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A voice for Alaska

Sioux Falls man helping to protect state's watershed

*John Pollmann
For the Argus Leader*

Tucked away in the southwest corner of Alaska, the rich waters of Bristol Bay have long been a dream destination for anglers from around the world.

But a proposed mine at the headwaters of the Bristol Bay watershed is stirring conflict in Alaska and raising questions about the future of the pristine landscape.

The front line of that effort to illustrate the potential threat facing one of the world's greatest fisheries runs right through Sioux Falls.

From his downtown office, Scott Hed faces the daunting task of communicating the challenges facing a distant Alaskan wilderness to a constituency that extends across the lower 48 states and beyond.

As director of the Sportsman's Alliance for Alaska, Hed helps keep hunters, anglers and conservation groups aware of growing conflicts involving the 49th state's vast and fragile environment.

Hed's journey to his job with the Sportsman's Alliance is almost as unique as the landscape he works so hard to protect. The Minnesota native graduated from St. Olaf College and spent 10 years working in the financial sector, eventually ending up in Sioux Falls.

In 2001, Hed's position was being moved, and he was given the choice of relocating or leaving the company. He chose door number two.

"I had grown to love South Dakota and really didn't want to move," says the 41-year-old. "Although it was a hard decision, I've found it to be one of the best I've made in my life."

Into the wild

With severance package in hand, Hed picked up and pointed the compass toward Alaska to live out a lifelong dream. Along the way, he made connections with people in the conservation world and was eventually offered a short contract to do outreach and education work in North and South Dakota.

The job has since turned into a full-time position while growing considerably in scale.

"I love what I do and I am proud of what I do," says Hed. "I work with individuals from all walks of life who are all concerned about the same thing - protecting one of the last great, wild places left on Earth."

Hed travels frequently to educate groups on issues surrounding Bristol Bay; his trips in the last 18 months included stops in Dallas, San Francisco, Boston and Rome.

While a portion of his audience is familiar with the focus of his message, many people are unaware of the imminent threat to Bristol Bay. That's where Hed's job really begins.

"With all of the attention paid to Alaska in the past year, most folks are aware of the pressure to tap into the oil and natural gas deposits in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and have formed an opinion on that issue," says Hed. "But many people, especially those outside of the angling and hunting community, are completely caught off-guard by what is being planned for the Bristol Bay watershed."

Threat to nature

Bristol Bay is an area of bountiful game and fish and breathtaking scenery. Within its scope, one can find caribou, moose and bears (grizzly, brown and black), as well as rainbow trout, Arctic char and Dolly Varden trout.

But the real stars of Bristol Bay are the salmon.

From a biological standpoint, the fish play an essential role in the surrounding ecosystem. As they move from the tidal waters to their spawning grounds, they play a crucial role as a food source for many organisms.

The healthy populations of Chinook, Coho and Sockeye salmon have also long sustained the area's indigenous populations and continue to support the world's largest commercial salmon fishery, as well as a thriving sport fishing industry.

The catalyst in this fight for Bristol Bay is the proposed Pebble Mine, an open-pit gold and copper mine, which, if completed, would be one of the largest of its kind in the world.

Conservative estimates put the value of the mineable copper and gold at around \$350 billion. Proponents of the mine tout the impact that the thousands of jobs needed to construct and maintain the mine would have on the local and state economy.

Unfortunately, the proposed footprint of the mine - roughly 15 square miles - and the underlying deposits of copper and gold are found in the land surrounding the headwaters of the Bristol Bay watershed.

Delicate balance

Tim Bristol serves as director of Trout Unlimited Alaska and has worked closely with Hed in communicating the threat that the Pebble Mine brings to Bristol Bay.

According to Bristol, the Pebble Mine project is unique in that there is no track record for a mine of this size in an area like that of Bristol Bay.

"There really is no guide that can provide for either side an indication of what one can expect from a mine of this magnitude," says Bristol. "However, historically, mines have not had healthy relationships with the surrounding ecosystem."

Bristol contends that while the Canadian mining corporation that is proposing the Pebble Mine project has promised to have a minimal impact on the environment, there really is no room for error in an area like Bristol Bay.

"Based on my research, a mine of this size would bring a fundamental change for an area that is currently wild and home to a nursery for the largest wild salmon fishery in the world," he says. "All it would take is one spill; the result would be awful."

From a distance

Over the past eight years, Hed has tackled a variety of issues facing the preservation of Alaska's

wilderness, but this Bristol Bay fight is his biggest yet. Among his challenges is convincing people that a man from South Dakota can adequately weigh in on a conflict that is brewing thousands of miles away from his home.

"Much of the work I do involves issues that are impacting federal lands," he points out. "I believe that a person, no matter where he or she is from, should be able to voice concerns over what is happening in these areas."

Hed hopes that South Dakotans will take notice of the challenges facing Bristol Bay and all of Alaska. While the issues may be miles away, they offer insight into trends that someday might visit this prairie state.

"Bristol Bay is considered to be the 'best of the best' in all of Alaska," he says. "People from all over the world dream of visiting there because of the quality of experience they can expect in terms of hunting and fishing. And if an area like that can be compromised, what's to keep it from happening anywhere else?"

John Pollman is a freelance writer who covers outdoors issues for the Argus Leader. If you have a story suggestion for him, please send it to argus-sports@argusleader.com
