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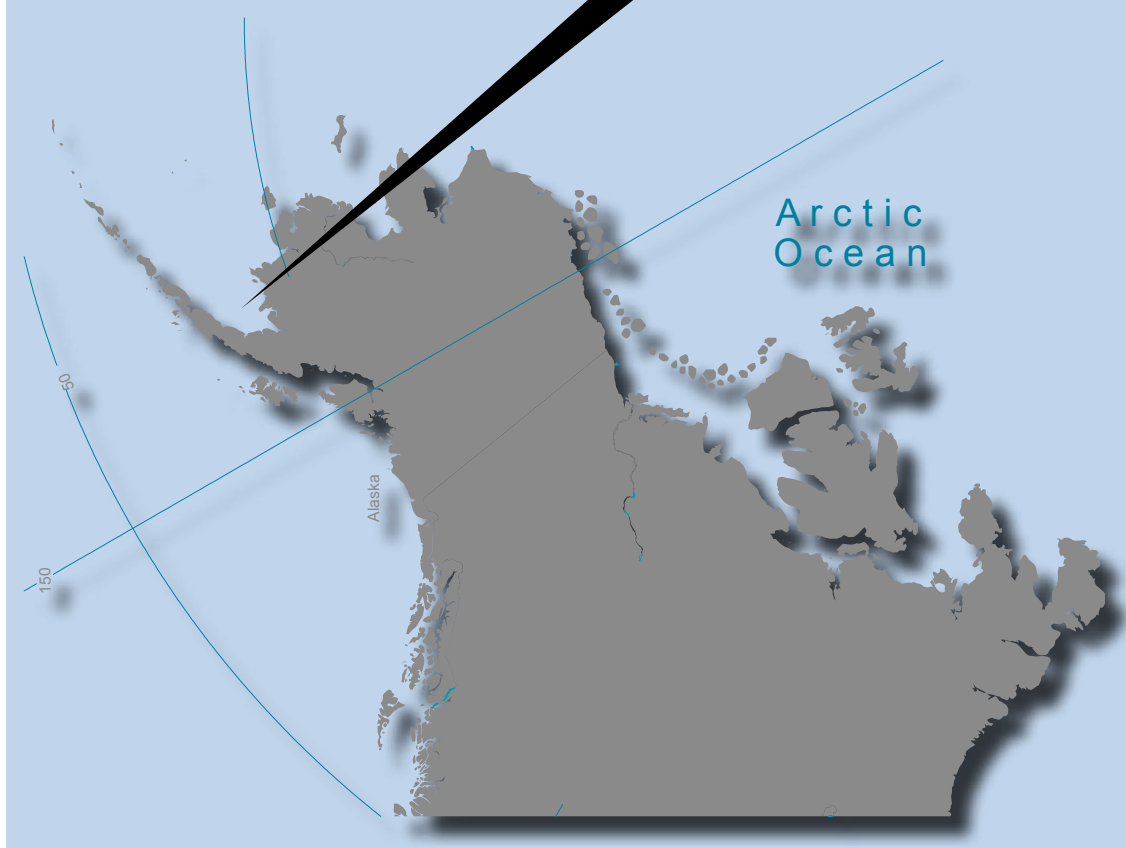
Bryce Butner

“Welcome to Alaska,” he said upon reaching the apex of the pass. This was an odd remark for my hiking partner to make, I thought. He knows that I’ve been in the state for nearly three weeks now. I’ve seen Denali, I’ve fished the fabled Naknek River and I’ve eaten my fair share of wild Alaskan salmon. As I gazed down upon Raven Glacier, a sulking mass of ice, slowly inching toward the valley floor, it occurred to me why I was still seen as a newcomer in Alaska.

A welcome is warranted every day in Alaska because each day is an adventure, a new place or a new natural phenomenon.

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Bristol Bay, Alaska



## OVER OUR DEAD SALMON: ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT IN THE LAST FRONTIER

Alaska is a land with unlimited opportunity for exploration and discovery, a land where one could visit a new locale every day for a lifetime and never see it all.

With the help of the Burch Fellowship, I traveled to this land of natural plenty to investigate how such



immense amounts of natural splendor are parceled out, how precious natural resources are actually harvested and how environmental preservation and, inversely, environmental development, happen on a grassroots level. The development of resources, particularly in an ecologically pristine area like Alaska, does not simply happen overnight, nor is it the decision of just one person. Rather, there is a complex process by which the development occurs.

Ecological impact, profitability, cultural consequences, local sentiment and legality are only a few of the factors within the intricate web of decision-making that occurs before development. I wanted to be at ground zero of a major environmental conflict. I wanted to immerse myself in a controversial development process and witness the workings firsthand. What better place than the last frontier?

The focus of my project was the Pebble Mine, a proposed open-pit mine located in Bristol Bay, Alaska, a remote region in the southwest part of the state, far off the road system. The Pebble Mine project is an extremely large copper, gold and molybdenum deposit with an estimated value of \$300 billion. The Pebble Partnership, an Alaskan limited partnership between mining giant Northern Dynasty Minerals and junior mining company Anglo American, is spearheading the development of the massive deposit. Although the project is still in the exploratory phase and drilling for ore has not yet begun, outcry against the mine is immense. Not only does Bristol Bay boast rich mineral supplies, but it is also home to the world’s largest run of sockeye salmon, a legendary migration that many feel is threatened



are changing as modern technology slowly begins to reach rural Alaska. The next stop on my journey was Iliamna, Alaska, a small community further inland than Naknek and Dillingham. Because residents of Iliamna do not have the fishing economy of the coastal villages, the community has become a stronghold of Pebble Mine support. After spending weeks in the middle of the fight against the Pebble Mine, it was

by the Pebble Mine. Bristol Bay salmon and the scale of their runs are not only an obvious symbol of the region’s environmental purity, but they are also an integral part of the economy and culture of the area.

It appeared to be a classic “jobs vs. the environment” controversy only on a much grander scale and with the world’s largest sockeye salmon run thrown in the mix to heighten the stakes. As a student of journalism and the outdoors I had to investigate the issue for myself. My goal was to film a short documentary that would shed light on both sides of the controversy, offering both the pro and anti-Pebble Mine camps an opportunity to state their case.

My journey started in Anchorage, Alaska, the state’s largest city and a hub for scientists, politicians and activists involved in the struggle. Here I devoted the majority of my time to interviewing everyone from museum curators to fisheries biologists to environmental nonprofit workers. Days full of interviews and late nights debating the issue with my host gave me the knowledge I needed before I embarked on Naknek, Alaska, right in the heart of Bristol Bay.

Naknek is a town that thrives on salmon. The community’s population nearly quadruples each summer as commercial fishermen flock to the fishing grounds for the summer sockeye runs. Here I immersed myself in the fishing culture and tried to understand how the Pebble Mine project is perceived by those who make their living from the salmon. Not only did I gain insight into the perspectives of many fishermen perspectives, but I also learned about the life of rural Alaska, a world previously unknown to me. From Naknek, I traveled to Dillingham, Alaska. Though larger than Naknek, Dillingham is a community whose lifeblood is also

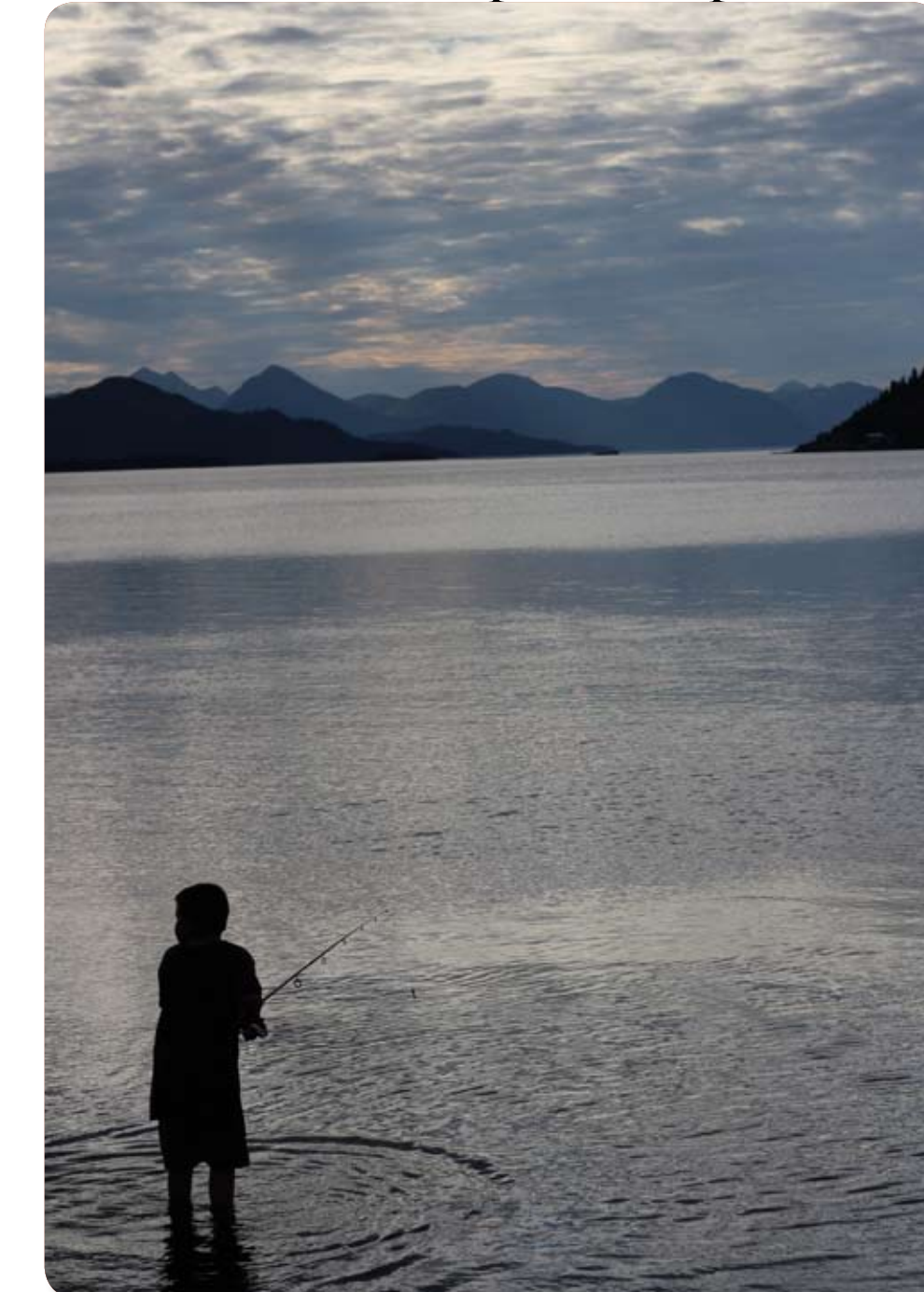
the fishing industry. Here I spent time with native Alaskans whose subsistence depends on salmon and the other animals they harvest for food. I had the pleasure of learning firsthand about the cultural significance of subsistence hunting and fishing techniques as well as how these techniques

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disorienting and confusing to enter a world where Pebble Mine is welcomed with open arms. Propaganda and dramatic rhetoric surrounds this controversy, so the opportunity for real one-on-one interaction with the people of Iliamna provided amazing justification for their beliefs, beliefs that I previously viewed as outrageous.

The Burch Fellowship seeks to enable students to pursue a passionate



interest in a way not otherwise possible. For me, it did so much more. I pursued my passion for outdoor journalism to an extreme degree, but the travel, learning, arguing, researching exploring that came along with the project taught me about so much more than journalism. I learned deeply about culture, economics, poverty and how inextricably bound the natural world is to all that we do. Perhaps the most amazing thing about my Burch Fellowship experience was how I came to understand both sides of a debate so wholly. My complete immersion in both camps gave me an unprecedented understanding of each angle. In many cases, my understanding was far more nuanced than actual devotees to the pro- or anti-Pebble Mine sides. Armed with the knowledge and experience I gained through my Burch Fellowship experience, I hope to continue to work in the field of outdoor journalism, encouraging awareness of environmental concern as well as open discourse about how to use our natural resources in responsible, sustainable ways.

