

## Shane Mahoney on Pebble Mine

Renowned Newfoundland wildlife biologist Shane P. Mahoney uses equal doses of philosophic rigor and prophetic vision to 'light up' the most important hunting conservation issues of our time. To be sure, Mahoney knows his rifle calibers and stalking techniques, but his primary focus as a writer, speaker, television, and radio voice is the cultural anthropology at the core of hunting from the dawn of humankind to decades into the future. Hunting's essential and central role in wildlife management and the wise multiple uses of Nature is a topic he vividly explores like few others. A world traveler and presenter at many international environmental forums, he is the foremost authority on the North American Conservation Model. Mahoney never hesitates to lead, or drag, hunter conservationists to the crux of an issue and beyond their 'comfort zone.' Arguably the best public speaker in hunting conservation, there is no one at the top of America's leading sportsmen's organizations that hasn't heard Shane a time or two. His awards include the Gold Medal in Wildlife Science by the Caesar Kleberg Institute and he was named the International Conservationist of the Year by Safari Club International. Mahoney has been the TV host and writer for impressive conservation education programs sponsored by the Boone & Crockett Club and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. He's a Life Member of the Dallas Safari Club and a board member of Conservation Force. The interview below conducted by Wildlife Forever's Tim Richardson asks Mahoney to hold forth on Alaska's Pebble Mine controversy, providing a preview to his upcoming *Sports Afield* column on the most important public policy battle in the Great Land.



**Q: What is the political or cultural context of a mine proposal like Pebble in the Bristol Bay region of Alaska?**

Alaska is a wild and special place. It resonates with our human capacity to marvel at the impossible scale and exquisite beauty of an untamed natural world; and it may be our last best chance to decide what a future North America will look like. Will there be places to inspire dreams, to call our adolescent souls to adventure and freedom, to ensure our sacred belief that unyielding possibility and challenge can yet thrive in a universe of instant gratification and far, far too much connection? Will there be wildness of such proportion to humble the excesses of mankind?

These ideals remain enshrined in the American conscious and they make Alaska unique within the national psyche. Certainly they are much more than romantic illusions. They lie at the heart of American idealism and sense of destiny. As a consequence there is something deeply *American* about Alaska, and thus there will always be a part of America that cares deeply about what happens in the nation's last vestige of its former life.

The wild fullness of Alaska we know is irreplaceable. We have proven this over a four hundred year history of reducing wild renewable resources to vestiges of their former abundances, although we made plenty of commitments along the way to prevent this from happening. Thus to place a mine of colossal proportions in the midst of one of Alaska's most unique and incredibly productive natural systems does not, unfortunately, represent a new reality. Rather, it is a frightening reminder of the many losses we have collectively endured in the name of unbridled economic progress and in the shallow assurances that we could brutally alter a natural system and somehow have it remain vibrant and full.

In this context, Alaska and the Pebble Mine pose a question of great consequence to the American people: will we keep great wild places that are exceptional beyond measure? Or will any and all of them fall before the serrated edge of possibility?

**Q: What's your take on the risks posed by the mine?**

There will inevitably be serious *direct* impacts on salmon and other resources within the immediate mine excavation and haul road areas. That much we already know. Certainly, that is the conclusion of the U.S Environmental Protection Agency based on its three-year study of the Pebble Mine. Just building the mine would destroy between twenty-four and ninety-four miles of salmon-supporting streams, and between 1,300 to 5,350 acres of wetlands. Such losses are startling given that everywhere else we are struggling to maintain or recover these very same assets.

Let us please not forget the lessons from the Columbia River Basin nor the grim statistics surrounding the vast majority of commercially harvested fish populations

worldwide! We have been in a constant struggle to save from further and perhaps calamitous depletion Northern Cod off Newfoundland, salmon throughout the Atlantic and tuna species worldwide....just to name a conspicuous few. Thus, destroying miles of some of the most productive anadromous fish habitat in the world ought to arouse even the most immobile sensitivities to the environment; or, for that matter, even the most die-hard proponents of economic progress at all costs. Surely some costs are just too high!

By far, however, the greatest concerns with Pebble Mine relate to acid drainage. What if the expanse of acid-laden waters behind those dams escapes by leakage or breakage? The cost to the overall natural system, and to salmon in particular, would be potentially devastating. While we might all agree that the fisheries are not in immediate danger, any reasonable person must ask what happens as the mine expands and eventually closes. The mine is projected to have a potential operating life span of one hundred years. Who will be standing then to guarantee the integrity of the dams, or offer responses to problems that must inevitably arise? Probably no one; but our descendants, aboriginal and settler alike, will surely and inevitably pay the price.

Barring major spills, even small leakages of toxic material could have serious effects on salmon, and thus on the entire ecological fabric that salmon in this region support. We might acknowledge that nature's complexities are such that it may take us decades to realize that a problem exists. We might also remember that we cannot simply put nature back together as though rebuilding a house. We have no blueprint for this. Yet who can sensibly guarantee that man-made infrastructure is unbreakable, unbreachable or unsinkable? How long must we wait for the inevitable to happen, an accident or an earthquake or the predictable deterioration of infrastructure? Will it take mere decades or a century? How can we believe it will not eventually happen? Remember Chernobyl, the New Orleans Dykes, the Titanic, and maybe, for good measure or relevancy, the Exxon Valdez? Risk is a certainty; preventing risk is not!

**Q: What does the unique breadth and diversity of the anti-Pebble Mine coalition signify to you?**

The Pebble Mine is an iconic confrontation of what we mean by progress and sustainable development. One does not have to be an extreme environmentalist to wonder about the wisdom of building this mine in this place; nor does one have to be a visionary to realize that this debate is truly about *frontier*, asking us all, hunters, fishermen, trappers, bankers, lawyers and businessmen alike, if we do not draw the line here, then when and where? What place will be deemed more sensitive, more critical to wildlife, to fish and to people, and this state and nation? What, if this mine is approved, are we prepared to say no to?

Many of us in the conservation and hunting world share a belief that reasonable economic development is essential to national progress, and we recognize that such

development has costs. As the founders of the conservation movement determined so long ago, it is not *non-use* that we wish for, but *wise* use. It was this mandate that coalesced such a wide range of viewpoints and players when conservation began and this common purpose is now recreated in the coalition against the Pebble Mine. From fishing guides to a majority of native peoples, from jewelry companies like Tiffany & Co. to arms manufacturers such as Ruger, to international wildlife advocacy organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund, an incredible array of politics and opinion have coalesced against this development. There is both great social power and political promise in this united front.

It is especially significant just how many hunting and fishing groups have voiced opposition to this mine. So often our hunting and angling communities steer clear of “environmental” issues and thereby forfeit their leadership position among America’s original conservationists and environmental activists, which we clearly were! But with Pebble Mine we see leadership by sportsmen across America for a place most of us will never see...exactly as it should be, exactly in line with our original path and calling! This is the role we should and must play.

Remarkable for its diversity, the coalition against Pebble Mine just might win the day; and if it does, the effort will stand as a milestone in conservation history. I say this, not just because stopping Pebble Mine would be the right thing to do; nor even because it will send a signal that profit alone will not be the shepherd of development. I say this because this coalition is what some of us dream about, a great tidal force of diverse peoples and interests united in their common cause for the natural world and the human communities that depend upon it.

In the end politics will decide the fate of Pebble Mine. Regardless, our coalition of citizens, with hunters and anglers leading the charge, will be the real gold dug from the heart of wild Alaska. In that, we can all take pride! In my view, the challenges facing wildlife cannot be met without citizen activism; and we need a broad front of opinion and persuasion to shift the balance of development sufficiently to address wildlife issues effectively. We must at times say “no”. This is the only chance that salmon, bears, and great wild places have in this increasingly fractured world. And, yes; it is the only chance we have as well, hunter and non-hunter alike. Where rivers run clean and natural systems remain vibrant enough to renew the great flood of life mankind can be certain of a future. This is the great gift all of us can give one another.