

## Past, Present, and Future Mining Projects in the Kivalliq Region

Early Research Results and Updates

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### Researching the history of the North Rankin Nickel Mine (NRNM)

While most of the other communities in what is presently Nunavut were built around cultural or historic attachment to the area, Rankin Inlet was brought into being by mineral development, bringing Inuit families from other settlements or areas around Nunavut, to work on the mine site. The North Rankin Nickel Mine (NRNM) contained one of the richest nickel deposits in Canada, and was the first mining town to be established in the Canadian Arctic. Inuit families migrated to Rankin Inlet, moving from a semi-nomadic subsistence way of life, to an industry-based settlement life, entering into the wage-based economy.



**Figure 1:** Two men stand and talk in front of the North Rankin Nickel Mine, July 1961 (NWT Archives, Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre).

The development and the closure of the NRNM brought great changes to the Kivalliq region as a whole. From 1957-1962, seventy percent of the NRNM's workforce was Inuit working in both above and below ground industrial positions. After the mine's closure in 1962, most Inuit people stayed while most qallunaat left, and this short encounter with mining remains an ongoing presence within the community. Community members that chose to stay in (or returned to) Rankin Inlet after the closure of the NRNM were left with environmental hazards still present on the mined landscape. The hazardous tailings, or the materials left over after separating the nickel from the unproductive ore, were left in the community. The mining company managed the tailings poorly leaving the hazardous materials in ponds below sea level that ended up running into Hudson's Bay and contaminating the shoreline.

The negative environmental impacts of the NRNM have created on-going challenges for the community, producing a tangled legacy and raising questions of how to remember the NRNM. Though the mine ceased operations in 1962, it took until 1995 for final closure and reclamation to be completed. Remediation efforts were completed in 1995; however, in 2009, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (hereafter called AANDC) conducted additional studies and discovered that a small amount of the mine site may not have been entirely covered, and in 2011, 15,000 cubic metres of additional clean fill were added. For now, AANDC has a long-term monitoring plan in place to make sure the freezeback of tailings in permafrost will be effective, and the area will be safe for community members and the environment. One long-term resident cited the examples of the Nanisivik mine, near Arctic Bay, as well as the Giant Mine in Yellowknife, NWT asserting, "[there was] orange dust on top of snow [in Rankin Inlet]...No one has seemed to reclaim an Arctic mine successfully yet. Will it be [Agnico-Eagle]?" This

community member argued that since mining projects bring great transformation to the community, they need to be responsible, “ethically and morally, [for their] permanent presence for years to come.”

In the summer of 2012, we looked at how residents in present-day Rankin Inlet remember the development and closure of the NRNM, and continue to engage with the old mine site that remains. Many of the old miners continue to live in Rankin Inlet, and are active participants in discussions surrounding contemporary mining encounters in the Kivalliq region. We interviewed old miners and long-term residents who were living in Rankin Inlet while the NRNM was operating. We asked them to share their memories and experiences about working and living around the old mine. We also asked them to share their stories about how the community continued to



**Figure 2:** Reclamation of the NRNM tailings area (Credit: Arn Keeling, 2011).

survive after the impacts of mine closure. We then spoke to government officials and present-day residents about the environmental hazards (Figure 2) and machinery remains (Figure 3) from the mine tailings that remained once the mine was closed. We captured these stories about the old mine in order to understand how the development and closure of the NRNM affected the Rankin Inlet community. These stories are important to hear and document in light of discussions around contemporary mining projects being developed in the Kivalliq region, such as Agnico-Eagle’s currently operating Meadowbank gold mine (located near Baker Lake) and Agnico-Eagle’s Meliadine mine project (located 25 kilometres from Rankin Inlet).



**Figure 3:** The remains of the milling equipment from the NRNM are still part of the community landscape within Rankin Inlet today (Credit: Arn Keeling, 2010).

### **What did we learn from the interviews?**

We learned that community members and government officials were attempting to be proactive and plan for the coming Meliadine mine project. Community members asserted that the new Meliadine project will greatly transform the community and will have a presence for many years to come, just as the NRNM continues to be an important part of the landscape today. Many community members spoken to questioned the environmental and social legacies effects of industrial mining projects in the Canadian north, asking what would remain once the Meliadine project was completed. Many people wanted more

information about the positive and negative aspects of contemporary mining. One long-term resident of Rankin Inlet suggested, “All has to come together, [we] have to go back and find out where [we] come from.” Another long-term resident stated that it is important for residents to know and not forget the history of Rankin Inlet, in order to not be reactive in the face of the

Meliadine project. With growth in mineral development in the Kivalliq Region, experiences of the social and environmental legacies of the NRNM can and are being drawn on to better understand the risks and opportunities, as mining returns to Rankin Inlet and the wider Kivalliq region.



**Figure 4-** *The all-seasons road to Agnico-Eagle's Meliadine project (Credit: Tara Cater, 2012).*

**In particular, the key issues discussed within our interviews were:**

1) Fly-in/ Fly- out labour

Mining in the Kivalliq region has provided new opportunities

for employment and a large source of income for mine workers from the Kivalliq

region. Mining has largely contributed to Nunavut's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and has been proposed by territorial government bodies as a significant form of economic development for the territory. Currently, approximately 31 workers at the Meadowbank mine site are from Rankin Inlet. The Meliadine project is set to contribute even more opportunities for mine training and jobs for the Rankin Inlet community and wider communities in the Kivalliq region. Some government officials we spoke to stated that they hoped the coming Meliadine project would provide a push for further education and training programs for youth in Rankin Inlet.

We spoke to mine workers from Rankin Inlet (and other Kivalliq communities) who currently work at the Meadowbank Gold mine near Baker Lake. While the NRNM was created as a 'mining town,' bringing Inuit miners and their families from their home communities to live and work in Rankin Inlet, today, the mining industry relies on a highly mobile labour force. This means that mine workers come from Southern regions of Canada, as well as Kivalliq communities. We found out a large portion of the workers hired by Agnico-Eagle are French-Canadian from Québec. Currently, 35% of Meadowbank's work force is Inuit (as of September 30, 2012).

Through speaking to mine workers we learned that Fly-in/ Fly-out work is a new and often challenging form of work for mine workers. Mine workers are expected to work for twelve hours a day, doing highly intensive work such as drilling, blasting, or cleaning. The workers must remain at the Meadowbank mine site for two weeks at a time, often spending most of their time indoors. Once their two-week rotation is complete, the workers return to their home communities, and are expected to rest for their next shift.

Some workers we spoke to stated that they were happy with their 2 weeks on/2 weeks off schedule, saying that it gave them time with their family, as well as time to focus on their work. They described their lives as divided into two homes and families, the one at the mine and the one at their home community. Others described fly-in/fly-out work to be difficult stating reasons such as they could not find someone to watch their children, they were homesick and often had to miss family and community events, or they felt stuck within lower-paying jobs such as

cleaning and washing dishes. Other mine workers from the Kivalliq region stated that they found it difficult to connect with mine workers and managers from the South, who often spoke French and felt the mine site was not a welcoming space. Through our interviews we learned that fly-in/fly-out labour required workers who were able to adapt to this new schedule, who had support within their home communities to watch their children, were able to communicate with family members back home, and could find ways to make this new schedule a ‘normal’ part of their daily lives. But for everyone, whether a southern or northern mine worker, this schedule is difficult and takes time and support to adapt to.



**Figure 5-** Haul trucks driving in the open pit of Agnico-Eagle’s Meadowbank mine (Credit: Tara Cater, 2012).

## 2) Environmental Legacies

Our project looked at three mining projects: the NRNM, the Meadowbank mine, and the Meliadine gold project. By considering these past, present, and future mines together we were able to reflect on the question of- what happens after a mine closes? Given that the Meliadine project has not yet begun operations, we focused on what community members in Rankin Inlet wanted for the future of the community and for themselves, and their families. We learned from our interviews that many community members and government officials were concerned about short-term versus long-term benefits and risks of the Meliadine mine. Many stated that while training and employment opportunities in the mining sector were exciting today, they worried about future environmental and social legacies of the mine. Some community members asked: What will remain once the mine closes? And reflecting on the history of the NRNM, a long-term community member stated, “In 8-15 years, we will be left with the [Meliadine project]...[It will be] just another nickel mine. [Agnico-Eagle] brings everyone here, and then closes again.” Many community members asserted that it was important to pay attention to what the social and environmental legacies of the Meliadine project will be, and to consider the big picture when discussing contemporary mining projects in the Kivalliq region.

## Further Research

As the Kivalliq region is set to become the stage of rapid mineral development, our research provides insight into historical memories, experiences, and associations with mining still present in the community today, as well as engagements, concerns, and relationships developing around contemporary and future mining projects. We argue that mineral development projects in contemporary Nunavut are not simply good or bad. This simplicity misses the many different challenging and productive conversations happening within Rankin Inlet.



**Figure 6-** Caribou migration through the Iqalugaarjuup Nunanga territorial Park (Credit: Tara Cater, 2012).

While mining is not a new venture for the community of Rankin Inlet, this is currently a time of experimentation for mining companies and Kivalliq communities, given new governance and corporate practices surrounding mineral development in Nunavut. In contrast with Rankin Inlet's first experience with mineral development, Agnico-Eagle is bound by IIBAs to consult with community members about potential environmental and social impacts, and to provide training and employment opportunities for Inuit people. Agents from Agnico-Eagle, government officials, and community members are thus engaging in new and shifting conversations around the benefits of mining, different practices on the land, and the value of resources.

There is need for ongoing documentations at the community level of contemporary experiences with the development of the Meliadine gold project and the new relationships developing between Agnico-Eagle employees and the Rankin Inlet community. In particular, continued research will look at the benefits and challenges of mine workers engaging with fly-in/fly-out mine work in Nunavut, in light of the coming wave of potential mineral development projects in the Kivalliq region.

The current outputs from this research include a Master's of Geography thesis entitled, "When Mining Comes (Back) to Town: Exploring Mining Encounters in the Kivalliq Region" written by Tara Cater. A print and electronic copy of this thesis is publically available in the Rankin Inlet resource centre. If you would like an electronic or print copy of your own please contact Tara Cater at tara.cater@mun.ca, or Pallulaaq Friesen at pallulaaq@gmail.com. We will also be constructing a film project and comic strip in collaboration with a Rankin Inlet artist, Ippiksaut Friesen, about the developing Meliadine gold project. We will be continuing research on this project, in particular, around Fly-in/ Fly-out labour and environmental impacts of mining in the Kivalliq region of Nunavut.

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**Figure 7-** *The research team in the summer of 2012 (Credit: Shirley Cater, 2012).*