

OPINION & COMMENT



The Politics of Mining

By Ann Katzenbach

A year ago, floods in two abandoned mines in the Patagonia Mountains pushed toxic mine waste into local streams. The PRT's front page carried a picture of the sludgy orange water running downhill, carrying heavy metals into Harshaw and Sonoita Creeks. Last week The Animas River in Colorado filled with a flood of similar heavy metals. This mess was huge. It wiped out a tourist industry, farming, drinking water and belief in the wisdom and expertise of the Environmental Protection Agency. The river, famous for trout fishing, rafting, and pristine beauty, will probably never be the same.

I've been to Silverton, Colorado, where this mess started. Like many tourists, I traveled up the narrow gauge railroad that runs along the Animas River. It was October and the aspen trees were golden. The town itself was small and bit forlorn, trying to base its economy on skiing and tourism. According to news accounts, in recent years the economy had perked up a bit with the arrival of EPA contractors doing mitigation on the Gold King Mine. How ironic that these workers who were helping a lit-

tle to boost the town's economy, released all the water from the mine tailings and essentially wiped out the town's economic base. It's a further irony that Silverton has refused the funds it would get as a superfund site because the town believed that such a stigma would hurt tourism.

Perhaps if it had taken the funds and the designation, the clean up would have had a better outcome. No telling. The fact is, the mess has been made, and tourism will decline in Silverton unless people come to see what a toxic waste area looks like.

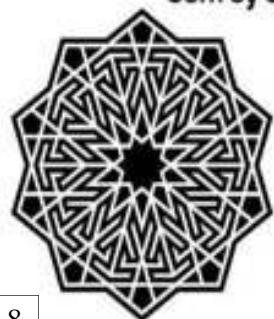
Arizona is full of abandoned mines. The mountains around Patagonia are listed as having about 60, not to mention the active Hermosa Mine off Harshaw Road. Old mines throughout the west, hastily closed up over the past hundred or more years, are leaking toxins into streams, polluting the soil, and poisoning grazing lands every day. The leaks are usually slow, but the acid that is leaching out is

powerful pollutant. Then, every once in awhile, a flood comes, or, as in the case of Silverton, a construction mistake happens, and we get to see in living color how nasty acid mine drainage is.

Everyone knows these old mines are a problem. Lots of taxpayer money gets spent on them every year. And yet, as we try to shore up these old mines, we are allowing modern mining companies to continue to break ground. They pay no royalties, can be headquartered anywhere on the globe, and have the right to mine on any federal land. The public has very little say in the matter, as Patagonia residents know. The deal the government makes with modern mining corporations is that they use modern methods to contain their mess -- not just today, but for thousands of years. The toxic spill earlier this year in Mexico was caused by a modern mining corporation. It polluted a river and farmland, destroyed aquatic life, and a "sorry about that" along with some fines made it all okay. Recent incident point to the fact that while mining provides some jobs, it also destroys whole economies.

The Mining Act of 1872 is the essential culprit. It encourages mining at the expense of everything else and really should have been changed decades ago. It remains in place because the corporations that benefit from it make sure it stays buried in the legislative detritus of Washington D.C. where most everything is for sale.

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