

Environmental

Mining among issues discussed at Earth Day Sustainability Fair

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The Wisconsin state legislature has been looking at reviving mining in Wisconsin as a way to improve the state economy.

Pro-mining advocates say this will provide employment opportunities and that mining today is much more efficient and safer and environmentally sound and culturally sensitive than in the past.

But many environmental activists and indigenous peoples are saying not so fast for redeveloping mining in Wisconsin, because there is no guarantee that some of the proposed mining projects are environmentally safe and many are also concerned that area Native American populations, in particular the Bad River Ojibwe, are also at risk.

One of those opposed to current mining projects is author and environmental and indigenous rights activist Al Gedricks.

Gedicks, an emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse; helped found and promote the Center for Alternative Mining Development Policy; produced the film "Keepers of the Water" about efforts of the Mole Lake tribe (and others) to prevent a zinc sulfide mine by Exxon Mobil that the tribe said would harm their wild rice beds; and has written the books "The New Resource Wars" and "Resource Rebels", the latter of which gets used in sustainability classes at the College of Menominee Nation (CMN).

With Earth Day coming up and growing concerns about what ecological and cultural impacts mines could bring to the state, CMN said Gedrick would be a good speaker to bring in for the environmentally-oriented holiday.

Contacts for Gedicks were made by CMN Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) student intern and Strategies for Environmental Education, Development and Sustainability (SEEDS) member Lloyd Frieson.

"I took Introduction to Sustainable Development and the professor (Dr. Bill Van Lopik) made us read the book 'Resource Rebels' and it actually made me want to change my degree I wanted to follow. After reading that book and taking that class one thing I am always fighting against is mining and pollution of water. I also saw 'Keepers of the Water' about fighting the Crandon mine and it was moving on how the big corporations just wanted to pollute all the waterways and they didn't care who they did it to and once they decided if they were not going to do it to Bad River might as well stick it in the Wisconsin River and then the non-native citizens said 'no we are not going allow this' so Al Gedicks is pretty much a hero of mine. I got his contact information, called him up and asked him if he would come and speak to CMN about the proposed mine up north and he said he would love to come over and do a presentation," Frieson said.

The idea of reviving mining in Wisconsin is nothing new, and Gedicks spent much of his presentation showing

the parallels he saw between the attempted Exxon mine construction in Crandon near the Wolf River and Mole Lake tribe in the 1980s and 1990s and the most recent mining plan of an open pit sulfide mine by Gogebetic Taconite (G-TAC) in the Penokee Hills region of Iron County Wisconsin, which he fears will effect both waterways and wild rice (in particular the Kakagon Sloughs) and subsequently the way of life of the Bad River Ojibwe.

Although some of the tribes located in Eastern Wisconsin may not directly be effected by G-TAC as they were by Crandon, Gedicks said this was only the beginning and if it was successful, soon mining would appear elsewhere throughout the state.

"The other projects are waiting in the wings to see what happens with the Penokee Hills projects and they are gold mining projects in Marathon County; around Wausau and Taylor County in the Chequamegon National Forest; and on the Menominee River right across the state line in Stephenson, Michigan".

The Menominee River project, known as the Front 40 project, was of particular concern to a few audience members, because they feared that if a mine went up here thousands of Menominee artifacts, as well as Ho Chunk and Potawatomi artifacts, would be destroyed.

Fortunately, for the anti-mine crowd for the time being, a grassroots organization called "The Back 40" has managed to stall efforts for the time being.

The proposed G-TAC mine is an open pit strip mine that will cover 22,000 acres of the Penokee Gobetic range, 22 miles of which will be in Ashland and Iron Counties (on the Wisconsin side of the Michigan-Wisconsin border), which is one of the largest undeveloped low grade iron taconite resources in the United States; and would be developed in stages the first phase of which would be a little more than four miles long, a third of a mile wide and 900 feet deep and this phase will be mined for about 35 years, most of the money to do this coming from private funds.

One of the major ecological concerns Gedicks had was what a possible mine could do to wetlands in the area.

"To get some sense of the critical ecological impact of this project all you have to do is look at the wetlands that are on both sides of the Penokee Hills. These are wetlands which under the proposed now-existing iron mining bill G-TAC can dump waste into which contains sulfide mineralization and releases heavy metals in a wetland which had previously been protected under the category Special Natural Resource Wetlands, recognized as such because of their direct connection to the groundwater systems and their ecological function as purifying water that flows into the Kakagon Sloughs which is where the Bad River tribe harvest their wild rice and they eventually drain into Lake Superior," Gedicks said, adding that this one thing that stoped the Crandon mine.

"Once you have sulfate mineralizations that release acid and release heavy



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Al Gedicks (standing) makes some comparisons between the proposed G-TAC mine near the Bad River Reservation and the proposed Crandon mine near Mole Lake in the 1980s and 1990s.

metals into the environment you have a biological dead zone: there are no fish, there are no plants, there is no life that grows in these areas and we know from experiences in the Western United States 12,000 miles of rivers and streams have already been contaminated by acid mine drainage and there is no question about what happens when you expose sulfide minerals to the environment, especially in a water rich environment, you get biological dead zone."

Gedicks also pointed out that wild rice, a staple food of the Bad River Ojibwe tribe was also at a major risk to be destroyed because of mining waste.

"Given this kind of chemistry and geologically of the deposit it is no accident that Bad River Chair Mike Wiggins is concerned that the discharge from this mine would go into the Bad River Watershed and threaten the tribes wild rice that grows in Kakagon Sloughs, which is one of the largest undeveloped freshwater estuaries in the world which is biologically important to all sorts of species as well as to the largest stand of wild rice in Lake Superior and is a forage for wildlife and a food source for the Ojibwe people," Gedicks said.

"We don't have to theorize about what the impact of acid mine drainage is on a freshwater estuary or on wild rice, all we have to do is look at our neighbor in Minnesota because on the Mesabi Iron Ore Range where they mined taconite for decades the dumped taconite waste at the headwaters of the St. Louis River watershed and now because of the discharge of sulfates and heavy metals into the St. Louis River watershed we have a 100 mile long wild rice dead zone in the St. Louis River."

Besides wild rice, there are also concerns about the raising of dangerous mercury levels in fish, which are another major food source of Native American people and also concerns about how the mining waster disposal would effect the freshwater in Lake Superior.

"The Penokee Hills is the recharge aquifer for the Bad River watershed. Any dislodgment or mountain top removal of Penokee Hills is going to effect dozens of Class I trout streams that flow through the Penokee Hills and provide the recharge for the groundwater that the people in Ashland and the Bad River Reservation depend on," Gedicks said.

Gedicks also reviewed the bumpy political process of getting mining

approved after a couple of years, and said it blatantly discriminated against Native Americans, public participation and existing environmental regulations and showed some similar parallels with the proposed Crandon mine; and that if mining was done it would mostly be automated, so there probably weren't that many jobs nor regional prosperity to be had.

Before Gedricks speech there were also several other booths visited by the general public emphasizing the importance of natural resources and the needs to protect them on display throughout the Keshena CMN Cultural Building.

"About a month ago we as a department (SDI) started planning and brainstorming Earth Day ideas and we know we wanted to have some focus around climate change and mining and the effect that that would have the environment," said Julie Edler of SDI.

The booths contained things like a quiz about water and water quality; a pledge for patrons to sign about how they would be more environmentally conscious in making decisions; and making seed bursts.

A couple booths also represented groups at the college such as the SDI or the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES).

The S. Verna Fowler Public Library also had a booth where it distributed library cards and the children's books "Juan and the Jackalope" and "Crusin the Fossil Freeway".

During the entire fair portion of the program, the global warming/climate change documentary "Thin Ice: The Story Behind Climate Science" also played (earlier in the day people could also view the documentary at the library) as part of a wider release of the film worldwide.

"There are a lot of politicians out there who are saying climate science is bunk and there is no real science behind climate science and the filmmaker checked with all the scientists who are working out in they field. So he documented what all these scientists were doing and how they were coming up with these ideas," said SDI members Skyler Martin in giving an overview of the film.

Throughout the night there were also raffle drawings for the patrons, prizes usually being plants and/or T-shirts from the SDI.