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## Diamond Mining Impact on People, Wildlife in NWT of Canada

Feb 13, 2009 2:53 PM By Marc Choyt

**RAPAPORT...** The following interview was graciously shared with Rapaport News by jeweler *Marc Choyt*, whom many of you may also know as an advocate for the fair trade diamond and jewelry cause.

**Introduction:**

During the past few years, the Canadian diamond industry has branded itself as a perfect "guilt-free choice" for the progressive consumer, often to the consternation of those committed to creating benefit through African diamonds. Though no conflict diamonds are coming from Canada, every diamond has an impact, no matter where it comes from.

Tracey Williams, trustee for the Canadian National Parks and Wilderness Society, has been living in a community near the diamond mines since 1999 and has extensive experience within First Nation communities. This interview provides a firsthand account on the effect of massive strip-mining in the tundra on both Natives and wildlife.

**Marc Choyt:** For many months now, I've been trying to get a firsthand understanding of what is taking place in the Canadian diamond sector.

**Tracey Williams:** For you as jeweler, this is a question of gradients. You have to have a source of gemstones that you can use and that can be consistently supplied, a quality product that you can feel good about.

**Marc:** I interviewed a wildlife biologist, Kim Poole, last May. He told me that the mines are very well managed.

**Tracey:** When Kim says that Canadian diamond mines are heavily regulated and heavily looked after, I think that overall, the regulatory process in Canada is as about intelligent on most points as it gets. But one thing to keep in mind: It all depends upon what is enforced and enforceable. You have all these things written down, and that is only as good as the ability to uphold what is put down in principle. In the Northwest Territories (NWT), the Canadian government and the aboriginal people have made some mistakes in dealing with the companies. But aboriginal people have put themselves in a position of authority. They are continually coming back with political clout to assure certain agreements have been signed. So far, diamond mining companies have been adhering more or less to these.

**Marc:** More or less...You're implying then that enforcement is, perhaps, inconsistent?

**Tracey:** There are impact and benefit agreements; these are socio-economic agreements that include training and work quotas that have to be met. They might come in once or twice a year and take pictures to make you think that they are actually there every day, making sure that the environmental standards are being strictly enforced. They are putting much more into the market the image of uprightness than the actuality. But when you compare and contrast, there are people far and away in much worse situations — such as the Navajo. The courts in Canada are strongly aligned with First Nation rights and treaty. That is one thing that is going in favor for First Nations people in Canada. The Territories are an interesting anomaly to North America. They have learned from the context of other places.

**Marc:** As mines opened, have all the companies that mine diamonds more or less followed the same procedures?

**Tracey:** De Beers has a big project that they want to develop, which is in a watershed flowing through a 32,000-square-kilometer (12,355-square-mile) study area, for one of Canada's next

major protected areas. People here are not into that [the new diamond project]. De Beers are upholding every environmental assessment but they were working hard to avoid the higher level of review, which is a paneled environmental impact review (EIR). This community said, no you won't avoid this review, and regional regulatory authorities sided with the communities. This community has been very good about doing their homework. But they have a constant battle to uphold their rights.

De Beers just opened the third diamond mine in the NWT, and are planning a fourth project, Gacho Kue. The people here have a lot of strategic thinkers and fighters and are not interested in seeing that through. The indigenous people have one advocate within the governmental structure here they can depend on: The courts acknowledge treaty rights. Those rights are tied to land tenure.

**Marc:** What is your involvement with these communities?

**Tracey:** I work with elders and community researchers on land issues, traditional land use, mapping and collecting oral history for various projects in all kinds of ways. My work is to assist community people to exercise the will of the people, the elders.

**Marc:** Are these groups more or less aligned in their views?

**Tracey:** Every community is different in the territories, but there is a universal trait. They are all very passionate about their connection to the land they walk on. It is obvious, and still practiced. That there is nothing more true. I have witnessed it, seen it. I know young leaders, and worked with up-and-coming leaders. The elders had their own hard decisions to make. Their biggest conflicts were around questions like: Do I take the payment that the government is offering me and send my kids to residential school or do I keep them here within their culture and language? What I can offer them in terms of future if they cannot walk the two cultures? Younger leaders today essentially have similar struggles, but they have more outside influence of contemporary North American cultural persuasion and influence to contend with. Consumer culture is a strong force. These influences take time away from language transmission or being on the land. The values espoused there, on TV, in movies and video games, are not ones necessarily aligned with traditional or contemporary understandings of First Nations culture.

What matters most. What the companies do when they come into an area is to find those people who will be allied with their points of view of how economic development is going to proceed. Then they separate them from people who see the need for other uses, less tangible to immediate economic gain, [for] the land. The companies try their best to fragment the communities.

In the best-case scenario, the chief and councils are strong enough to organize their community to make a stand for reasonable economic development with their interests represented. A cornerstone of community consultation is illustrated by the proposed McKenzie Valley Gas pipeline's Berger inquiries. This was famous in terms of indigenous social justice, and it happened in the early 1970s. The proposed oil and gas pipeline was to run from the Arctic Ocean along the McKenzie River to Edmonton. A federal commission was to write a report to Premier and ministries. It took three years to do the full review. Judge Berger held hearings in every single one of the 35 communities in the McKenzie Valley and listened to the elders, everyone. It was the first time that oral history was considered testimony. From listening to everyone, Judge Berger made many recommendations. These included that a string of protected areas be created along the valley to protect threatened species, that the pipeline proposal be postponed for ten years due to the considerable harm it would inflict on communities, that the construction phase would be the bulk of jobs for people, that no long-term employment projections were realistic.

**Marc:** How are the communities impacted by the diamond mines?

**Tracey:** The mines here are not directly adjacent to daily community life, yet the environmental impacts to their traditional lands, in their watersheds, are felt; people still use and eat food harvested from the land. Concern over environmental degradation of their land causes considerable real stress to all members of the community. They work at the mines. They try to maintain consistent family life, with one parent usually on a schedule of two weeks on, two weeks off. This is difficult. But they also see the fact that these forces of development and mining are huge and they have to get the most out of mining companies as they possibly can. In some cases, what they are getting now is too little, particularly with BHP — the Ekati Mine. This was the first diamond mine in the NWT and in Canada. It broke up the community because some people may say the Impact Benefit Agreement (IBA) is just a form of bribery.

The corporation or multinational is now expected to negotiate an IBA with the impacted

community. IBAs are basically socio-economic agreements between the company and the aboriginal government whose traditional territory is under mineral exploration or development. The fact the IBAs exist now is seen as real progress, but the first IBAs were signed before people understood the real money coming out of the mines. Again, IBAs are only as good as they are negotiated and enforced by the First Nations or aboriginal group signing onto them.

**Marc:** What about the environmental impact of these first mines?

**Tracey:** The real issue here is contamination; these diamond mines are on the tundra impairing water quality and all that survive on the water indefinitely into the future. The tundra is very fragile — permafrost. Putting a town in the middle of tundra which is dependent on diesel generators — you can only imagine how much fuel is required to be shipped in, not to mention every single repair, supplies, food for 300 people in a moonscape situation in winter. It is crazy, what they have managed to create in a tundra landscape. It's all about the ice road trucker, driving across the tundra. When you have a strip mine you have all kinds of impacts — roads and infrastructure, waste water, spills of oil and gas, the dust from trucks driving up from the pits 24 hours a day, and the oxidizing waste rock piles...what they do to the water and acidification of the water, to the aquatic life, is monumental. With diamond mining, you don't have the more-well known toxic chemical separation processes, but you are using high amounts of energy, using generators, and there is water contamination.

These are universal traits to strip-mining the world over. Unless you are panning in alluvial deposits for the gems, you are looking at crazy underground mines or strip mining. On the tundra, the impact of the footprint of one diamond mine on ecological habitat is enormous.

Plus, these mines are often located in the center of world's ribbon of northern boreal forest. The caribou herds, in great number, are incredible feats of nature. The sheer numbers of mammals moving together in a great pattern from boreal forest to the tundra to the shores of the Arctic Ocean every year is astonishing. These mines are in the midst of those migration patterns.

**Marc:** What other issues are there?

**Tracey:** One of the boons to mining industry here in the Territories is the amount of water available. No one else is using it. No other players. Enforcement is dicey. You are out there on your own. You can do pretty much what you want. If something spills and there is an accident — who knows?

That said, there are pretty good environmental controls and independent boards to oversee scientific data, which include aboriginal traditional knowledge and scientific experts to uphold standards. But acid mine drainage (ADM) is a real issue, affecting pH levels, and thus all life in the water. Although water-quality monitoring is taken seriously — all the various quantities are measured, so if something falls out of acceptable limits there are levels of alarm that can be raised — there is a tremendous amount of uncertainty around predicting ADM rates. Acid generation may not start up at a mine site for decades and persist for literally hundreds of years. Certain polymers in the processed kimberlite — the rock formation diamonds in the rough are found in — have also been proven toxic to life in the water column, the aquatic food chain.

At least in Canada, we have independent boards respected by mining — aboriginal groups in technical panels to review regular environmental monitoring reports made by industrial environmental teams. That being said, the impact of the mine-site footprint on the tundra environment can't be underestimated. BHP and Diavik Diamond mines found that biological technicians were reporting there was just an incredible enticement that the mines posed to the animals.

**Marc:** Enticements?

**Tracey:** The wolverine population — the home range of a wolverine is very, very large, several hundred square kilometers on the tundra. There must have been 12 or 13 wolverines attracted to the site one season that I was reviewing documents from mines on the subject — they have an incredibly large territory. For that many wolverines to be attracted by the mine by the foraging opportunities, into one area, for scavenging around the footprint of the mine site, is a huge impact on their behavior and habitat. That happens year after year — the actual mine site poses a gigantic impact to the tundra ecology and to wolverines in particular.

**Marc:** Are there other examples?

**Tracey:** Concerning the mine as a huge scavenging opportunity for other animals, foxes and bears are trapped in varying numbers as well at mine sites. The caribou herds' —

in particular the Bathurst Herd and Beverly Herd —migration patterns and herd size have definitely been impacted. A researcher affiliated with the Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation, whose elders and hunters actually helped to conduct one of the latest surveys of the Bathurst Herd. It was very labor intensive, a tremendous amount of flight time over incredible distances, and involved a lot data crunching. You can only do a certain percentage of their territory. Herd numbers are at an all-time low. Very costly and difficult to complete — often due to weather — aerial surveys are practically the best tool to assess their health and overall population as a herd. The Beverly barren land caribou herd size, recently surveyed in the fall of 2008, reported numbers shockingly low.

Changes in herd size fluctuate and herds will shift in distribution, but there is real concern around the fact that human activity could speed up decline in population size of the herds. The mines are right in the middle of their migration patterns. I believe that mines are partially playing a part, and probably a significant part, in the reduction of the survey numbers. Yet when people purchase a Canadian diamond, they are buying it often because they feel it is a conflict-free, ethical diamond that isn't negatively impacting the environment. You can only hold that view that Canadian diamonds are the conflict-free choice if conflict is defined purely as war, and class politics as played out in the motion picture "Blood Diamond".

This is a process of education. People are manipulating the system to assure themselves a slice of the market. It may take some jostling to uncover, to get the lenses focused right, to bring out the fuller picture so that the consumer better understands their choices.

So conflict-free doesn't take into consideration the contamination and pollution of air, water and land, often in some of the most pristine places held sacred to indigenous peoples the globe over, the damage to watersheds and the complexity of "fixing" the ecological damage left in its wake. Persistent problems left after the short life of the mine is over, of strip-mining or deep underground mining, will be left for our children to endure. The impact to quality of ecological life is serious.



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