

Confronting Kennecott in the Cascades

Adam M. Sowards, Professor of History, University of Idaho,
asowards@uidaho.edu, adamsowards.net, @AdamMSowards

The Abstract

In 1966, Kennecott Copper Corporation announced its plans to develop an open-pit mine at Miners Ridge. The low-grade ore sat within Glacier Peak Wilderness Area of the northern Cascade Range of Washington State, a place protected for wilderness values since the 1930s based on Bob Marshall's recommendation.

Conservationists were aghast by the prospect of a favorite place invaded by industry. The Wilderness Act (1964) allowed mining, and Miners Ridge became the first test—for corporations seeking to open mines, for conservationists seeking to stop them, and for the Forest Service seeking to maintain authority.

Conservationists deployed a series of strategies designed to turn public opinion against Kennecott, hoping public pressure might force Kennecott off the mountain. These innovative campaigns focused unwanted attention on

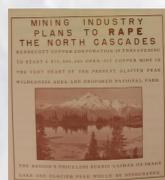
Kennecott's plans and disrupted business as usual. And the mine never materialized—however, not primarily because of environmental protest but because of copper economics.

The story comprises two parts. One is a narrative that reveals evolving grassroots protest strategies and savvy publicity campaigns in which dedicated environmentalists rallied to save a place they held dear as part of a coordinated local, regional, and national political calculus. The other is an analysis that situates obscure national and international political and economic trends following a separate logic that ultimately determined Miners Ridge's fate.

In the end, the story of a single place is the story of many places and how they are entangled.



"An Open Pit, Big Enough To Be Seen From The Moon"



Activists from the region and across the nation developed media campaigns to contrast wilderness with open pits and to suggest the enormity of the planned mine. Headlines and conservation publications, such as those sampled here, reveal the tenor of support in the region.

Scar in the Cascades

Open-pit mine in Cascades draws fire

Open Pit Mining For North Cascades? NO!



End the Glacier Peak threat



Glacier Peak and Image Lake

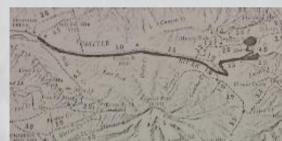
The Place

Glacier Peak Wilderness Area, contained in the larger North Cascades complex, includes a rich glaciated range with wild rivers, huge trees, staggering peaks, and deep valleys. Often described as the American Alps, the North Cascades inspired superlatives. Brock Evans, a longtime regional activist, described them when encouraging visitors: "The traveler who crosses or ventures deeper into these mountains sees an even more dramatic world. The closer his approach, the more rugged and ever more wild and beautiful the impact; murmurs and hints of still greater scenic magnificence are tantalizingly revealed in bits and glimpses up long deep valleys." The most iconic frame in the region was Glacier Peak towering above Image Lake, a mere two miles from Miners Ridge where low-grade copper mingled among the rocks.

The Corporation

Kennecott Copper Corporation (KCC) acquired the mining rights at Miners Ridge in the mid-1950s. A decade later, in December 1966, it announced plans to create an open-pit near Plummer Mountain. At the time, KCC was no small concern. The company worked or was developing mines across North American territory, as well in Africa and Latin America. Between 1963 and 1965, its annual net tonnage increased more than 15 percent from 536,005 tons to 619,868. KCC's consolidated net income at the end of 1965 topped \$102 million. The company hoped to take advantage of the market the war in Vietnam provided, appealing to "patriotic duty" to meet supply demands.

These maps show the location of the proposed mine.



The Assorted Actors



Orville Freeman, Secretary of Agriculture

• In April 1967, Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman spoke at the Sierra Club's biennial wilderness conference. Worried about losing land to the National Park Service, Freeman waxed rhapsodic about the North Cascades. Kennecott's scheme laid bare a choice: "It is not a case, in short, of 'either-or.' It is rather a case of economics, of choosing alternatives; of balancing a priceless, yet intangible, national treasure against ledger sheets and profits." Freeman noted suggestively that perhaps "a wise Creator" put the copper in the mountain "to test whether man could forego material riches for the fullness of the spirit." This was not a typical Department of Agriculture position.



Dr. Fred T. Darvill

• Dr. Fred T. Darvill, from Mt. Vernon, WA, began writing letters to politicians and editors of local papers. Concerned about Kennecott's desecrations, he bought three shares of Kennecott stock and demanded to speak at the annual stockholders' meeting. "I have come here today to talk about wilderness and beauty," he proclaimed incongruously at the May 2, 1967, meeting of copper investors. His forced verse, quoted in many news accounts, closed his comments: "Let it not be said, and said to your shame, that all was beauty here, until Kennecott Copper came." The play made national news.



Justice William O. Douglas

• Local activists invited Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas to lead what the press dubbed a "camp-out, hike-in, love-in, be-in" in August 1967. Douglas acknowledged that Kennecott possessed the right to mine, but "just because something's legal doesn't necessarily mean it's right." In this case, the nation must protect the "rights of minorities... who like to backpack, ride horseback, to climb, to escape the noise and din of civilization and find the solitude and peace that is available only in the remote wilderness areas." His arguments privileged the ethical and political over the legal and economic in confronting Kennecott.



Benjamin A. Shaime, Oberlin College student

• The campaign inspired many, including an Oberlin College student named Benjamin A. Shaime. After volunteering in the Northwest, he wrote an Honors thesis on Kennecott's proposals and wrote a petition signed by 428 scientists (including Paul Ehrlich and Lawrence Slobodkin) urging the company stop the open-pit mine. This gained him an audience with corporate executives where he pointed out "that in our complex, crowded society corporations must accept a responsibility for maintaining the quality of the environment and... act in the long-term public interest, even at some financial sacrifice." Shaime exemplified how the issue resonated widely.

The Upshot

Local and national activists generated publicity opposing Kennecott's plan. From protests and speeches to newspaper advertisements and films, they captured public attention and gained sympathy. Collectively, this activism slowed Kennecott's momentum. Seen this way, Kennecott in the Cascades represents a classic environmental history parable of white-hatted activists stopping black-hatted corporations bent on destroying the natural world. Alas, that's not the full story for why there is no open pit at Miners Ridge.

Instead, the reasons are far more intricate and thus more revealing about the nature of projects like this one. In short, broader environmental and industrial conditions changed and altered the calculus. On the environmental side, Miners Ridge became interwoven with the fate of the proposed North Cascades National Park.

Although it was not incorporated in the legislation that passed, the specter of an open-pit mine mobilized Northwesterners to support a national park carved from Forest Service land since the latter seemed far from sacrosanct.

The industrial side was even more interesting. Copper workers went on strike. Meanwhile, what had been a domestic copper shortage became a worldwide surplus with any domestic shortfall produced by exports. In such circumstances, mining a wilderness area proved to be bad business and bad politics.

References

This poster derives from a forthcoming book chapter that will appear in *Politics of Hope*, ed. Char Miller and Jeff Cranes. The archival research comes from the following collections, which include correspondence and many copies of contemporary news articles:

Brock Evans Papers, Special Collections, University of Washington;

North Cascades Conservation Council Papers, Special Collections, University of Washington;

and Sierra Club, Northwest Office Papers, Special Collections, University of Washington.

Full citations for the project available on request.

Through 1966

- ca. 1900-1920: mining claims established
- 1931: USFS designates Glacier Peak a recreation area
- 1937: NPS endorses national park
- 1950s: Kennecott Copper Corporation acquired patented mining claims at Miners Ridge
- 1956: First rumor from "extremely good authority" that KCC would mine Miners Ridge
- 1965: Anonymous tip to North Cascades Conservation Council about Kennecott's open-pit plans
- 1966: Kennecott formally announces plan

1967

- January: Summit of parties met in San Francisco
- April: Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman speaks to Sierra Club wilderness conference
- May: Dr. Fred T. Darvill speaks at Kennecott Copper's annual shareholder meeting
- July: Copper workers begin strike against the industry
- August: Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas leads group of protestors on hike condemning Kennecott's actions
- November: Senate passes North Cascades National Park bill

1968 and After

- April 1968: House Interior hearings in Seattle over North Cascades park
- September 1968: North Cascades National Park bill signed
- April 1969: Benjamin Shaime presents petition signed by 428 scientists to Kennecott executives
- 1977: North Cascades Conservation Council reminds membership of KCC as "sleeping giant"
- 1980s: Kennecott sells claims to Chelan County Public Utility District.
- 2008: Wild Sky Wilderness bill passes allowing for long-contested claims to be returned to Forest Service for wilderness protection in perpetuity

University of Idaho