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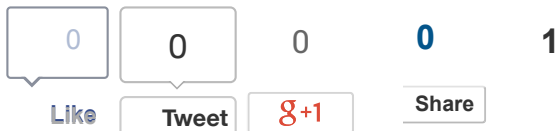
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GUEST VIEWPOINT

Nickel mining plan threatens Rogue, Smith tributaries

BY TIM PALMER

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Hidden from the usual tourist circuit, two streams in southwestern Oregon tumble from the Siskiyou mountains through wild canyons embossed with pines and boulder fields. These unprotected streams are now threatened by nickel mines.

They go by the hardscrabble names of Baldface and Rough and Ready. Their flush of crystalline water nourishes some of the finest runs of salmon downstream — vital for sport and commercial fishing. Elegant in snowstorms, brilliant with springtime blooms, these enclaves abound with botanical curiosities such as bug-eating plants. Vegetation found nowhere else in the world thrives in ancient red soil; botanists worldwide come just to see it.

Baldface Creek flows into the north fork of the Smith River, which crosses the border into California and makes its breathtakingly beautiful course through the heart of redwood country. Flowing off the other side of the Siskiyou mountains, Rough and Ready Creek joins the Illinois River — a branch of the legendary Rogue River and its principal nursery of imperiled coho salmon.

While the Rogue, Illinois and Smith rivers have enjoyed decades-long protection as designated wild and scenic rivers, our two remarkable tributaries have just kept flowing in a way that one might imagine lasting forever. But that vision is in jeopardy.

Exploration for open-pit nickel mines is proposed for both these basins; plans are pending at the U.S. Forest Service. On Google Earth, see the abandoned nickel mine at Riddle, south of Roseburg, to realize what awaits our slice of Siskiyou paradise. Pollution could quickly infect the Rogue and Smith rivers. Appalachia-style strip mining is permitted under the General Mining Act of 1872 — a relic of Ulysses Grant's presidency that allows miners to dig wherever they want on our public lands, exempt even from royalty payments and buffered from anti-pollution rules.

The infamous law was passed when miners were American sourdoughs swinging pickaxes, but those days are over; today's applicant at Baldface is a multinational corporation in Great Britain.

A century of work by dedicated local people and extending the whole way to Congress has protected the Rogue and Smith rivers, but all that could now fall victim to the price that Chinese nickel buyers are willing to pay to a corporate giant on the other side of the Atlantic.

Oregon does not have to be an impoverished and polluted resource colony of other nations. Congress can withdraw the area from mining claims, and our elected officials can pass legislation to protect these streams' fisheries and botanical treasures.

This would honor the decades-long work and investments that Oregonians and Californians have made in safeguarding the Rogue and Smith for the health of an economy that's based on fish, recreation and thriving stable communities — not the boom, bust and permanent damage of strip mining.

The Forest Service has found both streams eligible for safeguarding under their own wild and scenic status. Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley and Rep. Peter DeFazio have indicated support to protect these areas.

That initiative deserves immediate action with the backing of the entire Oregon delegation.

Tim Palmer of Port Orford is the author of "Rivers of America," "The Columbia" and "The Wild and Scenic Rivers of America."

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