



Giant Mine Monster – Backgrounder

Yellowknives Dene First Nation Launch Renewed Call for Giant Mine Apology and Compensation

December 2, 2020

This Background reflects our knowledge at this time and our work is ongoing to gather additional information.

Before the Giant Mine

The Yellowknives Dene people have occupied and used an extensive area around Tı Ndeè, or Great Slave Lake, in what is now Canada’s Northwest Territories, since time immemorial.

The west side of Yellowknife Bay, where the Giant Mine site and the City of Yellowknife are today, was particularly important to the Yellowknives Dene for harvesting, cultural and spiritual practices. The Yellowknives Dene protected this area by establishing their villages on the east side of the bay and preserving “the store,” as Elders still call it today, on the west side, for hunting and gathering purposes.

Treaty 8

Canada and the Yellowknives Dene signed Treaty 8 in 1900. The Yellowknives Dene understood Treaty 8 to be a peace and friendship agreement that did not affect their ownership and control of their traditional territory or limit their ability to harvest animals throughout it. Treaty 8’s boundaries did not include Yellowknives’ territory north of Great Slave Lake.

Subsequent efforts by Canada to impose hunting restrictions led to the 1920 Treaty Boycott in which the Yellowknives Dene chief led others from around Great Slave Lake in refusing to accept Treaty payments to protest what they viewed as Canada’s infringement on their rights and way of life.

According to oral history, the 1920 Treaty Boycott forced Canada to abide by the terms of Treaty 8 as understood by the Yellowknives Dene and to agree to protect the Yellowknives Dene’s harvesting rights within an area drawn on a map by Chief “Susie” Drygeese. Three years later, Canada created a 70,000-square-mile hunting preserve in the heart of Yellowknives Dene territory for the exclusive use of Indigenous harvesters--the Yellowknife Preserve.

Yellowknives Dene oral history says the Yellowknife Preserve’s boundaries were based on the map drawn by Chief Drygeese in 1920. The Yellowknives Dene understood that Canada created the Preserve in order to fulfill its Treaty promise to protect Yellowknives Dene harvesting rights from encroachment.

The Yellowknife Preserve

As soon as the Yellowknife Preserve was established in 1923, prospectors started lobbying Canada to loosen its restrictions. Canada began limiting the Preserve's protections in 1926. By the 1930s senior officials in Ottawa stated the Yellowknife Preserve was incompatible with mining, which they saw as critical to Northern development.

At the same time, the Territory's prospecting boom became increasingly focused on the west shore of Yellowknife Bay in the rich harvesting area the Yellowknives Dene had used and protected for untold generations.

In the early 1940s, Canada bowed again to pressure from the mining interests driving Yellowknife's growth, granting non-Indigenous residents special permission to hunt within a 210-square-mile area of the Yellowknife Preserve surrounding Yellowknife. A few years later, Canada removed these areas from the Yellowknife Preserve entirely, including the site of the newly operational Giant Mine.

In 1949, Canada transferred responsibility for the Yellowknife Preserve to the Northwest Territories Council, a body of federal bureaucrats and appointees overseeing the Territory's affairs from Ottawa.

In 1955, the Council summarily abolished the Yellowknife Preserve. No record of consultation or discussion with the Yellowknives Dene on this decision has been found.

The Giant Mine Monster

Established at claims staked in 1935, the Giant Mine site spans the west side of Yellowknife Bay, from the Yellowknife River to the mouth of Back Bay.

In the mid-1940s, Government of Canada scientists determined that roasting ore from the site at high temperatures would be the most effective method for extracting gold from the Giant Mine.

Canadian officials understood that roasting would produce emissions and tailings contaminated with harmful concentrations of arsenic trioxide. Canada's only requirements were that the Giant Mine have a tall smokestack and capture the liquid runoff from the mine.

Starting in 1949, Canada allowed the Giant Mine to roast gold for two years without any additional arsenic controls in place.

Over the following years, even as the Government became aware that the controls eventually installed did not prevent toxic concentrations of arsenic throughout the surrounding environment, Canada continued to allow the Giant Mine to roast gold without interruption.

A Toxic Legacy

Government documents reveal that Canada understood the impact arsenic from the Giant Mine had on the environment and the corresponding risks of arsenic poisoning to humans, including residents of the Yellowknives Dene communities near the mine, in particular.

Archival records show that:

- Arsenic emitted by the Giant Mine during its early years of roasting caused the death of a Yellowknives Dene boy, multiple episodes of arsenic poisoning, and the mass death of nearly an entire herd of cattle.
- Emissions from the Giant Mine led to dangerous levels of arsenic in the snowmelt Yellowknives Dene on Latham Island used for drinking water every spring from 1949 to 1952, and again in 1954.

Canada's primary response to this seasonal poisoning of Yellowknives Dene water sources was to run warnings in local newspapers even though most Yellowknives Dene at the time could not read.

- Discharges and seepages from the mine's tailings ponds led to arsenic levels in Yellowknife Bay – a source of hand-drawn drinking water for the Yellowknives Dene on Latham Island – that exceeded the limit for safe drinking water 15% of the time between 1951 and 1960.

The Effects

Scholarship and community-based research on Giant Mine describe its legacy of environmental destruction, individual and collective Yellowknives Dene suffering, bad faith operations and interactions, and general mistrust.

The mine has had direct effects on Yellowknives Dene members' physical and psychological health and wellbeing, their traditional land-use, the environment, and their relationships to the environment. For the Yellowknives Dene, the Giant Mine is associated with painful memories of sickness and death and a profound feeling of alienation from the landscape.

Yellowknives Dene members maintain that:

1. The deposition of arsenic in the environment has directly affected their health and wellbeing; and
2. By taking up and contaminating traditional lands and resources, the Giant Mine has undermined the hunting way of life the Yellowknives Dene understood Treaty 8 was supposed to protect.

The Yellowknives Dene say these losses have had corresponding social, cultural, psychological, medical, and financial impacts throughout their community.