

Leeching copper hurts Tsolum

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Black Press

Going to Winnipeg in late October to talk about old, leeching mines doesn't sound like a whole lot of fun.

But Father Charles Brandt of Black Creek is looking forward to speaking at a national conference about the history of an abandoned mine at the top of Mount Washington and how it affected a river system.

"In 1982, the Puntledge hatchery released 2.5 million pink (salmon) fry into the Tsolum River. Not a single pink salmon returned and then they knew something was wrong," says Brandt, a founding member of the Tsolum River Restoration Society.

Almost 25 years later, the Tsolum still has its problems - as a result of copper leaching into the headwaters from the abandoned mine - but there are fish in the river.

"The returns this year

were poor, we only had about 150 pinks in the river and returns were also down in the Oyster (River)," he points out. "Four or five years ago we had 35,000 return but that was a fluke. Last year we had 8,000 and that's not bad,"

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Father Charles Brandt

Brandt has been invited as a guest speaker at the Oct. 26-27 workshop of the National Orphaned/Abandoned Mines Initiative. The purpose of the conference is to explore and understand the best, emerging and innovative practices relating to the management of orphaned and abandoned mines.

Brandt will be talking about the history of the Mt. Washington mine, how leeching copper turned the Tsolum into a "dead" river, how various groups worked

together to cap the mine and continue to revitalize the river system.

"They want to find out the best way of looking after these mines...and we have a pretty good track record," Brandt says of the restoration society.

The Mt. Washington Milling Company operated an open pit copper mine at the top of the mountain from 1964-67, and then went into receivership.

"Then we didn't hear much about it until 1978 when Esso Minerals thought they could extract more copper. They introduced acid to get copper but after four years, it wasn't economically feasible," says Brandt.

By 1985, it was well-known the Tsolum - which generally runs through the

Merville area - was a "dead" river. According to Brandt, that's when the Comox Valley chapter of the Steelhead Society reconvened with the mandate to reclaim the minesite and save the Tsolum.

In 1987, the Ministry of Environment finally got involved and that led to a partial reclamation in 1988-89 by the contractor SRK which covered up the 7.5 hectare site.

Work continued on the site for a few years and copper levels fell by 50 per cent in the Tsolum - a decent reduction but still not healthy enough for fish.

The committee first formed by the Steelhead Society eventually changed into the Tsolum River Restoration Society. This group then formed a partnership with Fisheries and Oceans Canada, the provincial environment and mining ministries, TimberWest and the Pacific Salmon Foundation.

The province recently put up \$50,000 for a preliminary study on how to cap the mine for the long term. SRK has been hired again to do the work which could cost \$5 million.

"Well have to find the funds for that," says Brandt, who is optimistic about the Tsolum's future.