2, 2005, representatives of Shell Canada arrived at Iskut for what they had assumed to be an obligatory appearance. As they stepped out of their rental vehicles, they saw a gathering throng of children dressed beautifully in button blankets, and effected smiles as they approached what they had been led to believe would be a grateful welcoming party. Instead they were met with signs of protest and a polite yet powerful statement from the chief. It was Louis Louie's finest moment in three decades of leadership. "There will be no business on Tahltan lands," he declared, "in respect to resource extraction due to the moratorium that was imposed by our hereditary Elders Council. We'd be very pleased if you'd just leave us alone. Thank you."

The moratorium read in part: "All agreements negotiated with industry and government to date are hereby declared void. We will defend in any way necessary our rights and freedoms to be self-determining." James Dennis, a friend of Chief Louie's since childhood, spoke on behalf of his Klabonot'een clan. "We are looking after our own country," he said to the senior delegate from Shell, "Our land is our kitchen. When you bring your poison onto our land you are poisoning our kitchen. Go home." The following day, March 3, the Iskut Band Council formally withdrew from the TCC.

Within days Jerry Asp, the chief of Telegraph, had retired to a modest home off reserve in a subdivision of Dease Lake. In the third week of April he played a final hand, calling together all parties and all elders for a gathering of reconciliation. Asp unhelpfully began the proceedings by berating those who had opposed his mission. The elders who had participated in the occupation walked out, allowing Asp and his supporters to pass a resolution acknowledging the TCC as the sole legitimate body authorized to speak and negotiate on behalf of the Tahltan First Nation. It was a flagrant but futile gesture. Jerry Asp had already lost credibility when Pat Carlick and Margery Inkster, both veterans of the Telegraph occupation, had addressed the assembly in the Tahltan language. Not one of the supporters of the Asp faction, and most assuredly not Jerry Asp himself, spoke or understood the language. Pat Carlick had turned on them. "Now, you know," he said, "how we feel when you speak to us with your million-dollar words and we do not understand."

Undeterred, the TCC issued a press release the following day, reaffirming its self-appointed role as the voice of the Tahltan Nation. On May 5, 2005, Curtis Rattray sent a letter to Russ Marshall, Shell Canada's point person in Tahltan country, which again asserted the position of the

The road to Telegraph Creek from Dease Lake.

James Dennis at the blockade signing the Klappan Declaration, with (left to right) Jenny Quock, Rita Louie, Bertha Louie, and Mable Dennis.

TCC, even as it described highly respected native leaders such as Loveman Nole, James Dennis, and Bertha Louie, sister of the chief of Iskut, as mere pawns, closely associated with, as he wrote, "environmental organizations whose goal is to oppose all resource development in Tahltan Territory." Shell Canada, quite aware that not a single major environmental organization was in any serious way engaged in the conflict, had the sense to back off, leaving Curtis Rattray ever more isolated from the native people he longed to represent.

The summer came, and with it a period of calm. But then a clumsy phone call mobilized the entire Iskut Valley. On July 15 Fortune Minerals contacted Peter Jakesta, a heavy-duty-equipment operator married to Rhoda Quock, daughter of Jenny and Robert, and asked him to report for work clearing a campsite in country that he and the family knew as the Sacred Headwaters. Unbeknownst to Fortune, Peter was deeply committed to protecting the very place where he had been summoned to go, land where his father-in-law had first welcomed him into his family, an open clearing in a meadow at the base of Mount Klappan known to the Quock family as Beauty Camp. Fortune's plans called for the site to be buried in several hundred feet of waste rock. In attempting to hire Robert Quock's son-in-law, Fortune had made an extraordinary blunder, even as it revealed how little the firm knew about the place and the people its industrial scheme, if implemented, would compromise for all time.

Several days after the initial call from Fortune, Peter and Rhoda got word that a tractor-trailer, an eighteen-wheeler carrying heavy equipment destined for drilling sites on the Fortune claim, had arrived at Tatogga Lake, the roadside lodge just south of the turnoff for Ealue Lake and the Sacred Headwaters. With two small children in tow, they set off immediately to confront it, pausing only long enough to alert Oscar and Murray Dennis and their father, James. While Peter and Rhoda raced south, Oscar hurried home to grab a folder of documents and then, with Murray and their dad, headed down the highway. They reached the turnoff in time to see Peter, with his three-year-old daughter, Katrina, in his arms, standing in front of the Fortune truck, having instructed the driver not to get out. "The people negotiating for the land," he stated, "do not represent us. We are blocking this road."

Joining Peter on the grade, Oscar drew a line across the road with his boot and then called for the driver to join them. Oscar handed him a letter and then read a formal statement declaring that Fortune's concession infringed on aboriginal title and the rights of his family. Citing legal precedents with a flair and intellect that left the driver whirling in uncertainty and confusion, Oscar told the man it wasn't his fight and asked him to go home. His truck would not be permitted to cross the line. The driver, no doubt weary after a long journey from the south and not eager for conflict, retreated to Tatogga to phone his boss.

When word of the confrontation reached Fortune's headquarters in London, Ontario, CEO Robin Goad responded with a strongly worded message that he and his company were only prepared to negotiate with the established Tahltan authority, the Tahltan Central Council, which, he noted, had fully endorsed the project and accepted considerable compensation in return. Goad flew to British Columbia on July 15, hoping to work things out with the TCC. His company urgently needed to drill twenty-five test sites to maintain momentum as it pushed to satisfy the stipulations of the government's pro forma environmental assessment process.

When Goad learned that the TCC had been largely marginalized, he was both irritated and bewildered. As recently as June 2005, the provincial government had heralded a new era of collaboration, a new relationship with First Nations that promised prosperity for the people and certainty for industry. Jerry Asp had been widely quoted in the promotional literature of both industry and government as saying: "Relations have definitely improved. We wanted to send a signal that the Tahltan people are supportive of mining on their land."

Clearly, as Goad discovered once on the ground, the people of Iskut were not supportive of all mining, Jerry Asp, the TCC, or anything else that would compromise the homeland of their ancestors, the Sacred Headwaters. In frustration Goad ordered his lawyers to take legal action. In a Vancouver courtroom, Fortune sought and obtained an injunction to break what had within days of Peter Jakesta's defiant gesture grown into not only a complete blockade of the only road access to the interior but something far stronger, an entire movement of cultural rebirth and regeneration. The first families from Iskut to set up camp were those most directly affected. The Quock and Dennis families both had deep ancestral ties to Klabona, the Sacred Headwaters. Rhoda Quock was there from the start with

Oscar Dennis.

her husband, Peter, along with Oscar, whose father and mother, James and Mary Dennis, were among the elders who appeared at the blockade that first night. Rhoda's older sister, Ramona, turned up with their mother, Jenny, and with them came a flock of children and grandchildren. Soon the rest of the Louie family joined in: Rita, wife of the chief, and Louis's other sisters, Bertha, Mary, and Mable. Loveman Nole and his wife, Sarah; their son, John; and daughters, Loretta and Erma; Erma's husband, Jim Bourquin; and their children Michael, Ramsay, and David were also a powerful presence, visiting the blockade by day and often staying long into the night.

Shelters went up in the woods, and soon the men had built a walled tent frame to anchor what became within days less a place of protest than a camp celebrating the pride and wonder of Tahltan culture. Huey Carlick, an inspired artist from Iskut, painted the façade of the main shelter with iconic images of Crow and Wolf, symbols of the unity of the

people. Elders gathered around the fire every night. Food appeared—great stews of caribou and sheep, salads and cakes catered by the village. From time to time, the head of a moose hung over the coals. The older women spoke of life in the bush, scraping hides and sewing leather, creating the elaborate beadwork for which the Tahltan were renowned. The spirit on the blockade during the day was relaxed and joyful, the basic rule, the rationale for the entire protest, readily enforced. Those who would violate the country the elders held in trust were denied entry. Those who respected the land were welcomed to pass through and enjoy its beauty. With everyone who came by, local residents and government officials, backpackers and kayakers, fishermen and frantic tourists heading north to Alaska, the people on the blockade shared their vision of a new era of sustainable stewardship both for their traditional homeland and the entire northwest quadrant of the province.

None of the elders had ever participated in such an action before, not Mable Dennis or Rita Louie, certainly not Jerry Quock, who since his stroke had been mostly confined to a wheelchair. As fine a guide outfitter as the country ever produced, Jerry had hunted every ridge and valley within sight of the blockade, including Todagin Mountain, and he could not bear the thought of lakes such as Kluea, Ealue, Todagin, Tatogga, and Kinaskan becoming tainted with cyanide. For eight weeks, rain or shine, slumped slightly in his chair, he sat by the fire, saying very little. His presence alone was inspiring, as was the very existence of the blockade. Dempsey Quock captured the spirit of the camp when one night he said very simply, "I've done a few things I'm not proud of, but being part of this makes me real proud."

In the first days there was only one point of tension. It was July, and sockeye were running on the lower Stikine. There was not a person on the blockade who would not have preferred to be down at the fish camps at Tahltan putting up winter food. Fortunately, before anyone was forced to make a choice between protecting the land and feeding their families, something of a miracle occurred. A tandem tractor-trailer roaring down from Alaska rolled over right at the foot of Todagin Mountain, not ten minutes from the blockade. The driver was not hurt, but the contents of his load spilled out all over the highway, thousands of pounds of fresh salmon destined for the Seattle market, fish already gutted and ready to be smoked. Within a day the blockade site had been transformed into a fish camp, with a half-dozen drying racks improvised on the spot. By nightfall filleted salmon hung in long rows from dozens of poles tacked between spruce trees and protected from the elements by great blue tarps beneath which dozens of children played.

The elders naturally saw this as something of an omen, and curiously enough it did herald a migration of friends and family from Telegraph, who came both to share the bounty and support the blockade. Many, including Lillian Moyer and Terri Brown, arrived directly from the occupation of the Telegraph Band Office, which was still underway. As Tiger Lil, in particular, began to shuttle regularly between Telegraph and the Iskut blockade, she came to personify in her warmth and charisma, her eloquence and passion, the obvious fact that these two protests were as one. Lil had grown up in Telegraph but, sick with tuberculosis, had been sent away to Vancouver at thirteen. A single parent, married three times, she had worked for years as a barmaid to support her family, before finally returning home to the Stikine in 1979. In a hard life she had encountered much that was dark, which is why at sixty-six she chose only to see the light. The first time she visited the Sacred Headwaters as an adult, she had a vision of five women, all ancestors who spun in a great circle of love and power. She came away certain that it was sacred land and resolved to devote the remaining years of her life to its protection.

The magic that summer seemed never to end. Just when the camp grew hungry, a moose would wander through the slough just beyond the highway, and Peter and his boys would scatter, invariably returning hours later with meat and a story to tell. One evening I was down at the gas station and lodge at Tatogga, just south of the turnoff, having a cup of tea. Over some thirty years, I had known all six owners of the lodge, going back to Tommy Walker, who originally built it as a trading post, where by winter he could earn back from the native guides and wranglers the wages he had paid them in the fall. Mike Jones, the third owner, had been a particularly close friend of mine. A biologist, bush pilot, trapper, and river boatman, Mike went through the ice on his trapline at Bowser Lake in 1989. Sixty feet of snow fell that winter at Bowser, and the Mounties were not able to search for his body until spring. It was found floating just off of Deadman's Point, where Simon Gunanoot had hidden out for many months.

I was thinking about Mike, when I noticed a stranger sitting alone at a corner table. A young woman walked in, and I could tell that she had just come down from Todagin. The Red Chris mine site is but a short hop by helicopter, and there had been a great deal of activity out of its base at Tatogga all day. She turned to the fellow in the corner, and for about five minutes they had a breathless conversation about how amazing the mine site was, how many sheep and wolves they had seen, how extraordinary the vistas had been from the heights of the plateau. They both volunteered that they had never seen such a beautiful place in their lives. She turned out to be a geologist working for the mining company. He was an assistant deputy minister with Energy and Mines. It was the first time either of them had come so far north. One had never been beyond Williams Lake; the other had gone as far as Prince George, the middle of the province. Neither had ventured beyond the Yellowhead Highway, and here they were in a land they had never known, stunned by the beauty of a mountain it was their corporate and bureaucratic mission to destroy. For an instant I thought that just perhaps they would grasp the irony and somehow back away from the country, taking all of their schemes with them.

Although such hopes may seem naïve, they were somehow consistent with the mood of the summer and certainly no more impossible than the news that reached the blockade on the afternoon of August 12. At Eskay Creek the heavy-equipment operators working for the Tahltan Nation Development Corporation had threatened to go on strike over a single demand, that Jerry Asp be immediately removed from all of his positions at the company. Neither the mine nor the TNDC could afford a walkout. Jerry Asp did not happily leave a company he had founded twenty years before, but by Monday morning he was nevertheless gone. When the news reached the blockade on the Ealue Lake road, it seemed as if anything might be possible.

Shell Canada wisely suspended its operations that summer, but Fortune Minerals stubbornly went ahead. In early September, as the blockade entered a second month, notice was given that an injunction had been granted and that unless those on the blockade retired arrests would be made. The RCMP let it be known that September 16 would be the day. That morning delegations of Haida, Gitxsan, and Wet'suwet'en arrived in full regalia and with drums and songs gave honor to those prepared to forfeit their liberty in defense of their land. Lillian Moyer was the first to be handcuffed and led away. She spoke defiantly, with great eloquence, and later recalled having had the strongest sense that it had not been her voice but that of her ancestors speaking through her. "When they said Lillian Moyer to be arrested, I felt so much power. When I made my speech, even though my feet was on the ground, I thought I was actually floating around. That is how much power I had in me. The feeling that came over me was unbelievable."

There were by the end of the afternoon fifteen arrests, nine elders altogether, including a seventy-three-year-old great-grandmother, four of Chief Louie's sisters, and one legendary hunter in a wheelchair. "I loaded up on pain pills and I had a tough time," Jerry Quock later recalled. "First time I have ever been arrested in my life. I almost fell out of the truck when I saw my sister got arrested! But it was for a good cause. Them cops felt bad for arresting me. I told them it is your job. You do your job. I got my job. We have to do it. Have to protect the land. If we don't do it, no one will."

James Dennis, Oscar's father, was one of the first men to be taken away. "When you're doing something right for your people," he said to the crowd of supporters, "you have no fear in your heart. Our land is not for sale." That afternoon Oscar took his two sons, James and O.J., Oscar junior, up the grade to Klabona, and from the summit of Mount Klappan they looked out over the entire Sacred Headwaters. "The weight of what we had done hit me then as it does every so often," he later wrote. "We looked out and I explained to them that the whole landscape would have been drill pits. It would have been so bad that even our safety would have been at risk." On the way back to Iskut, they followed the grade all the way to the bank of the Stikine. Oscar wanted his boys to see the river on that day. Thirty years before his father had been one of the leaders in the fight against BC Hydro's scheme to dam the Grand Canyon. "Whenever the struggle gets tough today," Oscar once told me, "we look out over our waters and get inspiration from the river. We won then, and we can win now; this river is proof. It's still here, and so are we."

Two days after the arrests on the Ealue Lake road, the occupation of the band office in Telegraph ended after 265 days. The federal Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development stripped Jerry Asp of his position as chief and took control of local affairs until a new election could be held. In Dease Lake the elders were treated well and soon released. A hearing was scheduled for October 31, Halloween, but three days before the event Fortune Minerals dropped all charges. That same month First Nations from throughout the province gathered in Terrace and issued a statement that declared unequivocally: "The Nations of northern British Columbia will stand with those who step forward to protect their lands and waters. New development in our territories will only proceed with our free, prior and informed consent."

OVER THE WINTER AND INTO the spring of 2006, a new spirit ran through the entire Tahltan First Nation. In January the Iskut elders formally declared the Sacred Headwaters Tribal Heritage Area, a vast protected area to be administered by the First Nations in collaboration with federal authorities, in which traditional land uses would be recognized and encouraged. The obvious model was the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site, created in 1993 to protect the southern islands of Haida Gwaii. An unparalleled success, the creation of Gwaii Haanas had brought international recognition to Haida Gwaii, as well as remarkable economic benefits, employment for native and non-native residents, a robust and sustainable tourism economy, and for the Haida, those living and those yet to be born, a trust fund that through wise investments had over a decade grown to $70 million.

Even as Oscar Dennis and other Tahltan leaders worked closely with Guujaaw, head of the Council of the Haida Nation (CHN), to explore how the Gwaii Haanas precedent might be adapted to meet their unique needs, local elections in Iskut brought in new blood. Marie Quock, an inspired woman deeply committed to her people and the land, became chief. With her victory came a slate of reform candidates for council, including several veterans of the struggle: Peter Jakesta, Oscar's sister Carol, and Ramona, daughter of Jenny and Robert Quock and sister

of Rhoda. Significantly, for the first time in the history of Iskut, women held the reins of power, and come spring they were all looking ahead to the thaw and a new season of campaigning.

With Iskut having pulled back from the Tahltan Central Council, the elders in June formally incorporated the Klabona Keepers, a society fully dedicated to protecting the Sacred Headwaters. Significantly, the legal status of the Klabona Keepers was precisely that of the Tahltan Central Council, and by law their voice carried, or at least ought to have carried, equal weight in all deliberations with industry and government. Whether this would be so remained to be seen.

In July the Klabona Keepers issued an invitation to all First Nations through whose lands flowed the Stikine, Skeena, and Nass to join them at the Sacred Headwaters to celebrate the rivers of origins and the political stand of the Tahltan people. On August 4, 2006, chiefs and representatives of nine First Nations, along with hundreds of supporters, both native and non-native, gathered in a great circle in the very meadows where in a sense the entire movement had begun—Robert Quock's last family camp, which Fortune Minerals intended to bury in rubble. Ramona, Rhoda's older sister, told of how her father had loved this bit of ground, how much he had treasured the Klappan, his Klabona, and how he had dreaded its destruction. "He called it his beauty camp," she said. "Just before he went onto life support he was telling people in the room that all he ever wanted was for all the people to unite."

As Ramona spoke one could sense her father's presence, his kind face, the flash of silver in his hair, the warmth with which he invariably greeted even a stranger in the old co-op store he ran in the village. Now in a ceremony that would have been unimaginable in his youth, his final wish was being granted. One by one, through a timeless day, the elders of each nation walked forward to place water from their own rivers into a cedar bent box that Huey Carlick had crafted for the occasion.

At the ceremony at Beauty Camp, Mable Dennis makes her offering while behind her await (left to right) Loveman Nole, Jenny Quock, James Dennis, Rita Louie, and Lillian Moyer.

Guujaaw was there with his children from Haida Gwaii. He spoke as a friend but also in his official capacity as head of the CHN: "I am the political representative of the Haida. I was sent by the people to support you. Not just for my family but for the Haida Nation. The water that starts here as a trickle goes down to create the great rivers which mix with the waters of our islands."

Gerald Amos spoke for the Haisla, again tracing the paths of water that linked his people on the coast to the meadows of Klabona. Each in turn, men and women of prestige and lineage stood for their nations—Gitxsan, Wet'suwet'en, Carrier, Kaska Dene, Taku River Tlingit, Sekanni, Nisga'a. All brought water, as did the Tahltan, elders from Iskut, Telegraph, and Dease Lake who drew theirs from a dozen arteries of the Stikine and from each of the traditional clan territories of the nation.

Rhoda Quock represented her family, her ancestors and her descendants, even as she welcomed all to Klabona and her family's camp: "These Sacred Headwaters are the lifeblood of our people. This water is a symbol of our unity as First Nations people. Just as this water will flow back into the three great rivers that sustain our people, we will return to our territories and protect our lands. At the Sacred Headwaters we are drawing a line in the sand; this country bestowed to us by the Creator will be protected."

Rita Louie, the diminutive wife of chief Louis, whom I had known for years as a shy, even retiring woman, unfailingly polite but soft-spoken, seemed to have been completely transformed since her arrest at the blockade, as if fired by some new hope that had swept away a generation of trials and tribulations. She spoke late in the day; the sun glowed on her face and her eyes caressed all the distant horizons. "My name is Rita Louie," she began. "The beauty of this land, we live off. We get our food, our fish, our medicines, our berries. If they take that away, what are we going to have? We'll be standing with nothing. What's going to happen to us? You see that all those mountains? Our minds are in every mountain. Our memories are in every valley. Our children are in every river and stream that flows here. That's where we belong."

At the Sacred Headwaters gathering, Lillian Moyer lifts her hands in prayer. Seated beside her are Chief Marie Quock and, in his wheelchair, Jerry Quock.

When it came time for Loveman Nole to speak, he was quivering with emotion, and his old friend James Dennis stood by in support. Both men are cultural treasures, and none alive know Klabona and the Sacred Headwaters as they do. Loveman's remarks were less a speech than a powerful invocation of lineage and place, a statement of ownership attained not by paper deeds but by actual deeds, the experiences of a hunter and trapper, a father and a husband, living a good life, providing for a family, honoring a bountiful land. For him, love of family and place were one and the same. And, as he told the gathering, he was prepared to abandon all the trappings of the modern world and simply return to Klabona and the old ways.

"We have known this country long before anyone else knew of it." Loveman said as he lifted a small glass of Spatsizi water and, with a completely unconscious gesture, swept the horizon as if saluting the four corners of the world. In faltering English, he continued, "There's the country I travel on. Many tracks I made here. Many times I cross the Spatsizi River. Always cry about it. That's the place, my favorite place. Kill a lot of moose in this country. Everything we eat comes from here. Still living, I'm happy. I'm still strong, that's me. I'm honest man in this whole world. I still love my wife, fifty-four years, my kids growing up, I'm still strong and I could do the same thing what I did before, trap and hunt and everything. I still got my snowshoes, still got my traps." Without another word, Loveman leaned forward to pour the water into the box, even as James Dennis reached out to help balance him, with a hand to his elbow.

Lillian Moyer, having been the first to be arrested at the blockade, was one of the last to speak at the gathering. Dressed in army fatigue pants, her shoulders covered by an elegant button blanket, she reached out her arms as if in prayer. Sunlight sparkled on her silver bracelets. "The elders are keepers of the land," she said, "When we stand with them we stand with the ancestors. I did not get arrested for the fun of it. I did it to protect the land. We have the power to stop whatever we want to stop."

She then turned to address the entire gathering. "We need your help to protect this land. It is not just for the native people. It is for all people. Not just for us. And that is the way it should be. It is all connected. We are all connected."

THE MOMENTUM OF THE GATHERING carried through the summer and into the fall of 2006. In August elders at the blockade successfully turned back the heavy equipment of West Hawk Development Corporation, a small

Colorado-based company that, like Fortune Minerals, had a concession to exploit anthracite deposits in Klabona. Shell Canada retreated by its own volition, abandoning its drilling program for the year, even as it looked forward to reengaging in 2007.

The implications of coal bed methane, a subject unknown to most residents but two years before, had by the fall of 2006 become a central topic of conversation, both in the Stikine and in all downstream communities. The Nass River, homeland of the Nisga'a, supports the largest eulachon run in the world. The salmon fishery on the Skeena River alone contributes $110 million to the local economy, more than the forest industry. Coal bed methane has never been exploited in a wild salmon watershed, and as one elder remarked, "Who wants their sacred land, their heritage, to be part of an experiment?"

Industry and government initially maintained that salmon did not reach the actual headwaters of the Skeena. Such assurances did not inspire confidence, especially when the Skeena Fisheries Commission observed and collected DNA samples of 111 spawned-out coho and 22 chinook in the very headwater streams that give rise to the river. In the fall of 2006, the hopes of the Klabona Keepers rose as residents of the towns of Smithers and Telkwa rallied to reject overwhelmingly a proposal to explore for coal bed methane in the watershed of the Bulkley, an affluent of the Skeena and a major sport fishery.

Such optimism faded, however, the spring of 2007, as Shell Canada announced plans to proceed in the coming summer with its drilling program. From Telegraph came a letter signed by thirty Tahltan elders urging the company to reconsider its decision. At Iskut the Klabona Keepers met formally with Shell representatives and instructed the company to stay out of the Sacred Headwaters. The Tahltan political leadership stood by the elders. Without a clear mandate from the people, they informed Shell, there would be no support for the project, even if it meant the loss of $6 million in contracts for the TNDC. Dempsey Bob, an acclaimed Tahltan artist, expressed the new priorities very simply. "We have to protect our animals and fish. We can't eat oil, gas, and minerals."

With the elders on the blockade for a third summer and fall, the Klabona Keepers finally engaged the international environmental community and sent out a letter seeking support. Articles and paid advertisements appeared in

A spawned-out salmon near the head of the Skeena.

Opposite
Shell Canada's plans call for the construction of several thousand coal bed methane extractive wells spread across the Sacred Headwaters. Initially the company maintained that no species of salmon reached as high up the rivers as the site of their project. This turned out not to be the case.

GET THE
OUT!
15 years of Benefit
1000 YEARS
of
SHAME ON
THE MINISTRY

national and international papers such as the *Financial Times* calling for a halt to all exploration in the Sacred Headwaters.

Demonstrations took place in nearby Smithers and Terrace, in Vancouver, and at Royal Dutch Shell's corporate headquarters at The Hague. Within the region all First Nations, every municipal government, every regional district, and in time every major political authority came out against Shell's proposal. With the tide clearly turning in favor of protection, even as a national election loomed in Canada in 2008, every political party and each candidate in the Skeena-Bulkley Valley, the federal riding most directly affected by the issue, stood in solidarity with the Klabona Keepers. The incumbent, Nathan Cullen, was handily re-elected, in good measure because he had been the first to join the Tahltan on the blockade and campaign against the violation of the Sacred Headwaters.

One of three experimental coal bed methane test wells sunk to date in the Sacred Headwaters.

Opposite
In August 2007 Tahltan, Gitxsan, and Wet'suwet'en families, along with non-native residents of three threatened watersheds, marched along the main street of Smithers, B.C., and called for the protection of the Sacred Headwaters. Holding the white placard is Peter Jakesta, and to his right is the late Roy Morris, Chief Woos of the Wet'suwet'en Nation.

CANADIAN LAW STATES unequivocally that a First Nation must be consulted and accommodated before any industrial development proceeds in its traditional territory. But what happens if, as in the case of the Sacred Headwaters, the First Nation repeatedly and unequivocally asserts that it does not want such activity to occur? What happens when it becomes clear that agreements signed on behalf of the Tahltan First Nation were negotiated by individuals with an obvious conflict of interest, titular leaders who had defied the wishes of their people in a manner so blatant as to spark an open revolt by elders in an Athabaskan culture that in its very adaptation and definition of self as a hunting people avoids such ruptures at all costs?

Evidently, nothing, save that the projects go ahead anyway. Three years on, in the spring of 2011, Shell Canada has reaffirmed its rights to enter Klabona and drill for coal bed methane gas. Imperial Metals, with permit in hand from the Ministry of Energy and Mines, and having been assured of the availability of subsidized power with the cabinet decision to expand the grid to Bob Quinn Lake, has only to secure sufficient investment capital to proceed. The company has even satisfied all the stipulations of the provincial environmental assessment process, though the Supreme Court of Canada did rule that several federal agencies—Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Environment Canada, and Natural Resources Canada—neglected their obligations by issuing permits without conducting a full and independent federal environmental assessment as required by law.

In the initial decision that sent the case to the Supreme Court, Mr. Justice Luc Martineau in September 2007 described the failure of the federal agencies as an unlawful evasion of responsibilities with "all the characteristics of a capricious and arbitrary decision which was taken for an improper purpose." At the heart of the case was the fact that in avoiding a comprehensive assessment, and in suggesting that the provincial process was adequate,

the federal agencies had skirted a level of engagement that would have implied an obligation to consult the Canadian people in an open and public manner not only of the status of Imperial's permit application but also, by inference, of the fate of Todagin Mountain and the entire Sacred Headwaters. Inaction by these federal agencies effectively prevented the Canadian people from learning of the choice that was being made in their names, even as it silenced the voices of the vast majority, who almost certainly would have opposed such a project in such a place had they only been informed of its existence.

The judicial maneuvering ended in a Supreme Court ruling that acknowledged that federal agencies had been remiss and would have to be more engaged in the review of any future mining initiatives, even as it specifically exempted from its decision the Red Chris project, the very proposal that had prompted the successful court challenge. The logic did not become any clearer in a second case brought before the courts that challenged the lack of a comprehensive federal environmental assessment of Shell Canada's CBM exploration activities in the Sacred Headwaters. Among the casualties of the second ruling was Cassiar Watch, a small Iskut-based environmental organization, founded and run by Loveman Nole's son-in-law Jim Bourquin. Few knew the country as well as Jim, and for years Cassiar Watch had played an essential role as environmental watchdog, advocate of the wild, and proponent of a new vision of economics, conservation, and community-based sustainable development. Cassiar Watch was held responsible for expenses that effectively forced it out of existence.

The legal proceedings, while silencing one of the few local stakeholders fully committed to monitoring the impact of industrial activities in Tahltan territory, did very little to bring about meaningful reform in what the court ruling itself acknowledged was a transparently flawed environmental assessment process. Consider, for example, the brief history of the Forrest Kerr hydroelectric project on the lower Iskut River. The original proposal submitted by Coast Mountain Power called for a relatively modest run-of-the river installation, a 100-megawatt (MW) diversion and the construction of a low-voltage transmission line with limited environmental impacts. Because the anticipated power output was well below 200 MW, the level that by law would require a comprehensive federal assessment, Forrest Kerr slipped through with only provincial oversight; in 2003 the BC environmental assessment process readily certified the project.

Over subsequent years, as ownership changed hands and, with the proposed extension of the NTL to Bob Quinn Lake, the opportunity arose to sell power directly into the BC Hydro grid, the ambitions of the project grew. The master plan was amended five times, nearly doubling the projected capacity to 195 MW, an output necessitating high-voltage transmission lines of an altogether different scale. Yet by remaining just below the threshold of 200 MW, the expansion failed to trigger a federal review. Thus, the project went ahead on the basis of an outdated provincial assessment that had certified a design that in magnitude bore little resemblance to a revised concept that at a cost of $700 million would divert a salmon bearing-river through a tunnel thirty-five feet in diameter and nearly two miles in length.

AltaGas, the Calgary-based energy company that currently owns Forrest Kerr, has sought a further expansion of capacity with new plans to develop McLymont and Volcano Creeks. Although the combined output of the three adjacent projects would be 268 MW, well in excess of the federal threshold, the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency has not entered the fray; nor has there been any additional provincial review. This is not to say that these projects are inherently bad. In constructing North America's

Sergief Island in the delta
of the Stikine River.

largest run-of-the-river hydro project, AltaGas expects to invest $1 billion, bringing work and other opportunities to the Tahltan people. But there are obvious concerns. The construction of the diversion tunnels will generate 850,000 tons of waste rock that has yet to be tested for acid drainage potential. The project is located upstream from wild salmon spawning and rearing habitats on the lower Iskut and Stikine Rivers that the Tahltan First Nation in 2009 formally resolved to protect. The roads and transmission lines will run through heavily forested and pristine river valleys, imposing for the first time industrial infrastructure in a wild trans-boundary corridor that reaches from the Stewart Cassiar Highway to the Bradfield Canal and the coastal settlements of Alaska. That the vastly increased scale of the endeavor has not prompted additional oversight suggests the manner by which companies have been able to work through and around environmental assessment reviews designed more to placate the Canadian public than to bring serious scrutiny to industrial proposals that in their numbers presage the transformation of the country.

AS THE PLAINTIFFS IN BOTH CASES that reached the high courts would be the first to acknowledge, the legal debate over what were essentially issues of bureaucratic process obscured an obvious and fundamental question. What exactly is an environmental review process if a project such as Imperial Metal's Red Chris mine can be approved?

Before any decision had been made on the extension of the power grid, and well before final permits were in hand, Imperial Metals pushed a major haul road up the side of Todagin Mountain, describing it as a mere exploration track. Plans for the mine call for the removal each year of more than 10 million tons of rock from habitat that supports the most robust population of Stone sheep in the world; explosions from the pit and the cacophony of massive trucks hauling the concentrate will shake the mountain for nearly thirty years. The waste rock will be heaped over meadows where moose graze; the toxic tailings will be dumped into a pristine lake, where trout thrive and the ancestors of the Tahltan for generations worked obsidian into spear points and blades.

Inevitably at some point over the next two hundred years, toxic runoff will in some concentration reach Kluea, Todagin, and Ealue Lakes, headwaters of the Iskut, and from there flow into the lower Stikine. Imperial's plans call for the construction of roads, an explosives plant, a massive concentrator, and an open-pit mine of gargantuan scale. Although the project design by definition implies the destruction of the mountain, the Red Chris proposal moved through the environmental assessment process in record time, leaving one to wonder just what it would take in British Columbia for a mining company to fail such a review and be denied a permit, aside from political pressure.

Only a person blinded by ideology could fail to recognize that environmental considerations played little role in the decisions that granted Imperial Metals both permits and government subsidies to develop its Red Chris mine. It remains to be seen if the power, hopes, and dreams of the Tahltan will be able to stop such a violation of their homeland. Certainly no First Nation is better poised for success and ultimate victory. If a handful of elders can reverse history, take back control of their destiny, and blunt the industrial schemes of the second-largest corporation in the world, then surely anything is possible.

The years of conflict have been difficult and the sacrifices made by these remarkable families in defense of their land deeply humbling to all who witnessed but did not share their burden. The word "sacrifice" is derived from the Latin "to make sacred." Klabona was always hallowed ground, revered by generations of Tahltan, but it has been infused in this generation and by these deeds with ever-greater spiritual resonance. Their courageous stand

brought new and inspired leadership to Telegraph and Iskut, reconfigured the TCC with progressive voices, and perhaps most essentially galvanized a new solidarity in the entire Tahltan First Nation. As Rhoda Quock reflected at a gathering of Tahltan women in the spring of 2011, "It was a hard time for our people. We overcame a lot, but I am proud to stand before you today and tell you that we are united in protecting Klabona."

If in the end, despite all the efforts of the Tahltan, these projects proceed, and all that remains of Klabona and the Sacred Headwaters are the memories of the elders and the photographs in this book, Canadians should at the very least have the honesty to acknowledge what actually happened. We will not be able to say that these industrial initiatives were endorsed through an open and reciprocal process of "accommodation and consultation" with the First Nations as demanded by law. To the contrary, we will have to accept that they were imposed upon the country in the face of strong and vocal opposition from the Tahltan people. We will certainly not be able to claim that they satisfied the rigorous stipulations of an environmental assessment, when they in fact benefited from a regulatory process transparently skewed in favor of industrial development. We will not be able to flaunt our green credentials as a nation, knowing that $130 million from our national Green Infrastructure Fund went to subsidizing power to a mine that destroyed an iconic mountain.

We will most certainly be embarrassed by our government's cynical claim that these funds as allocated were intended to reduce our carbon footprint by freeing northern communities of dependence on diesel generators. We are surely not spending $404 million to connect to the provincial grid a mere 2,500 people, the total population of the entire northwest quadrant of the province. The power line extension reaches only as far as Bob Quinn, where there is no town. Dease Lake runs on locally generated hydropower. Iskut does indeed depend on diesel, but there are in fact no plans to tie it or any First Nations community into the expanded grid. As for reducing carbon emissions, a 2008 analysis by the Pembina Institute, a highly respected nonpartisan assembly of technicians and scholars, showed that rather than lowering greenhouse gas emissions, the Northwest Transmission Line will increase them by up to 1,200 percent, even as communities such as Iskut remain dependent on diesel-burning generators.

OSCAR DENNIS'S MOTHER, MARY, once told me that the measure of a Tahltan was not the color of skin or the makeup of the blood but the manner in which a person treats the land. She shared this thought at a wake, as she and James buried a son. I think what Mary meant was that in a sense we all have a chance to be Tahltan, not by ethnicity or by co-opting a heritage that is so powerfully and uniquely theirs, but simply by expressing in spirit and commitment a loyalty to place.

When I first knew the Stikine, I attended a gathering at Iskut as the community rallied against BC Hydro's plans to flood the Grand Canyon of a river that runs through the lives of every Tahltan man and woman. A young back-to-the-land hippie stood up and in what he took as a display of solidarity declared that if these dams got built he would just have to leave the country. Right after him a Tahltan youth rose and with immense dignity turned to the previous speaker and said, "Partner, that's the difference between you and me. If they build these dams, I'll still be here."

For nearly thirty-five years, the Stikine has called me home, and for much of that time, ever since we bought our place at Wolf Creek, it has actually been home, even as my work has taken me throughout the world. The poet Gary Snyder, asked how a person could best protect the environment, replied, "Stay put."

An intact rack of a
moose, most likely
killed by wolves,
Ealue Lake.

The moment that I knew the Iskut Valley would always cradle my family came late one evening in the summer of 2010. My younger daughter, Raina, had gone out on the lake in an old wooden canoe and had not returned by dark. Not a week before, several world-class kayakers just back from a successful descent of the Stikine canyon had flipped that very canoe, and I had fished them out on the verge of hypothermia. So I decided to take out a motor launch and see what had become of her.

Raina has a very special attachment to the lake and to all of the Stikine country. From the age of three, she had traveled the rivers with us, down the length of the Turnagain to the Kechika and the Liard, down the Taku from its headwaters at Shesley past the Nahlin to the Inklin and Nakina and beyond to the sea. By seven she had been up and down the length of the Stikine and from our lodge had explored all the ridges from Todagin to Cold Fish and far beyond. At ten she eagerly guided guests up the trail to the summit of Sky Mountain, a faint track through the bush that intimidates many an adult client.

In the old days, Tahltan men and women often took in, and raised children from other families; it was a natural adaptation for a hunting culture. Alex Jack never had his own kids, but he and Madeline brought up several nieces and nephews. But there was a strong sense that certain children would always remain by a parent's side. Of Raina, Alex often said, "She's the one gonna stay by you."

When she was five, Raina disappeared from our property. I searched for several hours before finding her far up the creek, dressed in her favorite purple bonnet and work gloves, kneeling by a dead black bear cub as she tried to stroke it back to life. I immediately looked for the boar that had undoubtedly killed the cub and now, though she did not know it, threatened my daughter. When I later recounted the story to Alex, he took it as a sign, of what I was never sure.

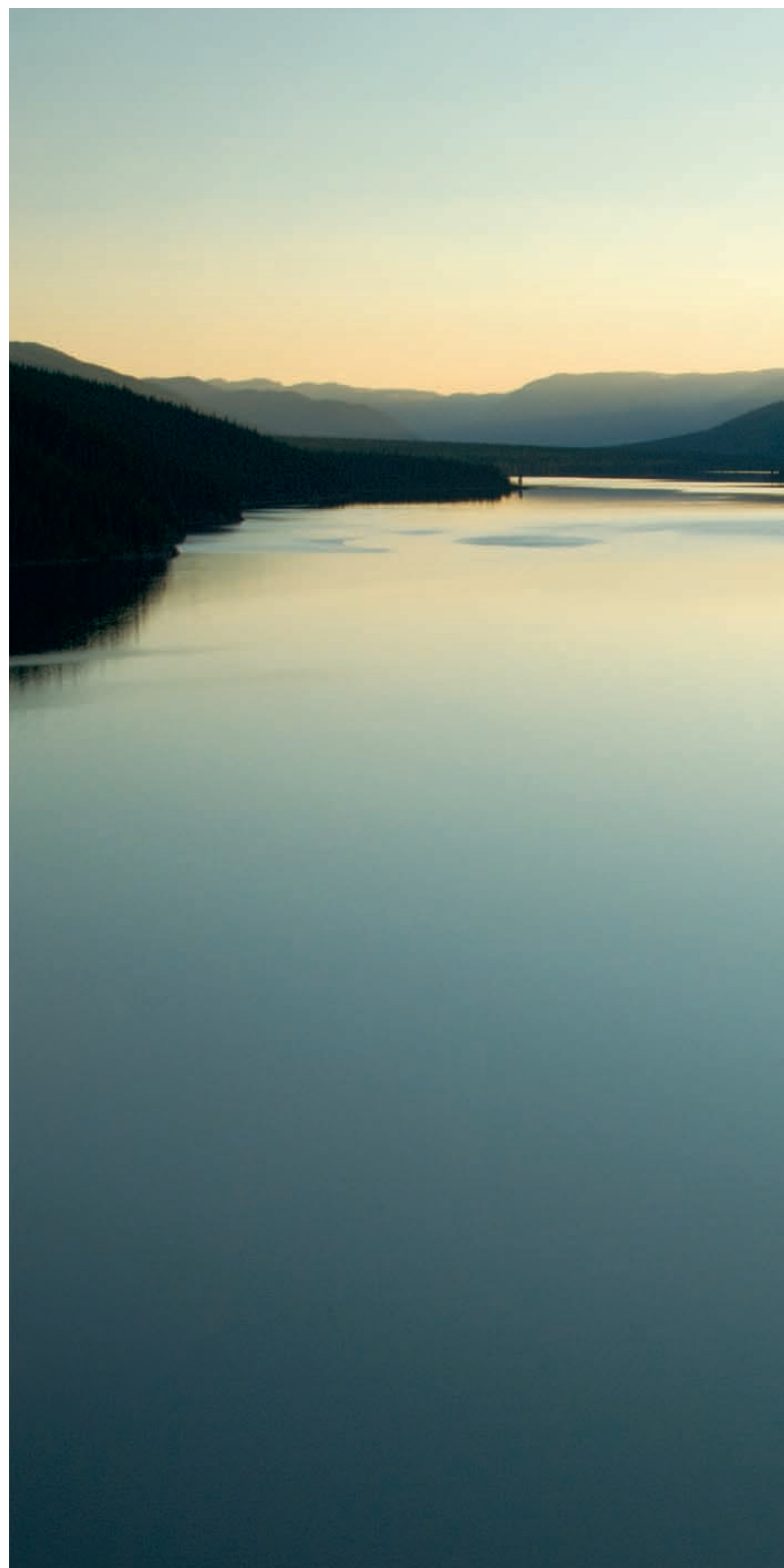
It was a beautiful night, with bright stars overhead and a sliver of a moon in the eastern sky over Spatsizi. I hazarded a guess that Raina had gone to her favorite place on the lake, a rocky bluff directly across from our lodge. Sure enough, I found the old chestnut canoe tied up to a snag at the base of the game trail that skirted the trees and rose through the rocks to reach in a few minutes a promontory with a surprisingly expansive view across the lake. Although it is only perhaps a hundred feet above the water, the shift in perspective is quite dramatic. In daylight it causes our lodge to appear almost as a dream, nestled in the forest along the far shore, with the great flanks of the mountains rising behind.

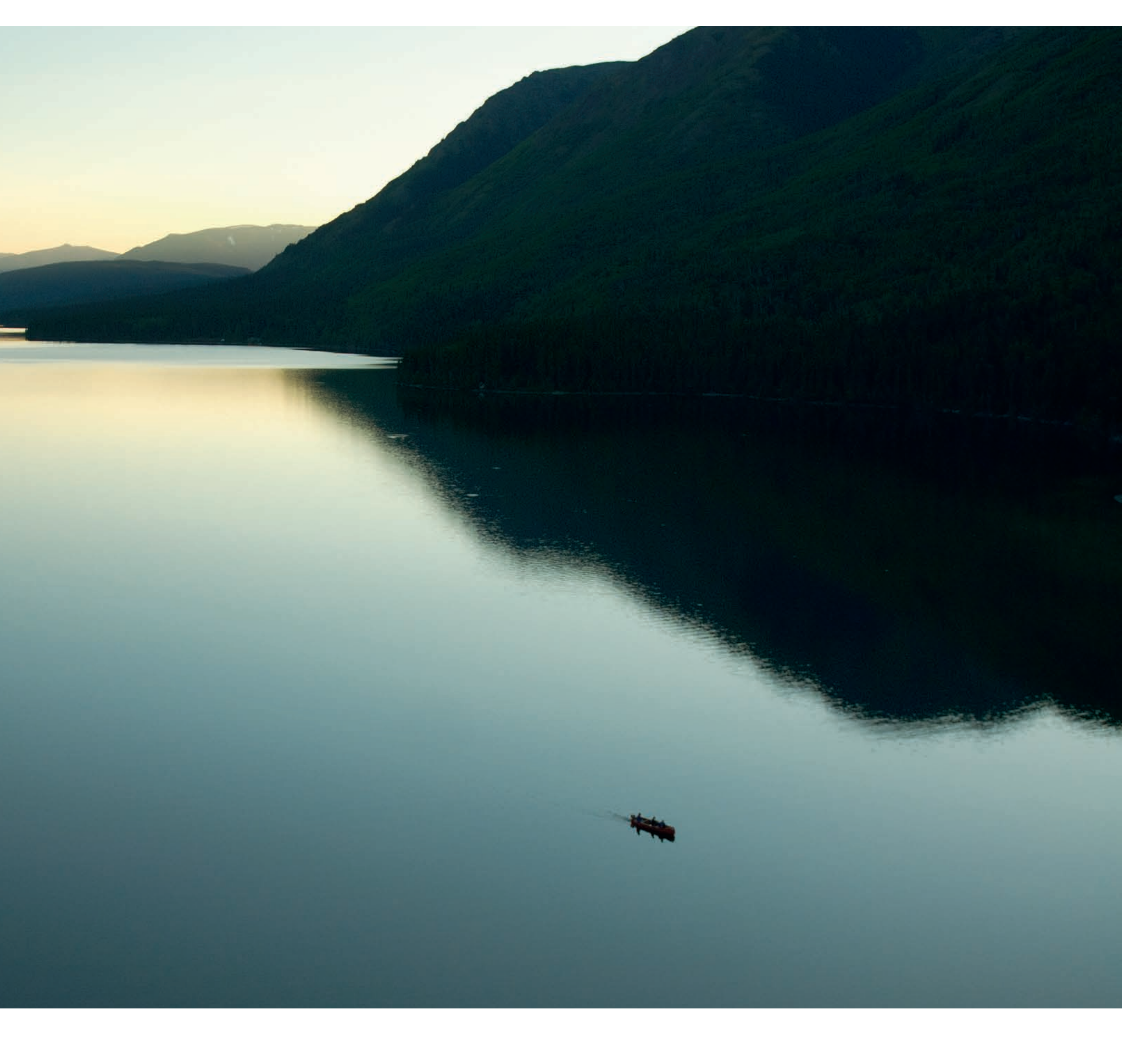
Raina was sitting alone, staring out to the lake. When I reached her I saw that she had been crying, and when I asked the obvious question, she replied, "Daddy, this is my home. This is the vortex of my life. It is so beautiful. This is where I want to live and where I want to die."

In that moment, even as engineers and drillers went about their business at the Red Chris site not three miles away from where we sat, I promised Raina that we would never abandon this country, and that even if the mine went ahead, we would wait it out as a family, along with the families of our Tahltan friends in Iskut. I might not be around in thirty years to celebrate the return of silence to the lake, but she would be, along with her sister, Tara, and their children, and in time their children's children.

This is what Mary Dennis meant, and what the elders have been saying all along. When company officials confronted the blockade in the summer of 2005 Mary swept them back into their vehicles with these words: "Great Spirit! Come on! Pray for our people, my children, my daughters, my sons, my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren. They're crying because their hearts are broken. It's tearing out. And also me. I'm speaking to the mining companies. I'm a Tahltan woman. I can go into the bush and cut my own wood and

Ealue Lake at dusk,
looking east to the
Spatsizi and the
Sacred Headwaters.





make my own campfire and set my own tent. I'm a hunter. I shot many moose and caribou. I'm a trapper. I skin whatever I catch. I live off of this land. I taught my children to live off of this land. We depend on this land. We must save it for our grandchildren. That's why what I am doing today. And I will continue doing it as long as I'm here. I am proud to be who I am. *Meduh!* Thank you."

NONE OF THIS HAS TO HAPPEN. Egregious decisions can be reversed, and permits, most especially those issued under a cloud of malfeasance, can be revoked. If we can spend $404 million to build a power line to nowhere, we can surely afford to buy out these companies, unpalatable as that may be, to protect a land that is as unique as any destination on Earth.

Even should the entire debate be reduced to economics, it would be madness for the sake of a single mine of modest potential to compromise a place that could one day be as important to the world as Banff, Jasper, Yosemite, the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, or the mountains of Tibet. The travel industry is the largest economic force in the world, generating each year $4.5 trillion in business activity. The total market capitalization of all mining companies in existence is some $962 billion. Red Chris offers the promise of a mere two hundred jobs. Shell Canada, once its extractive network is in place, would employ even fewer people. Viewed from the long perspective of history, it is a poor exchange indeed, both for the Tahltan and for Canada.

The plight of the Sacred Headwaters, and the question of its destiny, reaches far beyond economics to challenge Canada's very identity as a nation, even as it questions the values by which we will determine to live. At the moment a fundamental disconnect drives the dynamics of resource development. Vancouver-based executives at companies such as Imperial Metals enjoy the beauty of the lower mainland, the picturesque Gulf Islands, the snows of Whistler, no doubt boasting from time to time to their colleagues back in Toronto or New York of their good fortune to live in beautiful British Columbia, even while they profit from industrial initiatives that lay waste to the hinterland.

How would these corporate executives and government officials feel, and how would their families respond, if total strangers pulled up to their homes in Point Grey or West Vancouver, perhaps to the maple-lined streets of Rosedale in Toronto, and with back hoes and bulldozers began to tear apart their gardens? For the Tahltan, the Sacred Headwaters is a garden, and this is exactly how they feel about what they fear may happen to their land.

I wonder how different things might be if each of us had to confront directly the consequences of our demands on the natural world. Imagine if there was a law saying that before any person or company can destroy a mountain, pollute a river, tear down a forest, or violate an alpine lake, he or she or the entire board of directors of the enterprise must take their children and grandchildren to the place, camp for a week, and listen as the elders, the voices of the ancestors, explain what the proposed industrial actions will do to the land and imply for the lives of their children and grandchildren.

Imagine if all of the children got together, apart from the adults, and made a deal, a fair exchange, as children are inclined to do. For every tree destroyed on Tahltan lands, for example, the kid from the city would sacrifice one of his mother's favorite flowering shrubs from her garden. For every drop of toxic waste placed into a river or lake in Tahltan territory, an equivalent discharge would be dripped into the water supply of their suburban neighborhood or into a family swimming pool that all those kids enjoy? This idea, of course, sounds far-fetched, even ridiculous, to the urban ear, but it is exactly what the Tahltan elder James Dennis means when he says, "Our land is our kitchen.

The Sacred Headwaters.

Jordan Bob celebrating
the one hundredth
anniversary of the
Tahltan Declaration,
Telegraph Creek, 2010.

When you bring your poison onto our land you are poisoning our kitchen."

Such fairness and balance ought to be the norm, the way we as Canadians take measure of the impacts and potential of these various industrial projects. Unfortunately, we live by quite another code of conduct. This does not imply, however, that we have no voice and no obligations. These projects will go ahead only if we accept that people who have never been on the land, who have no history or connection to the country, may legally secure the right to come in and by the very nature of their enterprises leave in their wake a cultural and physical landscape utterly transformed and desecrated.

They will go ahead only if we continue to endorse a process that grants mining concessions, often initially for trivial sums, to speculators from distant cities, even as we place no cultural or market value on the land itself. They will go ahead if we maintain that the cost of destroying a natural asset, or its inherent worth if left intact, need not have a metric in the economic calculations that support the industrialization of the wild. They will go ahead if we remain committed to the notion that no private company has to compensate the public for what it does to the commons, the forests, mountains, and rivers, which by definition belong to everyone. That it merely requires bureaucratic permission to proceed.

They will go ahead as long as we continue to embrace a mindset that has no place in a world in which wild lands are becoming increasingly rare and valuable, even as we strive as a species to live in a sustainable manner on a planet we have come to recognize as being resilient but not inviolable.

The people of the Sacred Headwaters, the men and women of Klabona—all those who have rallied against these developments—have a very different way of thinking about the land. For them the Sacred Headwaters is a neighborhood, at once their grocery store and sanctuary, their church and schoolyard, their cemetery and country club. They believe that the people with greatest claim to ownership of the valley are the generations as yet unborn. The Sacred Headwaters will be their nursery.

The elders, almost all of whom grew up on the land, have formally called for the end of all industrial activity in the valley and the creation of the Sacred Headwaters Tribal Heritage Area. In the end what is at stake is the future of one of the most extraordinary regions in all of North America. The fate of the Sacred Headwaters transcends the interests of local residents, provincial agencies, mining companies, and those few among the First Nations who favor industrial development at any cost. The voices of all Canadians and of all people deserve to be heard. Surely no amount of methane gas, copper, or gold can compensate for the sacrifice of a place that could be the Sacred Headwaters of all Canadians and indeed all citizens of the world.

They say God is everywhere, but I think God has spent more time on the Klappan than anywhere. This is God's country.

ANDY LOUIE

Bear grass in the meadows of the Sacred Headwaters.

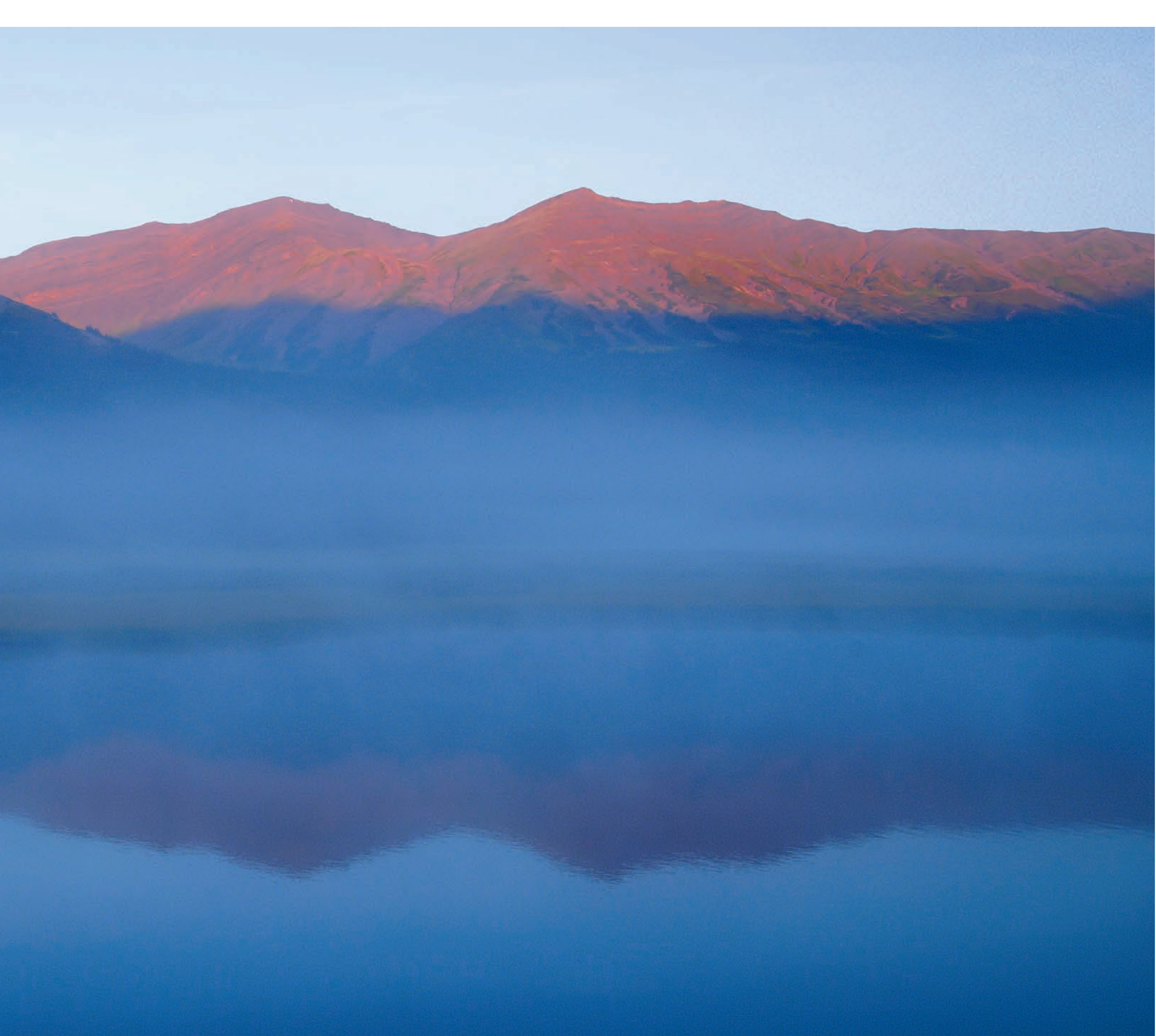
The Iskut River flowing south into Kinaskan Lake.

Opposite
Unnamed creek in the watershed of the Iskut River, downstream not far from the coast.

Mountain goat, the Grand Canyon of the Stikine.

Opposite
The Grand Canyon of the Stikine.

Following pages
The Sacred Headwaters.



When they did aerial counts of the sheep, they found that Todagin has the largest lambing herd of Stone sheep in the world, and yet they would put a mine up there. The government won't let anyone shoot sheep up there, yet they are willing to allow a mining company to blast apart the mountain with an open-pit mine?

JIM BOURQUIN

Stone sheep, Todagin Mountain.

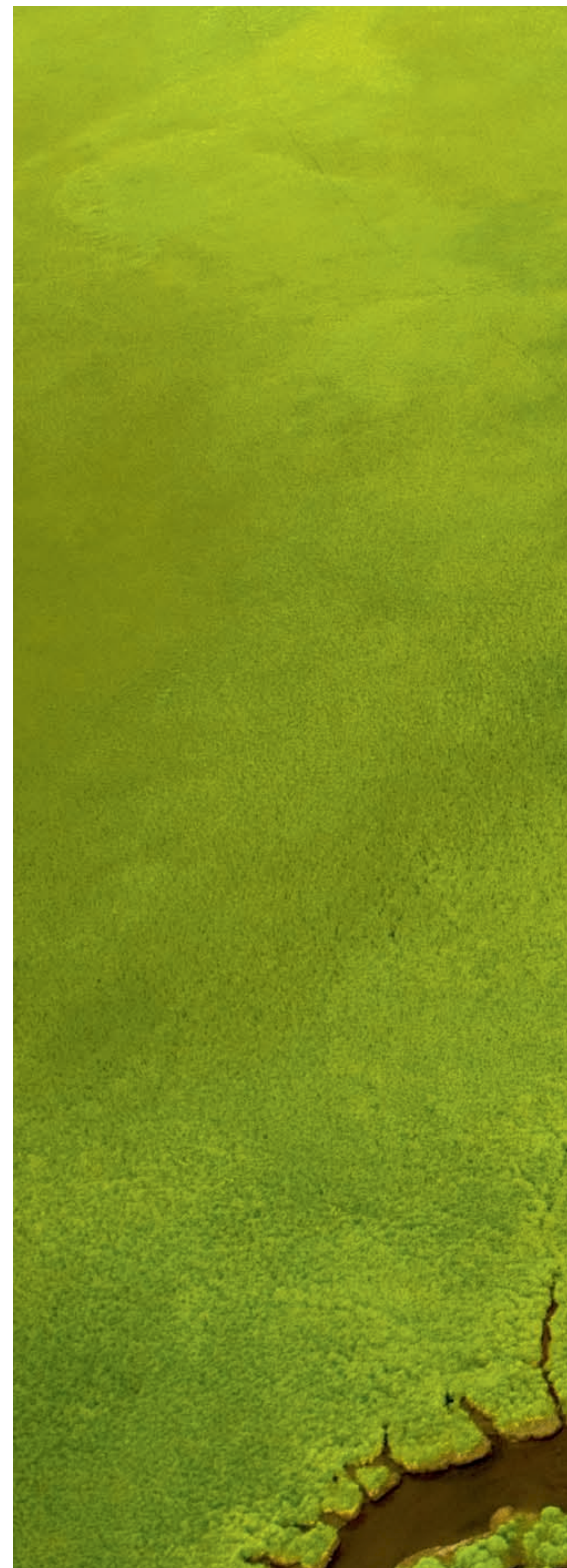
The Spectrum Range appears as a great natural watercolor, painted across a mountain landscape that reaches to the horizon.

Opposite
Kounugu Mountain, Spectrum Range, named after Kounugu, in Tahltan myth, the master of freshwater who refused to share it with the world.

There's a million jobs on this earth, but there's only one Klappan and Todagin and Spatsizi. Just one. That's all we get. And you're gonna to take that from us? When they say you take something from somebody by force, that's considered rape. It's considered rape. That's virgin territory up there. Virgin territory. And are you gonna rape her? You guys are all gonna rape her. What's going to be left of her after that? A broken spirit? Broken people? It's called rape.

CARLENE QUOCK

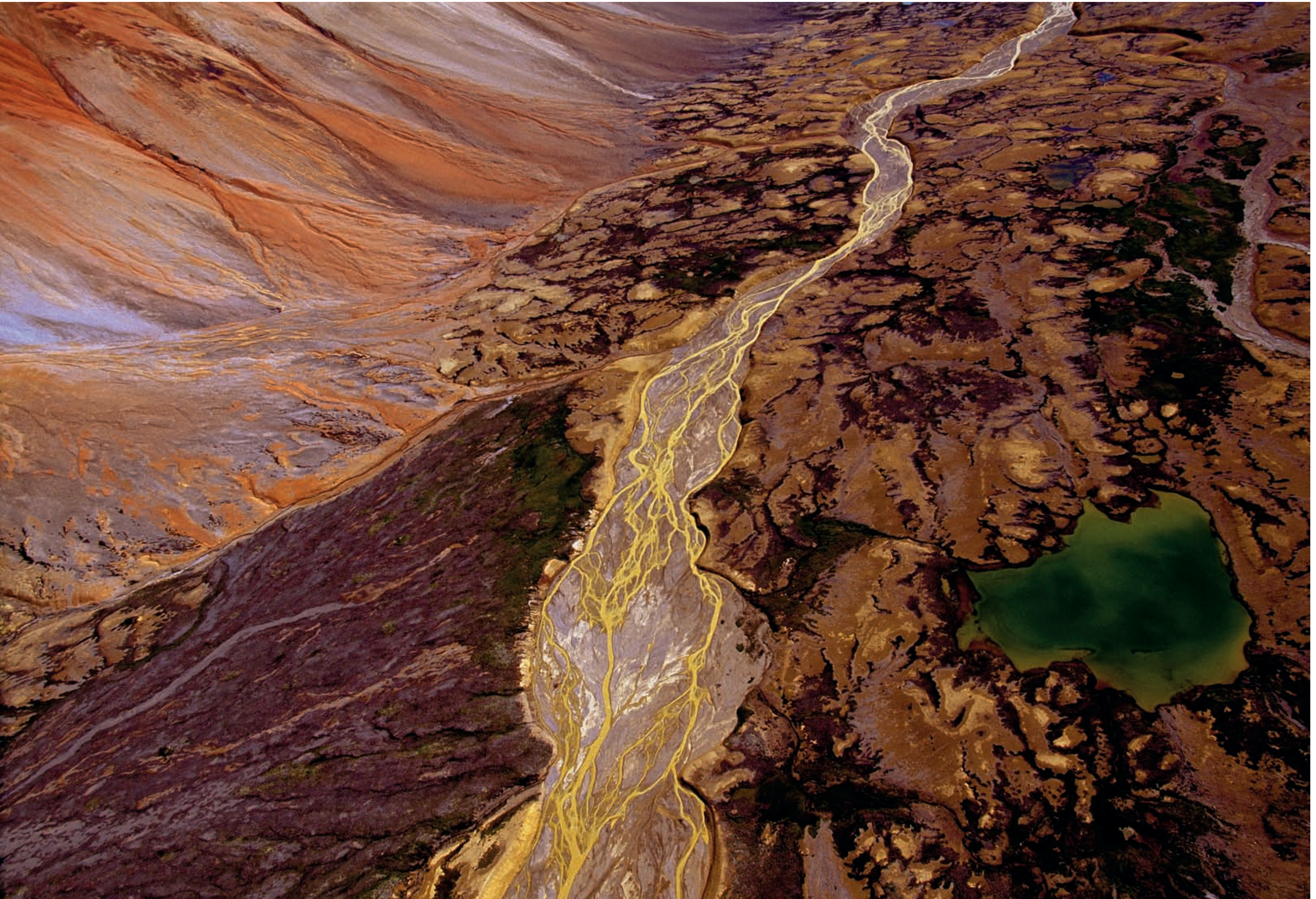
The Skeena River meanders through the meadows of the Sacred Headwaters.



A mountainside near the mouth of More Creek, in the Boundary Ranges of the Coast Mountains.

For the Tahltan the kaleidoscopic colors of the Spectrums recall the aurora borealis, the northern lights, in their language *Kitsu*, which is also the name of a prominent mountain at the southern end of the range.

Opposite
A yellow stream, a green lake, and red earth along the flank of Kounugu Mountain.



It's not only the salmon. It's the ravens, the eagles, the bears will be gone, the beavers will be gone. That's our culture. You can go to the goddamn grocery store, but we can't. Our people, we gotta go get our moose from up there. That is our grocery store. And you are dumping your garbage in our grocery store. You'll take your profits off our land and go back to Calgary to your house. Do you want us to bring the tailings pond and put it in your backyard so that you have to live with it and deal with it for the rest of your life and the lives of all your descendants? You'll just move. But we can't. We stay right here. We are Tahltan. We have a traditional right to our land and resources, and we have not been consulted.

DEMPSEY BOB

Two streams, with fall colors, the white spruce and poplar of the boreal forest.

You see all those mountains? Our minds are in every mountain. Our memories are in every valley. Our children are in every river and stream that flows here. That's where we belong.

RITA LOUIE

Todagin Creek flowing beneath the south slope of Todagin Mountain, down valley toward Tatogga Lake and the Iskut River.

Flood Lake and the terminal moraine of Flood Glacier.

Opposite
Flood Glacier, lower Stikine River, Coast Mountains.

Mount Edziza on the horizon, with Eve Cone in the foreground.

Kounugu Mountain,
Spectrum Range.

The Boundary Ranges of the Coast Mountains.

Opposite
Great Glacier, Stikine River.

Following pages
The boreal forest margins of Eddontenajon Lake, headwaters of the Iskut River.

One of my grandfathers used to say: "I am too old and I'm good for nothing. But I still want to say a few words about our land. It is very, very important. I got one leg in the grave already, but I am saying it for our next generation. Leave our land alone."

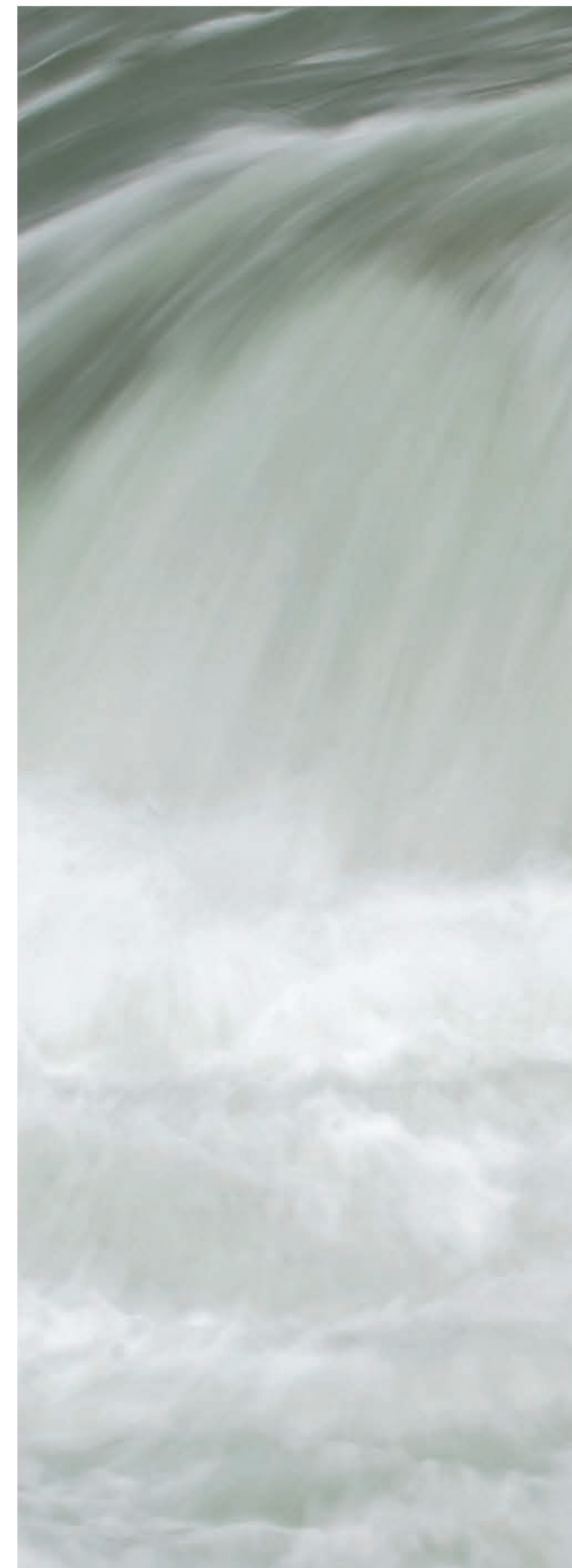
PAT CARLICK

Confluence of the Iskut River (foreground) and the Stikine.

Water is like blood. It goes everywhere and anywhere; you can't stop it. Water does not stay still. It always finds a way to seep out. And once it does, say goodbye to the Stikine River. That acid from those mines is the most deadly thing. It coats the bottom of the river, the stream, the creek, where the fish lay their eggs, and then the eggs won't hatch. I have a message I want to get across to the mines. We cannot eat gold. We can eat our animals and our fish.

AUGUST BROWN

Cascade Falls, Iskut River, with Natadesleen Lake and, beyond and out of sight, Kinaskan, Tatogga, Eddontenajon, Kluachon, Ealue, Kluea, Todagin, and Black Lakes.



Smokehouse at Tahltan Village, sockeye fillets on the racks.

Opposite
Gaffing salmon at Moricetown, Bulkley River, affluent of the Skeena.

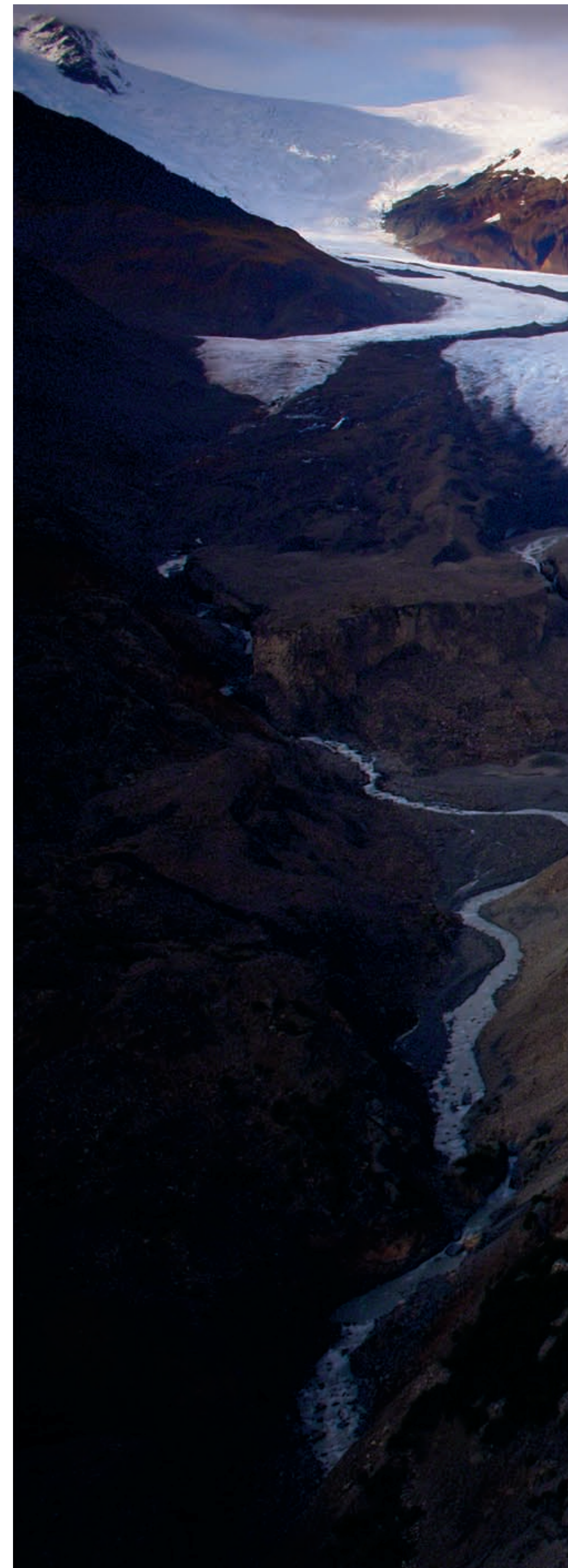
The Grand Canyon of the Stikine.

Opposite
Every summer Tahltan families gather to fish and smoke salmon at the confluence of the Tahltan and the Stikine Rivers. Looming above their camps is Tseskiye Cho Kimma, the home of Big Raven, mythical creator of the world.

They said, oh, we are going to plant trees. I said, you can't plant a mountain once it's gone. Rocks don't grow.

OSCAR DENNIS

Hoodoo Glacier and a waterfall on Hoodoo Mountain, Boundary Ranges, Coast Mountains.



A nursery band of Stone sheep, Todagin Mountain.

Opposite
Looking north toward Tsatia Mountain and beyond to Todagin.

The mining industry, they use the young people for the key. They use them to open the door. They won't come see us, the elders. They go see the young people and give them a job, and once they get them in there, it is a quick turnaround, and they either tell them they are on drugs or drink too much or not qualified. After they use them to open the door, they throw them away. They come back three weeks later without jobs. But they will hire people from Germany, Russia, Mexico, bring people who can't even speak English. That's how the government works. They want to destroy us.

AUGUST BROWN

Iskut River, flowing between Tatogga and Kinaskan Lakes.

I started hunting and trapping with my dad in 1945. Snowshoes. Everything was on foot. We used to go about seventy-five miles a day. We were just like wolves. We lived off the country. Powerful and strong. When you're doing something right for your people, you have no fear in your heart. Our land is not for sale.

JAMES DENNIS

Packhorse, Cold Fish Lake, Spatsizi wilderness.

A cow moose crosses
the inlet at the head
of Ealue Lake.

Opposite
Kate Auerbach,
a hunting guide,
returning to camp
in the meadows
of Spatsizi.

I said to my wife where are we going? We are going to the blockade. I said what blockade? She says to save the headwaters. I tell her that it was about time somebody did something about it. I've known my wife since we was kids. We grew up together. We got twenty-seven grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren.

JERRY QUOCK

The Katete River, along with the Craig and the lower Iskut, ranks among the most endangered wilderness valleys in Canada.

A De Havilland Beaver, workhorse of the Canadian north, taking off over Tatogga Lake.

Opposite
Ealue Lake, looking west toward the Iskut Valley.

Poplars along the banks
of the Stikine River.

Fall colors on the Tuya River, tributary of the Stikine.

Spectrums in the snow.

Opposite
The summit of Edziza,
sacred mountain of
the Tahltan.

The Three Sisters,
Stikine River.

Great Spirit! Come on! Pray for our people, my children, my daughters, my sons, my grand-children, my great-grandchildren. They're crying because their hearts are broken. It's tearing out. And also me. I'm speaking to the mining companies. I'm a Tahltan woman. I can go into the bush and cut my own wood and make my own campfire and set my own tent. I'm a hunter. I shot many moose and caribou. I'm a trapper. I skin whatever I catch. I live off of this land. I taught my children to live off of this land. We depend on this land. We must save it for our grandchildren. That's what I am doing today. And I will continue doing it as long as I'm here. I am proud to be who I am. Meduh! *Thank you.*

MARY DENNIS

Kinaskan Lake.

I would like to talk about a misconception about the Klabona Keepers. There are people that think we are totally against development. We are about fighting for our rights, because if no one fights for our rights, we are going to be done.

PETER JAKESTA

The Stikine River flowing through the Boundary Ranges of the Coast Mountains.

Following pages
Tatogga Lake.

It is not sacred because it is a place people go and pray. It has nothing to do with religion. It has everything to do with the fact that it is the birthplace of three salmon-bearing rivers.

TERRI BROWN

Todagin Creek ablaze
with fall colors.

Mountain goat, Grand Canyon of the Stikine.

Opposite
Osborne caribou in the Sacred Headwaters.

Autumn colors north
of Tumeka Lake,
Skeena Mountains.

This land was given to us by God to look after. Our culture is our land, it's our rivers, our animals. It is us. That's what we're trying to protect. From the fish come the eagles, the ravens, and the bears. If we lose the salmon, we lose all the animals, and that means the end of our culture. We say that if the native people lose the land, it's the end of the world. They'll be no more keepers on the land. We are the guardians of the land. That's why we're here. We belong where these rivers begin. We're wolves, we're ravens, we're frogs. That's our people. Our land is our culture, and this land is sacred.

DEMPSEY BOB

Simo'ogit Baxk'ap, Jacob Nyce, a chief in the Wolf Clan of the Nisga'a Nation.

The Sacred Headwaters.

Radical? Lopping off the top of a mountain and pouring it down into a couple of lakes is radical. Trying to stop them is not.

GERALD AMOS

What do we have to do next to stop them? If I have to be that one dead Indian, I will be that dead Indian.

LILLIAN MOYER

Sometimes I wonder if it is ever going to come to an end. If we don't have our country and the animals, we aren't going to survive; only people with money will be able to remain. So I ask the rest of the world: We need your help. We need more people to come here and help us.

AUGUST BROWN

Poplar leaves floating
on the waters of the
Sacred Headwaters.

Afterword Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

IN 1967 MY FATHER took eight of my brothers and sisters and me on a white-water trip through the Grand Canyon on the Colorado River. We camped on the Colorado's massive sandbars, bathed and swam in its seventy-degree waters, and caught native fish from the abundant schools. It was there that I first fell in love with rivers. Many years after that wonderful trip, my love for rivers translated into a passion for protecting them, when, in 1984, I began working as a volunteer with the Hudson River Fishermen's Association, a blue-collar coalition of commercial and recreational fishermen who mobilized to reclaim the river from its polluters. Working with the fisherman from the association, I discovered that the front line in the battle to save the environment is occupied by ordinary people tackling extraordinary odds to defend their communities—people who share a common belief in their fundamental right to protect themselves and their communities from the threat of pollution and environmental abuse.

Today I know of no better example of grassroots activists confronting extraordinary odds to protect their environment than in northern British Columbia, where, without the help of a single national or international NGO, a remarkable collection of individuals from fishermen and hunters to First Nations peoples and regional elected officials are working to stop a parade of catastrophic industrial projects proposed for the Sacred Headwaters, the birthplace of three of British Columbia's greatest salmon rivers—the Stikine, Skeena, and Nass. Their actions to save these great rivers are inspiring. In 2005 the Tahltan First Nation orchestrated a blockade in which fifteen were arrested, among them nine elders, including one determined older hunting guide in a wheelchair, Jerry Quock.

A few years later, a courageous young woman, Ali Howard, left her day job as a baker and swam the length of the Skeena River, from source to sea, a distance of some 360 miles, passing through the class-five rapids and the treacherous whirlpools and formidable eddy lines of its lower reaches, to show to all that the river is indeed an artery of life, linking every community that thrives in its drainage. As Ali made her way down the Skeena, children began to call her Salmon Girl, and as she passed the few settlements along the way, native leaders in ceremonial regalia paddled out to greet her in great cedar canoes. Local residents, both native and non-native, lined the shores. Politicians joined her for short stretches in the water, symbolically giving support to her cause even as they came to realize what this heroic young woman had endured in the frigid and daunting waters of the Skeena.

Only last year, the communities, and especially the Tahltan people of Iskut, provided a great deal of support for the team of photographers that traveled the country for eight weeks making the photographs for this book.

What the Tahltan and other First Nations have achieved in their fight for the Sacred Headwaters is an inspiration to communities throughout the world struggling to protect their land and the rivers that run through their lives. That a relatively small number of men and women, young and old, have managed at least for the moment to keep Royal Dutch Shell, the world's largest oil company and second-biggest corporation, out of the Sacred Headwaters is an extraordinary example of what always inspired my father, ordinary people fighting for what was right. As the anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has." It is precisely by such hopes and dreams, such commitment to place and home, that true change actually occurs.

But now the heroic efforts of the Tahltan people are not enough. Their actions, and the importance of their struggle to protect their homeland, call out for our support. In 2008, responding to overwhelming opposition in communities throughout the Northwest, the government of British Columbia announced a two-year moratorium on all CBM exploration in the headwaters. In 2011 this was extended for another two years. Shell's eight-year tenure, granted in 2004, expires in 2012. In the spring of 2011, Shell reiterated its intentions to continue to push forward its plans that would transform the Sacred Headwaters for all time.

In 1963 a dam was built on the Colorado River that buried forever the beautiful Glen Canyon beneath the waters of a reservoir. This terrible outcome, now universally seen as the tragic consequence of ill-conceived public policy, was allowed to happen simply because too few Americans were aware of the canyon's existence. With its destruction, we lost an iconic and invaluable part of our heritage. In time, as we came to acknowledge our folly, Glen Canyon famously became "the canyon that nobody knew." There are few Americans who would not give anything to have it back, pristine as it once was.

We may never be able to restore Glen Canyon to its former glory, but we can ensure that such a fate does not befall other, equally significant wild landscapes. The Sacred Headwaters is in many ways Canada's Glen Canyon. It is as beautiful, unique, and iconic, and most important of all, it is still here, untouched save for the footsteps of the elders whose struggles are celebrated in this wonderful book. Everyone who has ever lamented the loss of wild lands should rally to this cause and join in what is certainly one of the most important environment struggles of our time.

Take Action

The fate of the sacred headwaters hangs in the balance. With permits in hand and subsidized power about to be delivered, Imperial Metals needs only to raise investment capital to begin the dismantling of Todagin Mountain. Shell Canada's eight-year tenure in the Klappan is due to expire in 2012, as is the provincial government's moratorium on CBM development in the Sacred Headwaters. It is a time to reflect but also a time to act. There is a precedent that offers a way forward for all stakeholders and indeed for all Canadians.

In 1985 on Haida Gwaii, an archipelago then known as the Queen Charlotte Islands, the Haida took to barricades to reassert the obvious, that they were the owners of their ancestral land. At a time when industrial tenures had been long established, multiyear permits had been granted, and massive corporate investments had been made, the Haida unilaterally declared the far reaches of their homeland, all of the islands of the distant south, to be a "Haida Heritage Site."

Two years later all logging in South Moresby ceased as provincial and federal governments joined industry and the Council of the Haida Nation in a diplomatic process that ultimately delivered fair and just compensation to companies that had invested in the region, even as it established the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site. Gwaii Trust, an investment fund dedicated to promoting economic diversification and sustainable development on Haida Gwaii, was also created as a result of this process. What began as a dream grew to become a $70-million beacon of pride and economic well-being for the Haida and for all residents of the islands.

It is not too late to seek a similar solution for the Sacred Headwaters. Please join us in supporting the Tahltan men and women as they seek a permanent legislative ban on mining in the Sacred Headwaters and the creation of a Tahltan Tribal Heritage Protected Area. They ask for formal recognition of the principles delineated in the Klappan Declaration of 2005 *(Tl'abane Lani Dahthake Nohodih* in the Tahltan language), a document endorsed by the elders. The land is theirs. It is a sacred trust. They ask only that it remain as it is, to nourish the spirit of all peoples of the world. Let us challenge our political leaders to respect and grant this request.

Come north and experience the land for yourself. And write those who have the power to reverse ill-conceived initiatives and chart a better way forward. E-mails are readily deleted, so send an old-fashioned letter, reflecting on what you have learned of this issue. Or place a phone call to express your concern. Start with Victoria, but don't forget Ottawa.

Provincial

The Honourable Christy Clark
Premier of British Columbia
PO Box 9041 Station Prov Govt
Victoria, BC, Canada V8W 9E1
250-387-1715
premier@gov.bc.ca

The Honourable Terry Lake
Minister of the Environment
PO Box 9047 Station Prov Govt
Victoria, BC, Canada V8W 9E2
250-387-1187
envmail@gov.bc.ca

The Honourable Steve Thomson
Minister of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resource Operations
PO Box 9049 Station Prov Govt
Victoria, BC, Canada V8W 9E2
steve.thomson.mla@leg.bc.ca

The Honourable Rich Coleman
Minister of Energy and Mines
PO Box 9060 Station Prov Govt
Victoria, BC, Canada V8W 9E2
250-387-5896
emh.minister@gov.bc.ca

Federal

The Honourable Stephen Harper
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON, Canada K1A 0A2
pm@pm.gc.ca

The Honourable Peter Kent
Minister of the Environment
Les Terrasses de la Chaudière
10 Wellington Street, 28th Floor
Gatineau, QC, Canada K1A 0H3
819-997-1441
minister@ec.gc.ca

John Duncan
Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development
10 Wellington Street
Gatineau, QC, Canada K1A 0H4
819-997-0002
john.duncan@parl.gc.ca

To learn more about the issues, please visit the following websites and support the efforts of the Klabona Keepers and the Skeena Watershed Conservation Coalition.

www.sacredheadwaters.org

www.firstnations.eu/mining/tahltan-klabona.htm

www.skeenawatershed.com

Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK CAME ABOUT through the generosity and commitment of many individuals—writers and photographers, interviewers and interviewees, and friends and colleagues who helped in the field. Many gave weeks and indeed months of their time, yet no one associated with the project was compensated for their efforts. It was agreed from the start that all royalties from the sale of the book would go to the ongoing struggle to save the Sacred Headwaters. That so many would ask so little and give so much was both inspiring and profoundly hopeful.

I would like first to acknowledge Cristina Mittermeier, founder of the International League of Conservation Photographers (ILCP). Cristina, a fine photographer in her own right, established ILCP to mobilize and concentrate the conservation efforts of professional photographers. ILCP secures financial support from individuals and foundations to launch Rapid Assessment Visual Expeditions (RAVES), which bring small teams of photographers to threatened landscapes, with the goal of securing photographic portfolios that can be used by advocates and community groups to advance their conservation efforts. Over the years ILCP has sparked any number of successful campaigns, and the organization is highly deserving of support. If you can help, please do so by visiting www.ilcp.com. Our thanks to Cristina, as well as Mikael Castro, Mark Christmas, Trevor Frost, Shree Karmacharya, Jenny Nichols, and Abbie Williams.

For support of the 2010 Sacred Headwaters RAVE, our thanks in particular go to the Swift Foundation; Lavinia Currier and Lori Udall of the Sacharuna Foundation; Carol Orr and the Wilburforce Foundation; Yvon Chouinard, Lisa Pike, and Rick Ridgeway of Patagonia; Paul Gilbert and Robert Bateman of the Bateman Centre at Royal Roads University; and Deirdre Campbell, Lindsay Eberts, Jake Eberts, Edmond Eberts, Beth and Tony Stikeman, and David Holbrooke.

The team of ILCP photographers included Carr Clifton, Paul Colangelo, Claudio Contreras, Wade Davis, and Joe Riis. Tom Peschak and Florian Schulz, both ILCP Fellows, generously contributed images, as did Gary Fiegehen and my friend and colleague at *National Geographic,* Sarah Leen. I would like to express my particular gratitude to Paul Colangelo, who merged his own photographic project into this one and worked tirelessly to record testimonies from Tahltan elders in Iskut and Telegraph Creek. Carr Clifton and his partner, Deanne Henninger, also deserve a special word. A glimpse at the photo credits reveals that without Carr's efforts this book would not exist. Carr spent

nearly five months in the field, without compensation, and secured an astonishing portfolio. He was a generous and inspired companion, a friend to all, and a tremendous help at every phase of the project.

Many friends reviewed all or parts of the manuscript. My thanks to Jim Bourquin and Oscar Dennis, as well as Monty Bassett, Tom Buri, Lavinia Currier, Lindsay Eberts, Liz Ferrin, Charlie Fisher, Brian Huntington, Peter Jakesta, Chris Kissinger, Scott McIntyre, Shannon McPhail, Gail Percy, Rhoda Quock, and Tim Ward.

For support in the field, I thank especially the Collingwood family—Ray, Reg, Carrie, and Billy Labonte—who hosted Joe Riis for two weeks in the Spatsizi, as well as Erma Bourquin, Jim Bourquin, Tom Buri, Natalie Charleton, Raina Davis, John Guillote, Brian Huntington, Shannon McPhail and the SWCC (Skeena Watershed Conservation Coalition), Gail Percy, Stan Sowa, Clint Walker, and Teena Wright. Thanks too to Gerald Amos, Erik Boomer, Greg Brown, Karen Campbell, Don Church, Sara Close, Tara Davis, Taylor Fox, Ian and Mindy Frost, Bruce Hill, Ali and Chris Howard, Guujaaw, Robert Kennedy Jr., Albert and Rose Louie, Kenny Rabnett, Wes Sehcrest, Cass Sowa, David Suzuki, Ivan Thompson, Andrew S. Wright, and Rachelle Van Zanten.

I would like to extend a very special thanks to Monty Bassett. Monty, who documented many of the dramatic events referred to in this book, made all of his tapes available to us, as did Pieter Romer and Michael and Ramsay Bourquin. A special thanks as well to Monte Paulsen, who first wrote of the "Gentle Revolution" in a very fine article that appeared in the *Walrus* on March 21, 2011.

For sharing their words and standing for their land, I thank the Klabona Keepers, the young men and women and all of the elders of the Tahltan First Nation, most especially Dempsey Bob, August Brown, Terri Brown, David Brown; Erma Bourquin, her husband, Jim, and sons, Michael, Ramsay, and David; Pat Carlick, Oscar Dennis, Carol Dennis, James Dennis, Mable Dennis, Mary Dennis, Murray Dennis, Pat Edzerza, Marge Inkster, Thomas Inkster, Peter Jakesta, Andy Louie, Bertha Louie, Hilda Louie, Louis Louie, Rita Louie, Rick McLean, Lillian Moyer, Arthur Nole, John Nole, Loveman Nole, Sarah Tashoots Nole, Millie Pauls, Bobby Quock, Dempsey Quock, Carlene Quock, Gilbert Quock, Henry Quock, Jenny Quock, Jerry Quock, Marie Quock, Ramona Quock, Rhoda Quock, and Roy Quock.

The team at Greystone worked on an impossibly tight schedule, and I am very grateful for their support. Thanks to Scott McIntyre and publisher Rob Sanders, editor Nancy Flight, art director Peter Cocking, and proofreader and copyeditor Lara Kordic. Thanks also to Yanik Jutras for preparing the photography files for printing. I would like especially to thank Jeremy Eberts, who designed the book. He was a constant and insightful presence at every stage of the editorial process, as was Trevor Frost, who dedicated himself to every phase of the project. Trevor secured the funding, recruited the photographers, facilitated logistics, choreographed the delivery and editing of images, contributed editorial content, and transcribed dozens of hours of interviews. This book is his as much as anyone's.

Finally I would like to acknowledge all the friends and elders from the Tahltan First Nation who have welcomed my family into their territory over these many years. My thoughts go especially to those who have passed on: Jackie Carlick, Alex and Madeleine Jack, Charlie and Martha Abou, Francis Louie, Robert Quock, Charles Quock, and so many others. The book is dedicated to their memory, and to the promise of generations still to come. They will know the Sacred Headwaters as did their ancestors, thanks to the courage and commitment of the Tahltan people living today.

Photo Credits

CARR CLIFTON
Cover, frontispiece, pages ix, x, 5, 6, 9, 10–11, 13, 14–15, 21, 22, 27, 28–29, 30, 32, 36, 64–65, 66, 67, 68–69, 70–71, 78–79, 80, 85, 86–87, 87, 89, 90, 91, 92–93, 96–97, 100, 101, 102-103, 112–113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 122–123, 124–125, 126–127, 128–129, 132–133, 136, 138, 145

PAUL COLANGELO
Pages 7, 16, 17, 20, 31, 39, 58–59, 62, 76–77, 82, 98–99, 104, 105, 106, 111

WADE DAVIS
Pages 4, 12, 40, 45, 47, 56, 74, 75, 81, 88, 109, 118, 119

SARAH LEEN
Pages 41, 53, 94–95, 98, 110–111, 120–121, 131

CLAUDIO CONTRERAS
Pages 49, 51, 65, 61, 68, 130

GARY FIEGEHEN
Pages 134–135

BRIAN HUNTINGTON
Page 50

TOM PESCHAK
Page 48

JOE RIIS
Page 72

FLORIAN SCHULZ
Page 23

The David Suzuki Foundation

The David Suzuki Foundation works through science and education to protect the diversity of nature and our quality of life, now and for the future.

With a goal of achieving sustainability within a generation, the Foundation collaborates with scientists, business and industry, academia, government and non-governmental organizations. We seek the best research to provide innovative solutions that will help build a clean, competitive economy that does not threaten the natural services that support all life.

The Foundation is a federally registered independent charity that is supported with the help of over 50,000 individual donors across Canada and around the world.

We invite you to become a member. For more information on how you can support our work, please contact us:

David Suzuki Foundation
219-2211 West 4th Avenue
Vancouver BC Canada V6K 4S2

www.davidsuzuki.org

E contact@davidsuzuki.org
T 604-732-4228
F 604-732-0752