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LIST OF ALL ARTICLES

June 2009

- Miner's Memorial Day Videos
- **The Saga of the Tsolum River**
- Council of Canadians AGM
- "Chew on This" Film Series
- 30 Day Local Food Challenge
- Invasive species still endanger estuary
- Please Vote in Fish Farm Poll
- Thank You
- Amazing Day of song, dance and culture
- Five salmon farms should be closed
- Ray Grigg: Peak Oil...
- Seed Savers AGM
- Ray Grigg: Panarchy...
- National Aboriginal Day June 21
- Adapting To A New World Order
- A Tale of Two Diverging Economic Worlds
- Comox Valley Water Forum
- Writing Circle collects memories
- T-Shirt and Mail Art
- Miner's Memorial Day 2009
- Time To Sing
- Freshwater Fishing Seminar
- Water Meters: Truth or Dare?
- Hospice Society receives donation
- Thanks for Fish Tails turnout
- How Canadian are you?
- MusicFest Named In Top 25
- No Fishing in the Tsolum River!
- Seeds, Community, and Empowering People
- Letter to CVRD on Kensington & Water

MORE...

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General · 20th June 2009

The Saga of the Tsolum River

Charles Brandt

The Saga of the Tsolum River

There is a strong sense of hope and genuine anticipation in the Comox Valley as Quantum Environmental Group- teaming up with SRK Consulting, and CE Jones and Associates- prepares to place an engineered cover on the old Mt. Washington open pit mine site, a mine site that has been polluting the Tsolum River for 45 years, a form of copper pollution that remained undetected until a few years ago. It is the hope that this cover will halt any future contamination of the watershed, and lead to the health and healing of the river.

And although the haul road to the mine is now classified as an "Active Mine Road", work on covering the 7.8 hectare north pit is delayed until the last remnants of snow have disappeared from the pit floor so as to allow Quantum to begin leveling the floor in preparation for the placement of the under drains and the Bituminous Geomembrane.

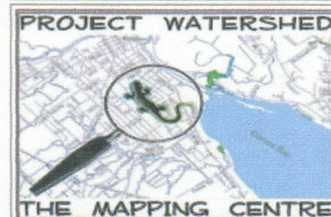
These large rolls of membrane, manufactured in France and on hand, will be rolled into place with heavy equipment and impermeably sealed. Its purpose is to prevent water and oxygen from seeping into the fractured pit floor and to allow run off any excess water. This then will be covered overall by a meter of till and the over drains will be put in place.

By Fall all of this year this work should be completed. Next spring topsoil will be brought in and planted with grasses and legumes. We will then have an alpine meadow as we had before the mine went in.

Although Mt. Washington Milling Company mined the Mt. Washington site from 1964 to 1967 (when the company went into receivership without reclaiming the mine site), it was not until the fall of 1984 that the ComoxValley community became aware that there were heavy concentrations of copper in the Tsolum River emanating from the old mine, copper that was lethal to salmon and aquatic life in the river. The warning came when only 8 pink salmon returned to the river to spawn. This was a river that boasted of runs in the early 1940s of 200,000 pink salmon. Not

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- Thank You
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- Water Meters: Truth or Dare?
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- Seeds, Community, and Empowering People
- Letter to CVRD on Kensington & Water

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only were salmon disappearing in large numbers but the prized trophy steelhead as well.

Along with the copper threat, there existed the continued removal of timber from the watershed, the removal of vast amounts of spawning gravel in the lower reaches of the river to construct the runways for the Comox Airport, and the removal of Tsolum water for irrigation purposes. All of these have contributed to the demise of this once great river.

In 1985, the local chapter of the Steelhead Society sprang into action. Under the leadership of Rory Glenning and the inspiration of Rob Bell-Irving, the Tsolum River Enhancement Committee was set up with the mandate of reclaiming the old mine site and enhancing the Tsolum River.

I was designated as chairman of this committee. For the next ten years through letter writing and meetings and discussions we attempted to fulfill our mandate. In 1987, when Karen Sanford was leader of the opposition, SRK Consulting was awarded a contract through the Ministry of Mines (EMMPR) to place a cover over the mine site. This was completed in 1989. Through '94 EMMPR continued experimental work at the site through Murray Galbraith and his team. It was during this time that the Mount Washington Committee was established, meeting twice annually.

It was not until 1997-98 that the SRK cover was proclaimed partially successful, when the copper loading in the Tsolum was reduced by 50%. Still not enough.

Various environmental groups then took up the torch: In 1997 a Task Force was formed following a public meeting at the Comox First Nations Longhouse; in '98 The Tsolum River Restoration Society(TRRS) was formed with Wayne White as our first president; in '02 TRRS formed a partnership with federal and provincial and economic groups; it was this partnership that led to the decision to use one of the many wetlands on the mountain to absorb some of the copper from the mine runoff. This reduced the copper loading in the Tsolum by another 50%. Good, but not yet good enough. Credit goes in part to Rob McCandless for this 50% reduction.

Things begin to happen in 2007, when the Ministry of Environment through Barry Penner granted the partnership \$50,000 to design an engineered cover that would finally lay the problem to rest. The design was created by SRK Consulting, the designer of the 1987-88 cover. To execute the plan and design would require considerable money.

This money, \$4.5 million, came from the Provincial Government. It was announced on April 15, 2008: the cover design and its execution will be fully funded. The announcement came at a time when Stewart Duncan was and is the president of TRRS.

The rest is history or is about to become history: within the next two weeks, as the snow disappears from the north pit of the Washington Mine, Quantum is prepared to start rolling, putting in place a cover that will hopefully halt any flow of the deadly copper into the watershed. And should it be less than 100% successful, a backup plan is in the ready, in the form of a small treatment plant, that will neutralize any copper not cared for by the cover.

Rod Haig-Brown once said, 'You never win an environmental battle'. We may never again see runs of 200,000 Pink Salmon in the Tsolum, just as we will never again see 300 square miles of old growth Douglas Fir that once existed between Courtenay and Campbell River. But what we will see and are seeing is a community that is committed to change, a community that is making a transition from a society that has been having a disruptive influence on the natural world to a society that will have a benign effect. We make this transition by experiencing creation with a sense of wonder and delight, rather than a commodity for our own special benefit, as we come to understand that a thing is right when it tends to preserve the beauty, integrity and stability of the whole biotic community.

Father Charles A.E.Brandt, erm.
Oyster River

