

A submission to the Consultation process for the development of a Minerals Strategy for Newfoundland and Labrador on behalf of the Mercy Centre for Ecology and Justice. St. John's, NL - April 2011

Sister Mary Tee, rsm – Coordinator of the Mercy Centre for Ecology and Justice

First, I would like to acknowledge the commendable initiative of government in providing this inclusive process for the development of a minerals strategy for our province. We, the members of the Mercy Centre for Ecology and Justice, understand the great challenge of government to create employment, particularly in rural parts of our province where the need is so evident, and we recognize government's commitment in this regard.

We, maintain that it is imperative, as we endeavour to generate employment through development of our mineral resources, that we do so in a way which does not compromise the integrity of our natural environment, or deprive future generations of the ability to meet their needs. While acknowledging the financial benefits that mining offers to this province we trust that the fundamental importance of a balanced approach to the protection of the whole of life will also be given due consideration..

It is our recommendation that a minerals strategy for our province must include a clear direction for the preservation of a healthy biosphere for the wellbeing of humanity. It must demonstrate that water and pristine areas of land are protected for their intrinsic value and for the value they hold for the community of life and for future generations.

A Sacred Trust

To protect and care for Earth's resources is a sacred trust. The gift of water is one of our most valued resources. It is the resource that supports all of life and, therefore, its availability for all must not in any way be put at risk. There is the notion here in Newfoundland that we have lots and lots of rivers and ponds and therefore we have an endless supply of water to be used for whatever purpose we want but nothing could be farther from the truth. We must never forget that the only fresh water available on this planet is what was given to us at the beginning of creation and that is a limited supply. Just three per cent of the water on our planet is freshwater and, according to some sources, only one per cent of the world's freshwater is readily accessible. We must remember that the water in our coffee this morning was recycled water that was probably used hundreds of millions of years ago and that at this moment many communities here in Newfoundland and Labrador now have to boil this recycled water for use in their homes.

Unfortunately, in today's world the availability of this precious resource is being significantly stressed in a variety of ways – by climate change, for example, and by agricultural and other industries. UNESCO Director-General, Koïchiro Matsuura in the 2003 UN World Water Development Report says, "Of all the social and natural crises we humans face, the water crisis is the one that lies at the heart of our survival and that of our planet Earth." Mr. Matsuura goes on to tell us that no region will be spared from the impact of this crisis which touches every facet of life, from the health of children to the ability of nations to secure food for their citizens and he

predicts that over the next twenty years the average supply of water world-wide per person is expected to drop by a third. (www.wateryear2003.org)

In recent years there is an obvious growing awareness of water as a finite resource, and with growing demand for fresh water there is even the prediction of future wars being fought over water

You will recall that in 2002 an amendment to the *Fisheries Act* known as *The Metal Mining Effluent Regulations* re-classified bodies of freshwater as tailings impoundment areas. Such authorization to mining companies to convert freshwater into reservoirs of toxic waste now gravely threatens this essential resource. One would think that to sustain this fragile gift would be of paramount importance to our government and that every effort possible would be made to ensure the survival of all ecosystems.

However, from the *Mineral Strategy Discussion Paper* (released by the provincial Department of Natural Resources in February 2011), it appears that the practice of using bodies of freshwater for tailings or mine waste rock disposal is being sanctioned despite recognition of the fact that such use can result in the permanent loss of freshwater habitat with consequent loss of biota.

What makes it even more puzzling is that both our federal and provincial governments have expressed their commitment to the protection of freshwater, as well as to the care and maintenance of ecosystems, in the recent National Water Strategy. In all of this there appears to be a disconnect. The recognition of the inherent harmony between people and nature must be part of any development, but with this seeming lack of responsibility for the preservation of this vital resource so essential for life we seem to be living in an illusion of separation.

Our ancestors were deeply conscious of their connection with nature and believed that if they protected nature it would protect them. We even sing of this intimacy in the *Ode to Newfoundland*. Indigenous people in a very profound way remind us of this vital relationship. In Chief Seattle's famous 1854 statement on the environment and the future of humanity he stated that, as humans, we share a common pulse, a common life blood and a common fate with our land and its waters.

For these native peoples water is not just water, but the blood of their ancestors, and the reflections in water tell of the events and memories of people. Rivers are referred to as brothers, quenching thirst and feeding children. Chief Seattle's message called his listeners to give rivers the same kindness they would give a brother. (www.savethefrogs.com/students/chief-seattle.html)

In this speech, the feeling of respect and love of indigenous peoples for the environment is very much evident. There is deep wisdom in these words to guide us in our quest for an environmentally responsible way to develop our mineral resources. We believe that when the heart is engaged, loving actions will follow – so that not only is the best interest of all Newfoundlanders and Labradorians considered, but also the best interest of the larger life systems: the biota community.

Protected Areas: Pristine areas must be protected in perpetuity and not afforded only temporary exemption from prospectors with the intent for mining their minerals in the future. To protect areas of land, wild life, fish habitat and water quality is to have a lens focused away from our own leanings to a vision that protects a place for future generations and preserves a biota community of life in its original form. It is recognition of the fact that Earth has an intrinsic value beyond economic value. Such worth reflects the role of life within a biosphere from which we emerged and our inseparable connection to its mystery, beauty and healing strength for both body and soul. Many people have understood this psycho-spiritual connection with pristine environments. One such person was John Muir, the founder of National Parks in America, who through his own personal consciousness of the intrinsic value of nature was able to inspire both the American people and President Roosevelt to see their connection with nature and the need to protect pristine areas as national parks. (www.nps.gov/jomu)

To live out of an awareness of the necessity of safeguarding and protecting pristine areas of our province is to redefine and acknowledge our appropriate place in creation and to understand that we are interconnected and interrelated in this one web of life. According to Thomas Berry, a historian and cosmologist, this psycho-spiritual dimension in nature is essential to activate our minds, imaginations and our hearts. Without these pristine areas, he reminds us, our minds would be as empty as a lunar landscape. Protected areas awaken the inner life and spirit of the human and provide a refuge for those seeking a more balanced way of life and a connection with the land.

Even though only 7.2 percent of the land on the island of Newfoundland is protected and a some what similar proportion in Labrador this minimal percentage of conservation *does* indicate a recognition by our government of the need to set apart land for protection. We recommend that in addition to already protected land new areas of land be designated for the protection of ecosystems, for the protection of the psycho dimension of human life and that all these areas be protected in perpetuity. Without our Government's support and protection of our life systems on this planet our human presence will continually be threatened and eventually be endangered.

Climate Change: Global warming will leave the supply of freshwater uncertain especially when we take into account that there is an increase of about 83,000,000 more people on earth each year. With our recent experiences of sudden unpredictable changes in weather and occurrences of freak storms we are aware that there is no guarantee that mining contaminants stored in impoundment areas can be securely contained or isolated. We are also cognizant of the fact that what affects one body of water can affect other bodies of water in the larger underground systems. Flooding, heavy precipitation and rapid evaporation during warm weather also promote the escape of these toxins into air, soil and water.

At a time when Canada's fresh water supply is already at risk due to climate change we expect our NL Government to adhere to the precautionary principle and to include it in the minerals strategy so that decisions and actions will be taken with a strong consciousness of avoiding serious or irreversible environmental harm, even where scientific knowledge is insufficient or inconclusive. (www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Precautionary_principle)

Once again we commend government for its desire to advance our province toward a sustainable-resource future, and it is our hope that *A Minerals Strategy for Newfoundland and*

Labrador will provide the holistic approach needed to ensure the long-term viability of our invaluable natural resources.

We trust that you will be ever mindful of putting the value of life in all its forms before any form of profit. We cannot ever afford to exchange life for financial gain.

References:

Minerals Strategy Discussion Paper: www.gov.nl.ca/nr/mineralstrategy/mineralsstrategy.pdf

Chief Seattle's 1854 Speech on the environment www.savethefrogs.com/students/chief-seattle.html

Mining Watch Canada: www.miningwatch.ca/en/home/issue/metal-mining-effluent-regulations

John Muir :(www.nps.gov/jomu)

The United Nations World Water Development Report, WWDR:www.unesco.org/water/wwap/wwdr

www.wateryear2003.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=3129&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

Berry, Thomas. THE GREAT WORK: Our Way Into The Future. New York, Random House, Inc. 1999