



SAFEGUARDING NORTHERN RIVERS

SAFEGUARDING NORTHERN RIVERS

is published by

CPAWS Wildlands League, 2016

Illustration by Marc Ngui



CPAWS Wildlands League is a not-for-profit charity that has been working in the public interest to protect public lands and resources in Ontario since 1968, beginning with a campaign to protect Algonquin Park from development. We have extensive knowledge of land use in Ontario and a history of working with governments (provincial, federal, Aboriginal and municipal), communities, scientists, the public and resource industries on progressive conservation initiatives.

SAFEGUARDING NORTHERN RIVERS

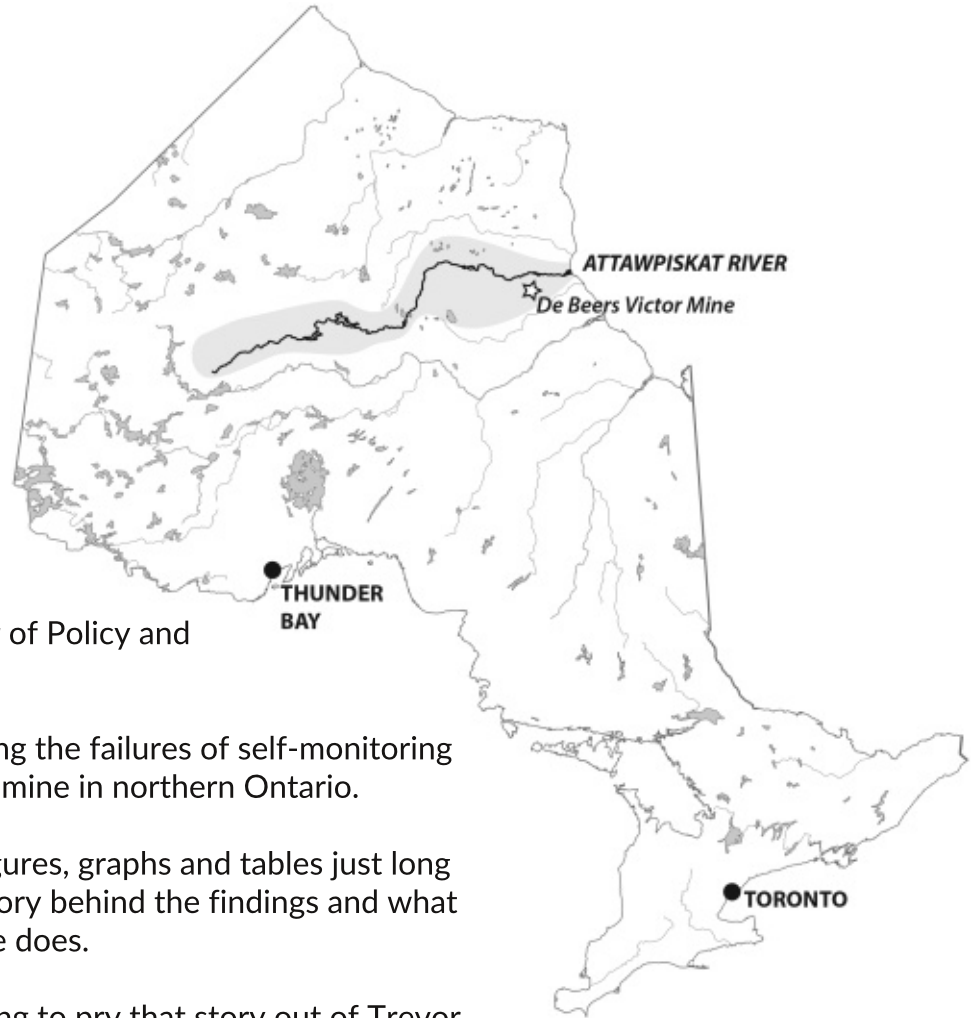


Trevor Hesselink is the Director of Policy and Research for Wildlands League.

He spent many months examining the failures of self-monitoring at the De Beers Victor diamond mine in northern Ontario.

We pulled him away from his figures, graphs and tables just long enough so he could share the story behind the findings and what motivates him to do the work he does.

We thank Peter Gorrie for helping to pry that story out of Trevor.



In the canoe

I'm paddling a canoe along the Attawapiskat, one of the wild rivers that flow across Ontario's Far North. All of them are magnificent, precious, and rare — five of the 12 last undammed and unregulated rivers in North America south of the 55th parallel.

I'm thinking about how much I love these trips, especially when my daughter Kaza comes along.

Kaza and I talk a lot about nature and wilderness. She understands why I work so hard to advocate for them because she loves nature as much as I do. Kaza tells me she wants to become a scientist – or maybe a ninja-scientist! I am not entirely sure what that means in her 6-year old brain but I think it's cool.

I have spent the past 18 months on an intense study of the De Beers Victor diamond mine — the first major industrial intrusion into the Far North. To me, how it's handled may well predict the fate of this beautiful, pristine boreal ecosystem.

My research focussed on mercury because it's both a significant danger to fish, animal and human health and an indicator of our approach to resource development.

Mercury is elevated in the Far North, and also in water flowing around the mine. When it combines

with sulphate — which is dramatically increased from mining activities — it more readily becomes methylmercury, a highly toxic form that attacks the nervous system. Methylmercury quickly magnifies from prey to predator, making it more dangerous the higher you eat on the food chain.

For decades, mercury contamination has forced the Ontario government to caution people, particularly pregnant women and children under 15, against freely eating fish from the Attawapiskat River. So for the 2,000 Indigenous people living downstream of the mine, in Attawapiskat who eat pike and walleye, two top predators in these waters, any potential to further increase the high levels of mercury they already carry really matters.

But I have been finding that, while the province dutifully issues the warnings about mercury, it may not have as clear a grip on managing its causes or preventing its additional environmental toxicity. Ontario requires De Beers to self-monitor and report mercury levels - but the company has failed to fully comply, and the province didn't seem to notice. This troubles me.

What would my ninja scientist do?



Ah, the wonders of a great northern river

Running errands

My phone rings while I'm cruising the local home improvement store. It's the De Beers' environmental manager: I've been chasing him for information. Give him full marks for following up. Kaza laughs: "More work!" she exclaims.

The province lets De Beers do its own monitoring of mercury in water flowing around the Victor diamond mine. I've asked the company for more information; additional details that could help confirm whether it's causing dangerous pollution.

Now the manager wants to know what on Earth I'm talking about. Surely it's obvious I have everything I need or, at least, that's available. No, it isn't obvious, I reply. Things are missing. There are big gaps. Reports aren't complete. Some stations aren't mentioned at all. And that can't happen when the operating permit requires full reports from every station.

Kaza starts singing and skipping alongside our shopping cart to try to distract me from whatever is making me frown. I know I have to get back to picking that paint colour for her

room but I've got to keep pushing. Round and round, we keep going. In the end, De Beers finally agrees to "look at what else we have." It turns out they have quite a bit more. But it takes more months of prodding for these details to come to light.

First, through Freedom of Information, I learn that back in 2007, a year before the mine opened, the company itself predicted it might increase toxic mercury levels downstream by up to 1,100 per cent. Then, an anonymous "brown envelope" reveals the actual situation: Samples taken at one of the unreported sites downstream from the mine showed the levels were, in fact, higher and rising in downstream stations relative to the upstream between 2010 and 2013.

Confronted with this information, as well as my continuing questions and some media coverage, De Beers finally provides more numbers, and makes a few corrections.

Still, they haven't revealed everything. The story continues.



La, La, La...Daddy on the phone with diamonds...!

Working at Night

It's the wee hours again. Why am I at my computer, bleary-eyed, wading through documents about the Victor diamond mine?

I've done this many nights for much of the past 18 months. Tens of thousands of pages.

It seems nobody else has studied this material so closely — not even the Ministry of Environment people tasked with supervising De Beers' mercury monitoring program — the one they call Ontario's "best ever" — and ensured the company complies with its permits.

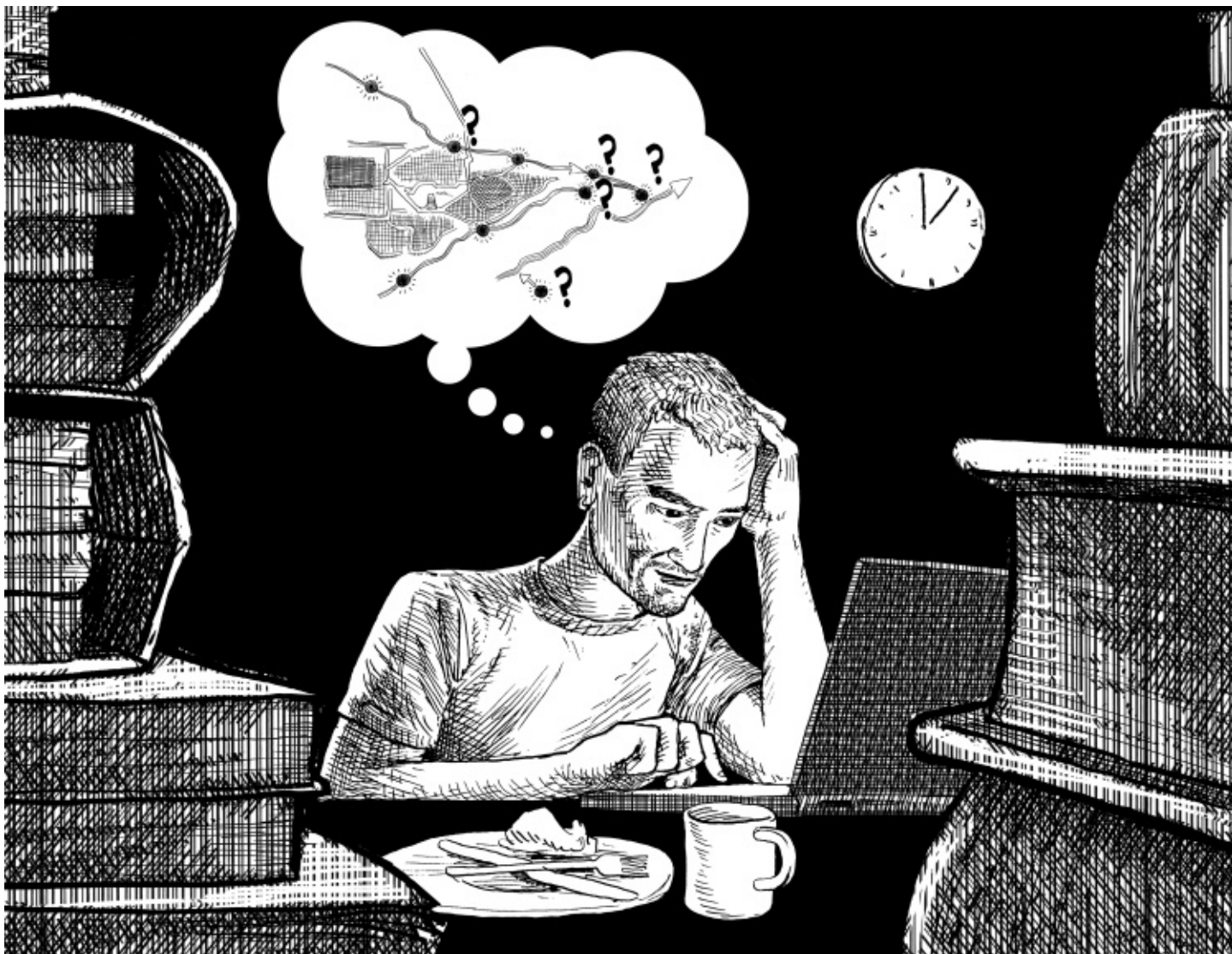
So why am I? Much of the credit goes to Kaza. She's a joy to me, but her medical issues mean she needs more care than an average kid. Since I'm a single dad, it makes for a hectic life. But she also makes a surprising contribution to this project — a gift of time.

Once she's tucked into bed, of course, I can't go out. I could turn in, too, but I'm a night owl. TV is a drag, so I've never owned one, and I'm not

big on crosswords. So, what to do with three or four quiet hours every evening?

What better than to feed my growing curiosity about the mine and the mass of paperwork that brought it into being. I examine monitoring reports and operating permits, study maps and charts, and investigate issues like how mercury becomes extremely toxic in Ontario's boggy Far North, and how water travels underground there.

It's tough slogging but the effort is paying off. I've found serious flaws in the monitoring and how it's reported. With what I've uncovered, I hope the government and De Beers will no longer ignore my questions or provide only select bits of information. There have been too many failures. This broken system, which lets De Beers monitor itself, must be fixed.



Why aren't they reporting on 5 of 9 monitoring stations? Why is downstream missing?

Kaza's Sandwich

Kaza bites into the delicious, slightly toasted, smooth peanut butter sandwich I've made for lunch. "Yuck!" she blurts. "What's this?" Oops: It's a scrap of paper covered with numbers.

Somehow, I've slipped in a page from the De Beers monitoring report I was reading while I made the sandwich. Yikes! How could I? The shock wakes me up. It was just a dream as I nodded off over my computer.

Maybe a reminder of how much my investigation of De Beers' Victor diamond mine has become part of our lives. Kaza sometimes asks why I have to work so hard. I make sure I have plenty of time for her, but it's true that thoughts of De Beers and its flawed mercury-monitoring program often circle my mind these days.

That's because the impacts could be dangerously toxic for local ecosystems and the people that rely on them. Studies and reports on the mine's impacts must be accurate, thorough and transparent. They haven't been, and both De Beers and the Ontario government have impeded my attempts to get the full story. It makes it hard to trust the system and trust the information coming from the company.

It's a story that extends beyond the current operation of the Victor mine. De Beers is

considering expansion, either by deepening the original mine pit, or starting another nearby. Then, there are other projects, like the Ring of Fire mines just upstream from Victor, proposed for Ontario's Far North.

If we don't ensure that assessments and monitoring are done properly from the start we unnecessarily risk future environmental and health impacts in the watershed.

My research into the Victor mine has exposed appalling weak points in the existing system: Most important, the company has not reported its monitoring results, as it's required to do, for most creek locations near the mine – and especially those downstream – since the project opened! Shockingly, it failed to report on 5 out of 9 surface water monitoring stations for the life of the project.

The major lesson: Leaving monitoring to the mine operator does not work.

The government must fix this. It needs to create independent, third-party monitoring of the Victor mine and all future developments, and the results must be made public, immediately and transparently.

The stakes are too high.



Whoops...how did that get in there?

**To learn about you can help safeguard these precious
northern rivers please call us at 1-866-510-WILD
or visit www.wildlandsleague.org.**

