Dear Livain Michaud,

I am writing to request that you reject Taseko Mines Ltd.'s proposed “New Prosperity” gold-copper mine project in the Tsilqot'in nen [the territory of the Tsilhqot'in (Chilcotin) people].

Through my experience as a researcher of ethnoecology, with particular regards to my Master of Science research involving members of the Xeni Gwet'in band of the Tsilhqot'in First Nation, I feel qualified to comment on the physical and spiritual dependence of the Tsilhqot'in people, including elders and youth, to the land within their traditional territory. This traditional territory includes both Fish Lake and Little Fish Lake, both of which are, as you are aware, threatened by the development of the “New Prosperity” mine.

The Xeni Gwet'in community is located in a very isolated part of British Columbia. The Tsilhqot'in language is largely intact within this community and it is one of the few indigenous communities in British Columbia where the indigenous language is spoken on a regular basis in day-to-day life. Many Xeni Gwet'in elders do not speak English at all. I have personally observed this in my time spent at the Xeni Gwet'in Band offices as well as my time interviewing elders, which often required the use of an interpreter. Most people in the community derive at least part of their sustenance from the natural resources within their territory. Culturally, their stories and history are inextricably tied to the land. For more information on this topic I suggest you read my thesis or the thesis of Linda Smith (a Tsilhqot'in member). I have provided references for these documents at the end of this letter. The Xeni Gwet'in and the larger Tsilhqot'in community (as well as many non-indigenous residents of the region) have come together, to (repeatedly) vocalize that destroying this landscape, even a part of it, will irreversibly destroy the aspects of their culture and heritage that are tied to that particular piece of land.

Xeni Gwet'in representatives are elected by the community not only to govern all members but also to protect their most vulnerable members. In the case of the “New Prosperity” mine these most vulnerable members are certainly the elders and the children. Xeni Gwet'in elders are sacred within their community. They should be sacred to all Canadians, including you our politicians, given the extensiveness and depth of their local knowledge. Xeni Gwet'in elders are deeply disturbed by the “New Prosperity” mine proposal. Imagine what it would be like for a large company to create a plan that involved destroying Basilique Notre Dame in Montreal or Parliament Hill in Ottawa or your personal home where your ancestors lived for centuries and where you continue to raise your children. I can scarcely believe that any of you would not find this disturbing.

The Xeni Gwet'in leaders are also elected to protect and give voice to the children within their community. These children's lives are at a crossroads. Their leaders are working hard to develop a natural resource based economy in their region that is economically and culturally sustainable in the long-term (“long-term” here meaning much longer than the 20 year project proposed by

[References provided at the end of the letter]
the “New Prosperity” mine project). The Xeni Gwet'in First Nation is uniquely positioned, given their relatively intact language, culture and landscape, to create an local, small-scale resource based economy that can support many generations to come. Large-scale resource development such as that proposed by the “New Prosperity” mine has the potential to unravel a healthy, vibrant and functional First Nations community, a community that could otherwise stand as an example and inspiration for other First Nations communities who, as you must be aware, are struggling with the degradation of their local languages, cultures and local economies.

Xeni Gwet'in and Tsilhqot'in objection to the “New Prosperity” mine project (as well as its previous incarnations) does not represent a case of a few vocal members of a community hijacking an issue in order to advance their personal objectives and opinions. I have personally witnessed, as an outsider working within this community, that this is the case of a community coming together to seriously consider the benefits and implications of proposed economic development within their territory and deciding after much careful deliberation that they will be best served by rejecting large-scale resource development and instead protecting that which is most sustaining to them: their culture, history and land. In making this decision they stand to provide their children with a culturally and biologically rich landscape upon which to build a long-term sustainable economy.

For Canada to approve the New Prosperity Mine would be deeply shameful and hypocritical not only with regards to the substantial environmental concerns as raised by the original environmental assessment panel (I am sure you are all well aware of the results and recommendations of this first panel) but also, importantly, in terms of Canada's changing relationship with aboriginal peoples. As I am sure you are aware Canada has endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and taken verbatim from Canada's own Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development website: “Canada reaffirms its commitment to promoting and protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples at home and abroad.” (accessed February 21, 2012). The following is not a rhetorical question but, rather, a question that I would like taken seriously and answered: Is it possible to both approve an application for large-scale resource development as represented in the “New Prosperity” mine proposal, which has been wholly rejected by the Xeni Gwet'in First Nations Government as well as the entire Tsilhqot'in Nation, while at the same time maintain “a commitment to promoting and protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples at home and abroad?”

For further reading:

Smith, L. R. 2008. Suwh-t'egheduninh: the Tsinlhqut’in Niminh Spiritual Path. Master of arts, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC.


Thank for your consideration of my concerns.
Sincerely,
Carla Mellott
<personal information removed>