Skiing the Chuitna coal prospect

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From A Long Trek Home: 4,000 Miles by Boot, Raft, and Ski (/Book.php) , published by Mountaineers Books in October 2009, about our Wild Coast journey (/WildCoast.php)

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On the far side of Knik Arm, after our days-long detour, we looked south- west along a line of snowy volcanoes rising above the coastal marshes of Cook Inlet. We had passed the northernmost point of our journey. We had left the road net behind. And that line of volcanoes would lead us along the Alaska Peninsula and eventually to the Aleutian Islands.

In the inlet, flaming skeletons of distant drill rigs stood on the horizon–spooky silhouettes against a sickly yellow sunset. Snow-machine tracks ran over the buried natural gas pipeline, leaving an icy corridor for us to ski. We counted down the miles to the Beluga power plant: 19, 17, 15,…7, 5, 3, 1…

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It loomed over us in the dark–a monstrous contraption of concrete and pipes, spookily lit by industrial yellow-orange lamps. We had to shout to hear each other over the constant screeching metallic howl. The largest power plant in Alaska, the Beluga natural gas plant powers a good chunk of the state's "rail belt" power grid, with Anchorage at its heart. But gas isn't the only fossil carbon beneath the hills of Beluga.

The Chuitna Coal Mine (/WildResource/Issues/ChuitnaCoalMine.html)

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The Chuitna coal prospect is a proposal by PacRim Coal to build a large strip mine on the western side of Cook Inlet, near the Chuitna River and the communities of Tyonek and Beluga.

If built, the project is expected to employ around 350 people, and provide over 350 million dollars in tax revenue to the state of Alaska and the Kenai Peninsula Borough over 25 years.

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The proposal is opposed by many local residents and environmental groups - who are concerned about the project's local impact on fish, wildlife, and human health, and about the global impact of increased coal use.

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Some hope Alaska will become the "Saudi Arabia of coal." Others fear it. An eighth (/WildResource/Issues/HowMuchCoal.html) of the world's coal reserves lie beneath the Alaskan wilderness–half of the coal in the United States. The largest deposits lie in the northwest Arctic (/WildResource/Issues/WesternArcticCoalDeposits.html). Most of the rest can be found in the Cook Inlet basin. And almost all of it is still in the ground.

But if PacRim Coal, LP, has its way, that coal won't stay in the ground. Ten miles from Beluga, we switchbacked on our skinless skis to the top of a small and rounded hill, covered with twisted birch. All around us similar hills popped up from a rumpled landscape of frozen wetlands, meadows, and ponds. It could all become a strip mine.

The proposed Chuitna Coal Mine (/WildResource/Issues/ChuitnaCoalMine.html) would obliterate eight square miles of landscape. Everything we could see would be bulldozed, mined, and drained, including eleven miles of salmon-spawning streams. If it goes through, it will be the first time a large mine in Alaska is allowed to mine right through salmon-bearing waters. Giant pumps would dewater the ground, dumping seven

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million gallons of mine runoff per day into the Chuitna River. From the mine to the inlet, crushed coal would rattle for miles down a half-open conveyor belt, potentially scattering coal dust across the land. Twelve million tons of coal per year.

From the residents of Beluga, we heard a litany of fears and concerns about the project's potential consequences (/WildResource/Issues/CoalImpacts.html)--for the salmon they caught in the Chuitna River and Cook Inlet beyond, for the endangered beluga whales of the inlet, for their businesses, their food, and their health. Listening to them, I also wondered about consequences further afield. Alaska doesn't burn much coal now, and exports the excess from the state's only coal mine as far away as Chile. What happens when the coal is burned? Carbon dioxide will rise into the atmosphere, warming our world, melting the glaciers of the Lost Coast, perhaps hastening the decline of the toads in Southeast Alaska, and helping the spruce bark beetle in its battle with the trees.

When we were in Beluga, in early 2008, PacRim Coal was submitting its final permit applications, which would set off the official review process. Only a few small clues hinted at this land's potential future: orange survey stakes, a weather station, the landing tracks of a helicopter surrounded by snowshoe prints from biologists checking a fish-trap, stray bits of bright pink flagging tape. It was hard to imagine what it might become.

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We climbed a bluff above the Chuitna River, feeling the warmth of the sun on our backs, looking out over the crinkled folds of the river gorge and the craggy mass of Mount Spurr rising behind it. The brown dot of a moose crossed the river below us. Long shadows of scraggly spruce bent over the rounded contours of snow-filled gullies. Our skis swished through a thin layer of powder on top of a hard crust of gleaming icy snow. It was the first truly beautiful skiing we'd had all winter.

Leaving Chuitna behind, we headed over the mountains–toward Lake Iliamna and another potential mine (/Issues/MetalsMining/PebbleMine.html).

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