Increasing sustainable resource development in BC: The importance of aboriginal engagement

Canada is home to one of the largest natural resource sectors in the world which many provinces and territories within the country depend on to sustain local and regional economies. This demand places evolving socioeconomic pressures and incentives on both communities and firms to enhance production to meet the needs of growing populations and increasing living standards. Communities are however often unable to reap potential benefits in the form of employment or contracts due to limited experience and skill development programs set in place by mining companies. Understanding the social responsibility to ensure sustainable methods as an engineer or geologist is becoming an increasingly significant business practice, as erosion of local legitimacy may lead to unwanted conflicts with communities and stakeholders, which can serve to severely disrupt operations. In 2017 British Columbia was the second biggest mineral producer by value in Canada (Natural Resources Canada, 2018) and exploration expenditures are increasing (Fig.1). British Columbia is also home to over 200,000 indigenous people which are separated into almost 200 distinct first nation communities (Fig.1), each with their own philosophies and customs. The aim of this paper is to promote the importance of fostering relationships with Aboriginal communities as mining companies continue to explore culturally sensitive areas with economic potential within British Columbia. The essay will introduce incentives for collaboration and some of the current policies in place, draw upon case studies within British Columbia, and finally discuss steps that geoscientists and engineers can take to ensure social sustainability within culturally sensitive localities.
In 2010, close to 60 Aboriginal First Nations were actively claiming rights to land within the province of British Columbia (Heisler and Markey, 2013) and are still in the process of negotiating treaties with the federal government. Ernst and Young’s identified that at the global level, the social license to operate was among the top 10 biggest risks facing mining companies in 2017 (Ernest & Young 2017). Since jurisdictional authority over natural resource and land development falls under provincial authority, the province of British Columbia has a responsibility and interest to move negotiations forward. Negotiations such as these are encouraged through Aboriginal training programs which result in employment with companies specializing in mineral exploration. Formal support is offered through the provincial environmental assessment process in which companies are obligated to negotiate terms of support from Aboriginal communities over disputed or unsettled territory. In recent years consulting with Aboriginal communities has developed into a central theme within the recommended practices of both the Mining Association of Canada and the Prospector Developers Association of Canada. Guides for consultation have been developed for mineral
exploration in growing numbers over the last decade to facilitate negotiations. As an example, in 2009, the Association of Mineral Exploration in British Columbia (AME BC) introduced a corporate social responsibility program (CSR) to avoid conflict between First Nations and exploration companies. An Aboriginal Engagement Tool Kit was additionally released to inform companies on how to approach First Nation governments. Research by Hesler and Markey (2013) revealed, however, that there was an uneven application of CSR practices by mining companies to Communities in northwestern British Columbia, in which companies would selectively apply CSR principles to communities with political leverage to influence project development. Relations with local communities is essential for two reasons. Firstly, mining activities may have an unavoidable environmental footprint in the form of pollution or waste which grants communities legitimacy to require miners to take more accountability (Baba and Raufflet, 2014). Secondly, natural resource exploitation often occurs in indigenous territories within countries such as Canada and Australia. It is clear that the way in which companies approach community relations should be an essential part of their business model and training programs (Keeling & Sandlos, 2015, Mitchell, 2010).

The first case study draws upon the Alcan (Aluminum of Canada, Inc.) owned Kemano Hydroelectric project between 1952 and 2012. This project was considered one of the most ambitious projects in North America, employing 10,000 workers and contributing 4% to British Columbia’s GDP (Baba and Raufflet, 2014). Despite the economic legitimacy of the project, a second phase of exploration was delayed for close to two decades due to unsettled claims from a first nations group, Cheslatta. One area particularly affected was the Nechako reservoir within the Cheslatta territory which caused extensive flooding and flow disruption of a river which the Cheslatta nation depended on as a source of salmon (Christensen, 1995). Flooding destroyed the
Cheslatta territory, including homes, farming tools and trapping equipment, forcing relocation of 350 people. In 1979, Alcan announced the intended launch of Kemano II (KCP) in which upgrading of the Kenney Dam located on the newly surrendered Cheslatta lands was one of the projects proposed. This project was the first in Canada to be granted exemption from a federal environmental review process. As of 1995, $535 million had already been invested by Alcan and the project was nearing 50% completion. In 1995 the project was cancelled by the B.C. government largely due to efforts from opponents including the Cheslatta Carrier Nation and environmentalists. Many legal battles followed in which all stakeholders (Cheslatta, government and Alcan) entered a deadlock that would last many years. Alcan did learn lessons from the decade long confrontations and promoted the development of two regional offices in the watershed area and the appointment of company representatives to work with the Cheslatta Carrier Nation. Alcan also implemented new policies of engagement founded on mutual respect, accountability and most importantly, transparency. In 1999 Alcan contributed generously towards the creation of the Nechako-Kitimat Development fund to encourage sustainable practices in the Nechako watershed area. Since then there have been economic development programs with the Cheslatta including the Three Nations Forest Stewardship Program. The most significant reconciliation however, took place after Rio Tinto acquired Alcan, in which the transfer of sixty-three districts comprising 11,00 acres was given back to the Cheslatta Carrier Nation in 2012.

Successful examples of how more inclusive social and environmental development models have been incorporated to ensure sustainable development include the Galore Creek Project in northwestern British Columbia (Fidler et al., 2010). Negotiated agreements, which arise as a result of voluntary negotiation between First Nation groups and companies were used
to ensure that no conflicts would arise between the Tahltan Nation and stakeholders of the Galore Creek project. The BC environmental assessment office provided funding for the Tahltan to collaborate and participate in the project review. The Tahltan used the Negotiated agreements to influence the mine design by proposing alternate access roads to enhance sustainable mining.

The documented encounters between First Nation groups and industry is numerous, and within the last decade there has been increasing research devoted to studying the dynamic relationship between small communities and large exploration companies (Bullock et al., 2018; Fidler, 2010; Graben, 2014). The polar case studies presented demonstrate the importance of aboriginal engagement and importance of collaboration and transparency between the Crown, Aboriginal groups and industry. Although companies have developed much more rigorous protocols for aboriginal engagement in recent years, young geoscientists and engineers need to understand their role in fostering relationships with communities proximal to exploration sites. This includes undertaking the due diligence to conduct thorough research on the jurisdiction they foresee operating in. Willingness to offer technical training to residents as well as supporting local communities should be seen as an obligation and is incredibly important in maintaining social and cultural legitimacy throughout the course of a project.

This essay has presented case studies to support the importance of Aboriginal engagement in mineral resource development. The Kemano and Galore Creek projects were used as examples to demonstrate the polar outcomes that result from improper confrontation and collaboration between the government, industry and Aboriginal groups. Geoscientists and Engineers working in exploration need to perform due diligence by continually reviewing the dynamic laws and policies present in jurisdictions in which they work in to ensure the highest standards of social responsibility are maintained.
References


