The Impacts of Placer Mining on Traditional Xastull Territory

By

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The Xastull First Nation is located in the Caribou region of central British Columbia. The nation is the northern most Shuswap tribe and is a member of the larger Great Secwepemc Nation, which is comprised of a total of 17 tribes. The Xastull practiced hunting and gathering lifestyles for thousands of years on territory ranging from the Rocky Mountains to the Coast Mountains. These practices were structured around family groups and harmonious relations with their neighbors known as the Southern Carrier (Xastull).

The arrival of Europeans in the 1850’s brought intense change and disruption to the Xastull culture and the land they had stewarded for thousands of years. In particular, the colonizers were in search of gold and precious stones and quickly discovered the abundance of both within the Xastull territory. To this day gold mining remains a key economic driver in the area, however next to no benefit is gained by the Xastull community.

The most dominant process of gold extraction in the region is *placer mining*, which is defined as, “the extraction of valuable heavy [minerals](http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780199641666.001.0001/acref-9780199641666-e-9706) from a [placer](http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780199641666.001.0001/acref-9780199641666-e-6117) deposit by washing sand and dirt away with a powerful jet of water, leaving behind the desired [mineral](http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780199641666.001.0001/acref-9780199641666-e-9706)” (Park, 1). Specifically, this process is executed through thousands of small-scale mines found throughout the region. Over the last 150 years placer mining has exploded throughout the Xastull territory, resulting in wide scale disturbance of streams and traditional land use areas. To showcase this disturbance, two maps have been created showing the distribution of placer mines overlain by both Xastull traditional land uses and critical fish habitat (see attached). These two parameters were chosen because they showcase both the cultural and ecological impacts of placer mines and in most cases ecological impacts (riparian destruction, water damage) carry cultural impacts, especially considering how closely the Xastull interact with the land and water.

Before exploring the impacts of placer mining, it is worth explaining the map features and the meaning behind them. The first map shows the overlap between placer mine distribution and Xastull traditional land use practices. These practices are broken down in 7 categories: village and lithics; camping/gathering areas; fishing areas; berry picking areas; medicinal areas; planting and harvesting areas, and hunting areas. One challenge of describing these areas and land uses is that many, if not all of them, overlap to one degree or another. Through interviews with Xastull community members it became clear that most berry picking areas are also medicinal areas and that hunting areas encompass the entire extent of the Xastull territory. The map features and categories are sourced from two Traditional Use Studies conducted in 1999 (Forest Renewal BC) and 2012 by the Xastull in collaboration with Spanish Mountain Gold Limited (2012). It is important to note that these maps are in many ways incomplete. This is due to both the ongoing nature of the land use studies and the non empirical ways by which the Xastull pass on information and knowledge. The descriptions of the map features are sourced from interviews conducted with Xastull members. The areas were described as follows:

Village and Lithics

The village was the main settlement area for Xastull Nation and was more permanent than camping areas. Structures were mainly pit houses, used especially in winter.

Camping/gathering areas

Areas include Tyee Lake, Lac La Hache and The Horesfly Area. These were meeting areas where many nations came together for celebration and games. Camping areas were utilized during hunting and gathering trips where groups or families would collect medicines and berries as well as practice hunting and fishing.

Fishing areas

Fishing occurred in a wide variety of lakes and rivers in the Cariboo region. Desired fish included multiple species of salmon and bull trout depending on the time of year.

Berry picking areas

Harvested berries included strawberries, high bush cranberries, saskatoon berries, thimble berries, raspberries and many others.

Medicinal areas

Medicinal plants included Devils Club (root tea), Balsam pitch, swamp tea (Labrador Tea). Medicinal harvesting areas were widespread throughout the Xastull territory.

Planting and harvesting areas

Plant harvesting areas consist of areas where families would harvest trees for bark, roots and cambium. The main use for the harvested tree materials would be for baskets and other weaved goods. Other harvested crops included wild potatoes, tea, fungus, and wild rhubarb.

Hunting areas

Animals hunted included Moose, Deer, Grouse, and Rabbits.

The second map showcases the distribution of placer mines in context with areas that are considered critical fish habitat by the Caribou-Chilcotin land use plan created by the provincial government of British Columbia. Specifically, these areas refer to habitat occupied by the bull trout, which is a key food source for indigenous communities throughout the Caribou region. To understand the impacts that placer mines can have on bull trout, one must first understand how the trout are connected to their environment. Bull trout are currently blue-listed in British Columbia because, “their regional population is particularly sensitive due to their restricted distribution, susceptibility to habitat degradation, disruption of migration patterns and over fishing “(Horsefly, 50). More specifically, bull trout are highly susceptible to changes in water temperatures, which, in their native region, is usually the product of riparian deforestation. This is the removal of trees and their subsequent shade near the edge of streams which exposes the stream to direct sunlight and results in increased water temperatures (Hammond, 9).

Forestry policies in British Columbia are relatively strict and abided by as compared to mining policies. The vast majority of riparian deforestation in the Xastull territory is the product of placer mining proponents failing to follow proper protocol (non-compliance). For example, in a recent audit done by the BC Ministry of Environment, 26 placer mine tenures were, “inspected and assessed for compliance with submitted Notice of Works” (Canada, 1). Of the 26 mines that were visited, 23 were active tenures. Of these 23, “74% were found to be in non-compliance with their Notices of Work” (Canada, 1). These non-compliances varied from failing to follow the 10-metre riparian setback reserve, to discharging wastewater into streams and rivers, to diverting waterways. Notabaly, 13 active tenures (57%) were found to be operating inside the important 10-metre buffer in place to protect stream banks and fish habitat (Canada, 1).

The impacts of placer mining on riparian zones and critical fish habitat are relatively easy to understand and quantify when compared to the impacts that the industry has on Xastull culture and traditional land uses. This becomes truest when one considers the interconnected and cyclical nature of indigenous land use and culture in the Caribou region. One concrete way by which placer mines impede traditional land use is through access. As it currently stands, only the claim holder and mining inspector have the right to enter an active tenure without written permission. Everyone else, including the indigenous community, are restricted from the land. This directly impacts Xastull community members from participating in land use practices that go back thousands of years.

Moving forward, all government and mining bodies should consider ways in which the mining policies and consultation processes could be improved to better represent local indigenous perspectives and protect critical fish habitat. The areas needing improvement in placer mining operations are too abundant for a single research paper, so we will focus on the two areas mentioned above. In an interview with the placer mining referrals coordinator, Susan Aspinall suggests that to improve the protection of critical fish habitat, “the riparian setback should be maintained at 30 metres. It should not matter if the areas have been previously disturbed or if there is gold in the extra 20 metres (between the boundary and the river)” (Aspinall, 1). Aspinall suggests that if the mine is close to a larger river the buffer zone should be extended beyond 30 metres based on the river’s ability to erode it’s banks and reduce riparian vegetation.

When asked how the consultation process could better represent the perspectives of the Xastull community, Aspinall suggests that policy changes are key to achieving this goal. A major change needed in the mining policies would be “that the Crown should be obligated to accommodate and not simply consult First Nations. This will legally bind them to consider First Nation land use and the intrinsic value the land has” (Aspinall, 1). As it currently stands, the policies only require mining proponents to consult with First Nations but they are not required to alter their Notice of Works in anyway based on the results of that consultation.

The second suggestion Aspinall makes is for proponents to be obligated to replant the cleared areas with local trees species. Currently, proponents are obligated to plant grasses and clovers in the mined areas and, although this is a start, it is far from returning the land to its original state.

The cultural and ecological impacts of placer mining within Xastull territory need addressing on both a social and political level. There are many opportunities to improve the mining process to better represent local indigenous traditions and practices, all of which should be explored. There is the potential for mining to occur in harmony with indigenous land use practices but substantial steps need to be taken before this harmony can be achieved.

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