Asbestos Hill: Inuit Experiences with Nunavik’s First Mine

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Now, the Asbestos Hill mine is significant for a number of reasons. First, it was an important mine because of its time of operation, between 1972 and 1984 (making it the 1st mine to operate in Nunavik) and its northern location, in northern Nunavik between the communities of Salluit and Kangiqsujuaq. In fact, the Asbestos Hill mine was also the 2nd mine to operate in the Canadian Arctic, following the mine in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut. Lastly, the mine was the first fly-in fly-out operation in Canada.

Now, although all of these factors are important, the most important aspect of the Asbestos Hill mine and why it matters is the mine’s contribution to the modernization of Inuit in Nunavik and the ways the mine helped transform the communities of Salluit and Kangiqsujuaq.
Before I explain my research I’m going to start by explaining where it fits in the grand scheme of things.

There has been a lot of research done on resource development and its impacts in the North by my colleagues in this room. More specifically, Thierry Rodon and his Knowledge Network on Environment Impact Assessment and Social Impact of Mining in the Canadian Eastern Arctic and Subarctic at l’Université Laval have focused on the socio-economic and environmental impacts of current mining in Nunavik.

As a result, not much research has looked into the historical aspects of mining in the region and its legacies, and no previous social science research has been conducted on the Asbestos Hill mine. This is where my research on the Asbestos Hill mine comes in. This research is particularly important because it’s filling this gap in the literature on the impacts and legacies of past mining in the Canadian North, and more specifically in Nunavik.
With all of this in mind, I began my fieldwork this past May. To capture the whole range of impacts, as well as the necessary historical information on the mine and the region, I used two methods of information gathering, archival research and oral history research (or interviews).

For the archival research portion I traveled to Quebec City in May and scoured the archives at the Archives nationales du Québec.
Now, for the oral history portion of my research, which is the most of it. I spent one month in Salluit, due to the large community size of 1,400 and more past Asbestos Hill mine workers to interview. Then, I spent 2 weeks in Kangiqsujuaq, which is the smaller community of 700 people. In total, I interviewed 18 people. Most interviewees were Inuit men, who were previous Asbestos Hill mine workers. The average interview lasted around 45 minutes to one hour.
1. The Transition

Prior to arrival of the Asbestos Hill mine, Inuit in Nunavik experienced many lifestyle changes. Interviewees are part of the transition generation as they were born into a nomadic lifestyle in igloos and summer tents, and later moved into permanent settlements and government-built matchbox houses. In the ’50s and ’60s, Salluit and Kangiqsujuaq were villages of 200 residents with one priest, a Federal day-school, and limited means of travel and healthcare. Past Asbestos Hill workers were the first Inuit to receive formal education in residential schools, and to move from subsistence activities to full-time wage labour work.

The mine came at a time when there was no economy and no immediate economic prospects to the region after the fur trade crashed in the ‘50s. The region was in need of economic assistance from the Federal government of Canada. So, much like what happened in the rest of North, the Quebec and Federal governments encouraged this mining project to bring economic growth to the Inuit in the area.
2. Inuit Work Experience at Asbestos Hill mine

Interviewed Inuit past Asbestos Hill mine workers recalled work at the mine as a positive experience despite many factors, such as cultural and language differences. The young male Inuit workers lived in mine barracks alongside 400, mainly French-Canadian, employees. Although they worked long shifts for three straight months rotations, those interviewed remembered their first experience in a multi-cultural work environment as exciting, saying that it was a worthwhile adventure with many opportunities for work training and entertainment (movies, bars, games).
3. Mine Closure

“[Just] prior to the closing of the mine, it was an open season for getting some cheap, cheap booze and that really affected [Salluit]. For a small community, it has a big impact on everyone. ... It affected [families] quite dramatically”
- Willie Keatainak, former Asbestos Hill mine worker

The closure of the Asbestos Hill mine in 1984 had a minimal impact on Inuit in Salluit and Kangiqsujuaq due to the impending opening of the Raglan nickel mine.
4. Impacts and Legacies

During its operation, the mine provided income and work training for Inuit, which allowed workers to buy necessary supplies and learn new skills, such as carpentry and mechanics. On the other hand, the mine interrupted traditional hunting, fishing, and trapping activities, and Inuit workers were subjected to prejudice and at times racist interactions with non-Inuit workers. Furthermore, the mine’s introduction of drugs and alcohol led to persistent subsistence abuse problems that are still present (see quote below).

1996 remediation – 12 years after mine closure

Influenced the Raglan Agreement, because people didn’t want the same thing happening again, with the no consultation.
Conclusion and Next Steps

Conclusion
Local Inuit’s negative experiences with the Asbestos Hill mine contributed to the Raglan Impact and Benefit Agreement (IBA) between Raglan mine and Salluit and Kangiqsujuaq, Canada’s first IBA signed directly between a mine and an Aboriginal group, which helped pave the way for similar future negotiations.
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Questions?