

The author, seen here after a 1981 bear hunt on the Alaska Peninsula, says that despite countless trips to Africa, nothing compares when it comes to Alaska adventures. (CRAIG BODDINGTON)

PROTECT WILD ALASKA

FINDING BALANCE BETWEEN NATURE AND PROFIT

BY CRAIG BODDINGTON

The 50-state country we all love grew in various ways. We conquered, or at least overran, most of the West. Most of the Southwest was seized as spoils of the Mexican American War (1846-1848), probably the most



unjust war in our history. Alaska was actually purchased fair and square in 1867, from a down-on-its-luck Czarist Russia for \$7.2 million. This was one of the largest real estate deals in our history, second only to the Louisiana Purchase, which gave us most of the Gulf Coast and lower Mississippi.

At two cents per acre, Alaska was another solid bargain, but its acquisition wasn't a particularly popular move. Negotiated by Secretary of State William Seward, Alaska was alternately referred to as Seward's Folly and Seward's Icebox – at least until the major gold strikes in the 1890s.

Since then Alaska has repaid the purchase price many times over. I was in grade school when Alaska became our 49th state in January 1959 (followed by Hawaii eight months later, thus solidifying the United States as it still is today).

Alaska of today is not our least populous state. Actually, three other states have lower human populations, but Alaska is far and away our largest state, and without question it has the least dense human population.

Actually, it goes farther than that. The majority of Alaska's 731,000 residents live in the Anchorage area, and a great deal of the rest of the state is unpopulated wilderness.

MAINTAINING OUTDOOR PARADISE

Not only hunters and fishermen, but all folks interested in the outdoors (which, at some level, should be all Americans) should rejoice in the fact that, in Alaska, we have one of the world's great unspoiled wilderness regions.

Alaskan residents have a real playground: about 84 percent of Alaska's 663,000 square miles is either state or federal land, held in public stewardship and available to all of us.

Not all of us ever get up there, but I think sojourning in the Alaskan wilderness is a dream shared by most American outdoors lovers – whether hunters, anglers, bird watchers, or just plain old nature lovers.



Part of the proposed Pebble Mine project could affect what has been the site of one of the author's favorite moose hunting locations. (CRAIG BODDINGTON)

The thing is, Alaska is our wilderness.

Throughout my career I have noticed that, for American sportsmen and -women, Alaska beckons more strongly than Africa, and nothing else comes close. It's no great secret that I'm an African addict, so it might surprise you to learn that I, too, have fallen under the spell of Alaska. I've journeyed there at least 20 times, primarily for hunting and a bit for fishing.

I've hunted guided and unguided, on mainland and islands; from Southeast to the Brooks Range and from the Kenai Peninsula to the Wrangell Range. Not all of my Alaskan hunts have produced game (on fish, well, I never got completely skunked!), but all have been successful in that, when you can enjoy wildlife in true wilderness you have accomplished your goal and realized your dream.

FINDING A BALANCE

Alaska is a big place, and it seems there should be room for both wilderness and human development. Sometimes there is, but northern wilderness actually hangs on a fragile balance. I was up there in the military in the mid-

1970s when the Alaska Pipeline was going through; in some ways the Great Land took decades to recover; in other ways, she never will.

And let's not forget the *Exxon Valdez*.

Even without massive human interference the balance is hard to achieve. We have seen the ebb and flow of caribou herds, the push-pull between predator species and prey. For some years now Alaskans have been arguing about what really is a massive human interference: the proposed Pebble Mine inland from Bristol Bay, essentially where the Alaskan Peninsula joins the mainland.

To focus it a little bit more, and reverting to place names legendary in the hunting world, think of these gems: Lake Iliamna, Lake Clark, Mulchatna River, Wood Tikchik State Park. If it comes to be so, Pebble Mine will sit astride some of Alaska's best "mixed bag" hunting for moose, caribou, and brown bear; not to mention with the Dall sheep and goats on the edges, and wolves and wolverines for the lucky. Downhill and downstream from the tailings is the great salmon fishery of Bristol Bay, along with the lakes and rivers.

MINING VS. THE WILD

It seems odd that just one mine could be the source of so much controversy, or possibly cause so much disruption. First, there are mines and then there are mines. The primary metals in the deposit are copper, molybdenum, and, of course, good old gold. However, the gold ore is extremely low-grade, so we're talking an economy of scale – a massive project – to make the extraction profitable.

From the beginning, the use of multiple earthen dams to contain the liquid refuse has been questionable: lose just one, and major fisheries are wiped out. The risk to marine life is known, and, in fact, (according to some surveys) 62 percent of Alaskans are opposed to Pebble Mine proceeding – despite the obvious jobs and economic value – based primarily on risk to the fisheries



The shortest access road among a maze of them if the Pebble Mine project is completed would span 70 miles and cross 63 salmon-bearing streams. The author says such a huge operation would require three times as much water a day as is used in Alaska's largest city, Anchorage. (CRAIG BODDINGTON)

alone.

But let's add the impact to wildlife. The mine itself will be huge, almost certainly a pit mine that might be 2 miles across and thousands of feet deep. That's big, but barely a pimple on the vastness of Alaska. Far more serious is the incredible infrastructure required to support such a project. The mine itself would sit 20-odd miles north of Lake Iliamna. The logistics, housing, and actual site would resemble a small city. In order to operate, Pebble would require as much power and three times the water as the city of Anchorage uses daily. And of course this new city must be built - and it has to be accessed. One proposal is a road of 104 miles from the mine to Cook Inlet, a major road for major trucks and equipment, paralleled by a fuel pipeline and another pipeline to carry concentrated metal slurry to the mine and straight through prime game country. The shortest access road would cover 70 miles and cross 63 salmon-bearing

streams. Geez!

The local caribou herd is currently down, but in natural wilderness the caribou runs on a boom-and-bust cycle. They will recover, but not if road construction, then a road, and then a city, spring up in their living room.

Historically and today, this is a great area for moose. My own "best ever" moose was taken just a bit south of this area, but not far enough south to avoid the unimaginable disruption. Personally, I never hunted brown bear this far north - and since it's fairly far north, this has not been the place for Alaska's biggest bears. It is, however, an area with an exceptional bear population, feeding on moose, caribou, and, of course, the rich salmon fisheries. Within the affected area are game management units (GMUs) that allow two brown/grizzly bears per regulatory year because of the high population. And if you think you, as a nonresident in Alaska, have no stake in this, in GMU 9 guided nonresidents take about 81

percent of the unit's annual brown bear harvest, an average of a whopping 175 bears per year. Mess up the habitat and it won't be pretty. Let one dam break and impact the fisheries and it will be ugly. Salmon populations will die, and predators will quickly wither.

WINNING THE BATTLE

Pebble Mine has been a hard-fought battle for years. At first, in the name of economic development, too many politicians were eager for it to proceed. Now, in the face of much (common sense-backed) public outcry some are backing off – as well they should. Others are digging in their heels.

Make no mistake: Alaska is about mineral production. There are many possibilities, and as exploration becomes ever more sophisticated there will be many more. But Pebble Mine comes at too high a cost to the Alaskan wilderness we all revere.

Right now things are happening fast. The Environmental Protection

Agency has invoked the Clean Water Act in attempting to protect Bristol Bay from Pebble Mine; and of course the mine has sued the EPA. Additionally, there are currently efforts in Congress to strip from the Clean Water Act the very authority the EPA is using to try to protect Bristol Bay.

That is hardly the first lawsuit; back in 2009 six federally recognized Native American tribes filed *Nondalton Tribal Council et al vs. Alaska Department of Natural Resources*, challenging the validity of the 2005 Bristol Bay Area Plan, including Pebble Mine.

Right now this is a very interesting and almost unprecedented situation. In Alaska's delegation in Congress, only Sen. Mark Begich opposes Pebble. The state legislature is divided, although delegates from the Bristol Bay area are united in opposition.

What is really fascinating is that, on this issue, hunters, fishermen, conservation groups (whether pro-, anti-, or neutral to hunting and fishing), and

native groups are joining in opposition to Pebble Mine.

After a decade of controversy, Pebble Limited Partnership, comprised primarily of foreign investors, stands nearly alone. Ultimately Alaskans will be most impacted by this issue, but all Americans who hold Alaska's wilderness have a stake in this, and it's important for America's hunters to stand up and be counted. There is no "win-win" here; Alaska's wilderness and the wildlife she sustains must be the ultimate loser if Pebble Mine is built.

To state your opinion, or, more importantly, to contribute – and it matters not if it's small or large – to this epic battle, visit SaveBristolBay.org or check out the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership website (trcp.org/pebble-mine). **ASJ**

Editor's note: Author Craig Boddington is a renowned outdoors journalist and TV hunting host. Visit his website at craig-boddington.com.