

Northern Mineral Development : We All Need to Have Skin in the Game

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All stakeholders involved in northern mineral development have a role to play in positively advancing an industry that represents an opportunity for socio-economic development. Mining has the potential to bring self-sufficiency to the North; empower people with education, training, and employment; increase territorial revenues; and support infrastructure development. In the author's experience as an environmental assessment (EA) practitioner working on resource projects across Canada's north, elders have consistently stressed that their youth need the opportunities of a modern economy to be productive and raise healthy families. It is imperative that we explore how stakeholders can work together to support responsible northern development that values traditions and the environment.

Northern mineral development has over a 100-year heritage, with a handful of environmental legacies. However, it is mining's dirty history that has transformed it into a leader in environmental stewardship today. Regulatory regimes in the North are less than two decades old, involving made-in-the-north land use planning and EA processes that emphasize the integration of local knowledge and perspectives. Successful projects demonstrate sensitivity to northern concerns and maximize the involvement of, and support and benefit for local people.

Circumpolar regions are underexplored and present "low hanging fruit" for explorers, as they prospect with bedrock close to the ground surface. However, the remoteness from southern markets and populations, a lack of transportation infrastructure, short seasonal windows, and extreme cold make these regions expensive to explore and develop. Other challenges include typically scarce, pre-existing environmental baseline information, potential wealth of traditional knowledge to collect and consider, and communities that have limited experience with mining.

Who are the stakeholders? A "stakeholder" is an individual or a group with the potential to effect, or be affected by, a project. There are many stakeholders involved in a mining project, each aiming to maximize the potential benefit while minimizing undesirable effects. This includes communities, aboriginal organizations, interest groups, regulatory bodies, investors, customers, and of course the environment. Since there are often competing interests among stakeholders, responsible project development is about finding the right balance.

What can be done? There are structural improvements that can be made to organizations and regulatory processes that can make it easier to achieve responsible northern mineral development. Often it comes down to adopting a synergistic viewpoint.

Spend your client's money like it is your own: In the consulting world, long-term, trust-based relationships can be developed with clients when you spend their money like it is your own. In the world of northern community engagement and review processes, the default can be to focus on quantity. Stakeholders must understand that a company's resources are limited. We need to focus on content and quality rather than volume, with respect to engagement, documents, processes, mitigation measures, and monitoring programs.

Focus on what's really important, and use best management practices for the rest: Our main goal in an EA is to identify and address key issues by focusing on valued eco-systematic components (VECs). Too often, though, practitioners and regulators are reluctant to exclude anything, and thus the focus is on everything. Credit is due to the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board in the Northwest Territories for prescribing EA reports to focus on "key lines of inquiry" for the most significant issues, and allowing lighter treatment for "subjects of note" best addressed through environmental management commitments. More streamlined EA documents will reduce the burden on proponents, and the documents will be more readable and accessible to communities.

Ask not what are you going to do for me; seek win-win and synergize: It is commonplace for companies to negotiate agreements such as Impact and Benefit Agreements (IBAs) with local communities during the permitting process. In Nunavut, the successful negotiation of an IBA is a legislated requirement for any major project. These agreements commit money, training and employment, preferential business opportunities, compensation mechanisms for harvesting, and other benefits. It is just good business sense. However, often they can take an unreasonable amount of time and money to negotiate. An abbreviated negotiation process focused on fairness for both parties does not necessarily mean the receiving group will fall short on the benefits they might have otherwise received.

Mining is important to the circumpolar world, as the benefits are large within these small and remote economies. While northern individuals and organizations characteristically show a high level of cooperation, all stakeholders can better promote the sustainability and demonstrate that we all have skin in the game.

Knight Piésold is an international consulting company providing comprehensive engineering and environmental services for the mining, power, water resources, transportation, and construction sectors. Founded in South Africa in 1921, the company has expanded worldwide, with over 800 employees based in offices across five continents. Knight Piésold opened its first Canadian office in Vancouver in 1975, and currently employs over 160 people in Canada working on projects worldwide.

Richard Cook is a senior scientist in Knight Piésold's North Bay, Ontario office. He started his northern consulting career in Yellowknife, the Northwest Territories in 1995, and has been active in northern regulatory affairs, mining, and power projects since that time. He is a big fan of Stephen Covey's book, 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, and promotes the implementation of these concepts for better project outcomes. He proudly shares that his Inuit colleagues in the North Baffin region of Nunavut call him by his Inuktitut name, "Qunguya" meaning "smiley guy." •