

# THE TOXIC LEGACIES PROJECT

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**A SOCIAL SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES (SSHRC)  
PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROJECT**

## What is Toxic Legacies?

Welcome to our second newsletter and update on the project! Toxic Legacies is a research project about the history and legacy of arsenic contamination at Giant Mine. We are a partnership among researchers at Memorial and Lakehead Universities, Alternatives North, and the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. This past year has been full of exciting discussion and work, including a week of workshops with Elders, youth and the Yellowknife public; the Communicating with Future Generations Working Group has been meeting regularly and is preparing their final report, and we're excited about the premiere of the documentary film "Guardians of Eternity" next month!

## Giant Mine's Arsenic Problem

The Giant Mine was part of the founding infrastructure of Yellowknife and can still be seen on the outskirts of town. It was built without consent on Yellowknives Dene hunting and harvesting grounds, and for a number of years from 1949, highly toxic arsenic trioxide, a byproduct of the roasting process used to separate gold from the ore, spread widely from the roaster contaminating the land around the mine. Today, the majority of that arsenic, some 237,000 tons, is buried underground in old mining stopes and specially built chambers. The Canadian and NWT governments are working to remediate the site and the current plan includes keeping the contaminants frozen, perhaps into eternity. The recently approved environmental assessment includes a number of measures, including an independent oversight body and a perpetual care plan, and includes the requirement that research into a more permanent solution be conducted and that the project be reviewed every 100 years. This is one of Canada's most contaminated sites and understandably there is much public awareness and concern. The Toxic Legacies Project has been working closely with those involved on a number of projects including the following:



Giant Mine's Former Headframe (photo: John Sandlos)

- **Communicating with Future Generations Working Group**
- **Youth outreach and Elders' perspectives**
- **"Guardians of Eternity" documentary film**
- **Curriculum insert about Giant Mine**
- **Highway interpretive signage**

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### Highlights:

- The film "Guardians of Eternity" will have a community screening in Yellowknife on Saturday November 7th, 7PM, Northern United Place, Yellowknife
- The film will also have special screenings at:
  - University of Ottawa on November 19th
  - Memorial University in St. John's on November 26th
  - Thunder Bay, December 10th

## Our Projects

### Our Film: The Guardians of Eternity



Giant Mine Headframe  
(Photo by John Sandlos)

We are extremely pleased that the documentary we are producing about Giant Mine: **“Guardians of Eternity” will have a screening in Yellowknife on Saturday November 7th, 7PM, Northern United Place, Yellowknife.**

Additional screenings are likely in Thunder Bay, St. John’s, Ottawa, and at universities and film festivals around the country. The film focuses on Yellowknives Dene knowledge, experience of the site, and strategies for communicating over the long term about the site. France Benoit, Ron Harpelle (Lakehead University), Kelly Saxberg and Sheba Films are partners on

the film project. We screened the trailer at our June workshops and had the pleasure of accompanying the filmmakers on a tour of the Giant Site to get some summer footage. In June we screened “Into Eternity” a Finnish documentary about a nuclear waste site that touches on similar themes of warning future generations. The latter film generated lots of discussion, and we look forward to seeing a full-length film that focuses squarely on the arsenic issue at Yellowknife!

For more about the film project, the filmmakers, and a short clip from their work, see “Guardians of Eternity” at <http://vimeo.com/35522130>

**How can we make sure no one ever digs into the frozen chambers?**

### Communicating with Future Generations

A major point of concern and a focus of our work is how to ensure the management needs of Giant Mine are not forgotten. This work sometimes feels like science fiction! How do we ensure that 2,000 years from now, people on the land know that Giant Mine is a toxic site? How can we make sure no one ever digs into the frozen chambers? Or if the chambers start to leak, how can we warn future generations about the flavourless, colourless poison that will seep out?

The Communicating with Future Generations Working Group meets monthly in Yellowknife and includes members from the NWT and Canadian governments, the YKDFN, the North Slave Métis Alliance, the City, the Heritage Society, Alternatives North

and other interested members of the public. We invite guest speakers to share their knowledge and look to the work done at the nuclear Waste Isolation Pilot Project in New Mexico, one of the only sites with research on these questions. We are also looking to the Elders and Dene knowledge about how to communicate over thousands of years. Our work is to consider approaches to perpetual care that will inform the remediation of the site. You can find minutes from our meetings online at our website ([http://www.abandonedminesnc.com/?page\\_id=765](http://www.abandonedminesnc.com/?page_id=765)). Also, keep an eye out for public outreach on this topic in the coming months and a report compiling our thinking thus far.



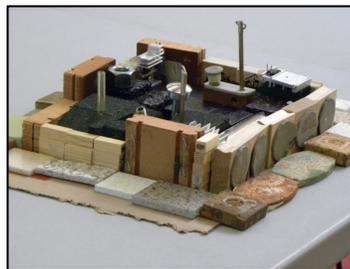
Thermosyphons at frozen block test plot (photo by John Sandlos)

## Youth and Elders Workshops

In June, some of our academic research partners were in Yellowknife, Dettah, and N'Dilo. With the help of the YKDFN youth coordinator, we had a workshop with the YKDFN youth where we examined ways to pass on knowledge about the site by designing models of the surface. Below are some pictures. Many youth thought about building large barriers to keep people and animals out. We held the same workshop in a Yellowknife high school and similarly saw elaborate fences and sign-systems. A noticeable theme among the YKDFN youth was keeping the site ugly and desecrated rather than trying to remediate and repurpose it. A third workshop was held at Kaw Tay Whee elementary school in Dettah. Check out our blog for a post about these workshops: [http://www.abandonedminesnc.com/?page\\_id=410](http://www.abandonedminesnc.com/?page_id=410) and look for an article on these workshops in the Fall EdgeYK Magazine ([edgeyk.com](http://edgeyk.com)).

We also met with YKDFN Elders gathered to discuss their perspectives on communicating with future

generations about Giant Mine. They shared how important it is that people know the YKDFN experience of Giant, the destruction of their land without consent or remuneration, the pollution and harm to the people, land, and animals, and the need for compensation. Among other things, they discussed using signs and involving the youth so they know what happened and mentioned wanting the tourists that come to know the history of Giant.



Model design for monuments at Giant Mine (Model by YKDFN youth and photo by John Sandlos)

## Community Land-Use Mapping

What did the land around Baker Creek look like before gold mining? How did Giant Mine change the land in that area?

Using aerial photos and interviews with Yellowknives Dene elders, we hope to re-build a picture of the Baker Creek Valley before mining and highlights its importance for hunting, fishing and gathering.

Using maps, photos and memories, we also plan to create a digital “fly-through” of Baker Creek as it was prior to mining, and at various stages of development. We hope to display the fly

-through videos online and possibly in museums as a testament to how the Yellowknives remember an important part of their traditional territory.

The community mapping project will draw on expertise within the Yellowknives communities and the Geography Department at Memorial University. A Masters student in Geography, Amanda Degray, will take on large parts of the project under the supervision of Professor Arn Keeling. The project will provide crucial insights into the history of mining in Yellowknife.

**“We hope to re-build a picture of the Baker Creek Valley before mining”**

## Giant History Projects

One big goal of our project is to tell as many people as possible about the history of Giant Mine. To do this, we have developed several public history projects about the history of the mine.

We are developing a curriculum insert for Grade 10 Northern Studies class about Giant Mine which will provide resources for teachers regarding the history of the mine and life before the mine, themes of colonization, environmental legacy, memory and stewardship drawing on this local case-study.

Working with the NWT Government, we are gathering content for interpretive signs at the highway pull-out overlooking Giant. This will be a great way for tourists and interested visitors to get a quick taste for the complex history of the site.

We have a number of interviews and transcripts from Elders about life before the mine, the site and stories about the site, including the discovery of gold. This are being compiled for possible use on a website.



GMRP Sign with John Sandlos (photo by Kevin O'Reilly)

## The Toxic Legacies Project

### CONTACT US

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*Alternatives North*

Goyatiko Language Society



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

### Who are we?

The Toxic Legacies Project is a partnership among researchers at Memorial and Lakehead Universities, the Goyatiko Language Society, and Alternatives North. Project participants include

**Mary Rose Sundberg**, Goyatiko Language Society  
**Kevin O'Reilly**, Alternatives North  
**John Sandlos**, Memorial University  
**Arn Keeling**, Memorial University  
**Ron Harpelle**, Lakehead University  
**Kelly Saxberg**, Sheba Films  
**France Benoit**, Independent Filmmaker

We're on the web: [http://www.abandonedminesnc.com/?page\\_id=470](http://www.abandonedminesnc.com/?page_id=470)

### Looking Ahead

In the next months, we're working toward an interpretive website with oral histories, maps and photos that will highlight the YKDFN experience of the mine, life before the mine, and the rich hunting, fishing and harvesting previously found in the area. We will also be publishing reports from our June activities and the Communicating with Future Generations working group and planning public outreach activities around the premiere of the film.



Model for monument design at Giant Mine (Model by St. Patrick's High School students; photo by J. Sandlos)