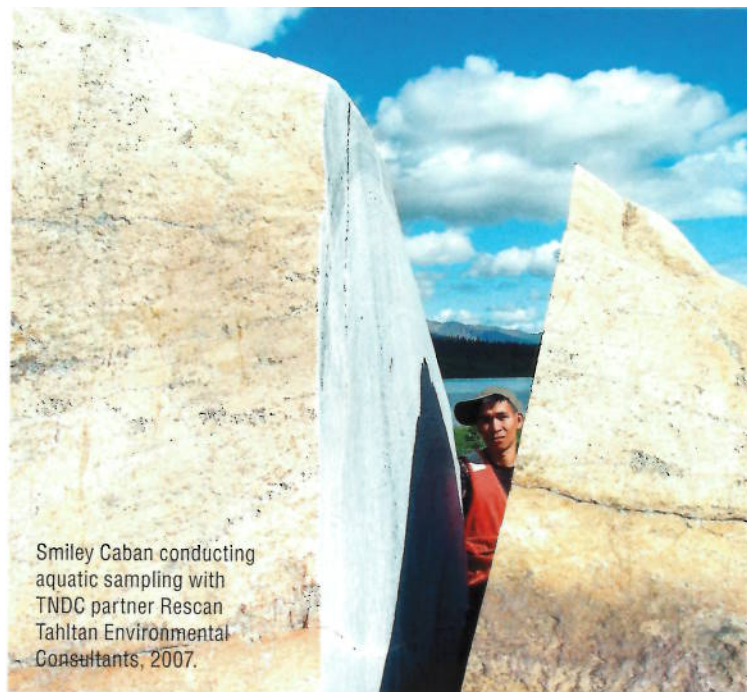


First Nations forward



Smiley Caban conducting aquatic sampling with TNDC partner Rescan Tahltan Environmental Consultants, 2007.

TNDC COMES OF AGE IN THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

BY VIVIAN DANIELSON

The 1980s were heady times for Vancouver-based junior companies, with millions of dollars raised to explore and advance what was expected to become a series of new mines in British Columbia's "Golden Triangle." At the same time, the Tahltan Nation faced high unemployment and growing concerns about the influx of gold-seekers into its traditional territory. The clash that ensued was inevitable and a transformative event for both the minerals industry and Aboriginal communities.

Phillip "Jerry" Asp, a former Tahltan chief, led a high-stakes standoff with operators of the Golden Bear mine in a bid to gain an employment guarantee and a contract to build the mine road. The Tahltan were ultimately successful and made history by signing the first Aboriginal Impact and Benefit Agreement in B.C.

The Tahltan Nation Development Corporation (TNDC) was founded in 1985 and went on to negotiate agreements with other mines in the Golden Triangle – notably Eskay Creek, which operated from 1991 to 2008. TNDC signed contracts valued at \$250 million at Eskay Creek, in addition to employment and training commitments.

Eskay Creek was instrumental in building Tahltan skills and capacity as the contracts included building a 70-kilometre road, site preparation, settling pond construction and maintenance, camp construction, catering and housekeeping for 250 workers, road maintenance, ore hauling and bus service. Unemployment fell to below six per cent during these boom times while First Nations employees advanced through training and apprenticeships or moved into management.

With Eskay Creek closed and new mines struggling to open, TNDC faces the same challenge as mining companies, riding out yet another industry trough. Despite the present slowdown, current president and CEO Garry Merkel is optimistic about TNDC's future prospects. One reason is the large scale of mine projects in the pipeline and another is diversification into other sectors, particularly "green energy."

Merkel cited the newly constructed \$764-million Northwest

Transmission Line as a recent accomplishment for TNDC. The 344-kilometre, 287-kilovolt transmission line between Skeena Substation and a new substation near Bob Quinn Lake is now in service and expected to be a catalyst for mine development in the region.

The Forrest Kerr, Volcano Creek and McLymont Creek hydroelectric projects also provided new opportunities for TNDC. These run-of-river projects, all being developed by AltaGas, are situated within Tahltan Nation traditional territory.

On the mining front, TNDC has moved earth and provided services to the \$643-million Red Chris project, which includes an extension of the Northwest Transmission Line to the mine site. This copper-gold project came under scrutiny after operator Imperial Metals reported a tailings spill at its Mount Polley mine in south-central B.C. Soon after the incident, Imperial agreed to a third-party review of the Red Chris tailings dam. The report was submitted to the Tahltan Central Council last fall and the parties are working together to ensure that recommendations contained in the review are implemented.

Time will tell if other mines come to fruition in the Golden Triangle, notably Galore Creek. The copper-gold project was put on the back burner by partners NovaGold and Teck in 2007, after costs escalated from \$2 billion to approximately \$5 billion.

Meanwhile, Merkel said TNDC is actively exploring stable, long-term, local business opportunities, such as highway maintenance and electrical infrastructure maintenance, and major business opportunities outside Tahltan traditional territory. TNDC has also developed joint-venture partnerships with more than 20 companies, including environmental and helicopter service joint ventures.

"In the year ahead, we'll focus on making TNDC an even stronger and more stable company, improving our community connection, stabilizing our workforce and strengthening our overall management capacity," Merkel stated in a mid-2014 report.

Approximately 75 per cent of TNDC's employees – which ranged between 180 and 430 in the 2013-14 fiscal year – are Tahltan, and 90 per cent are First Nations. ■