



Tamarack Water Alliance Community Zoom Meeting Wednesday, December 3, 2025 10am CT

**TOPIC: History of Savannah Portage Region and Ojibwe
Stewardship Past and Present**

**PRESENTERS: Stephen Schaitberger, Episcopal Priest/Author
and Don Wedll, Mille Lacs Historian**

Stephen Schaitberger and Don Wedll will provide an historic view of the Savannah Portage and an acknowledgement of the Ojibwe stewardship of the area past and present.

Schaitberger is the author of *Stands Before His People: Enmegahbowh and the Ojibwe*, an historic biography of the first Episcopal priest of Ojibwe heritage. Schaitberger's mentor was Fr. George Smith, the grandson of Enmegahbowh who immersed him in Ojibwe culture in his youth. He also spent his summers at his family's cabin on Lake Minnewawa in the Tamarack area.

Don Wedll has extensive experience working for Tribal governments. He worked for some 34 years for Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe starting in 1974 working in the areas Education, Law Enforcement, Natural Resources and Environmental. He was directed to develop the litigation of the 1837 Treaty Rights of the Mille Lacs Band. Wedll also worked with Region 5 U.S. EPA in the development of EPA's Indian Policy and the development of Nation Environmental Programs for Indian Tribes. In 2009 he moved to Alaska and worked for 6 years with the Association of Village Council Presidents conducting Environmental Reviews and Tribal Environmental Programs. Wedll's academic background in mathematics, Federal Indian law, and environment has provided a unique skill which he applied while a member of US EPA Committee on Science and Technology and EPA Senior Environmental Enforcement Team. He presently serves on Giiwediniing Treaty Rights Museum and Cultural Center, and Crow Wing County Historical Society.

Register for the meeting and receive the Zoom link [here](https://tamarackwateralliance.org/php/eventreg.php?eid=16)
(<https://tamarackwateralliance.org/php/eventreg.php?eid=16>).

TWO WAYS TO DONATE TO TAMARACK WATER ALLIANCE

- **You can donate on our website anytime at tamarackwateralliance.org/donate.html.**
- **OR you can [Give to the Max](#) to Tamarack Water Alliance until the end of December.**

We invite your donations now and throughout the year. Tamarack Water Alliance is all volunteer Minnesota non-profit with no paid staff. Every penny you donate goes to support our hard work educating the public about the risks of sulfide mining to our water, environment, fish, wild rice, and ecosystems.

Your donation goes to support our community educational activities which include tabling at community festivals and parades, participation in other community events, targeted speaking engagements with interested local organizations, monthly informational public

zoom calls and an associated email newsletter, website and social media, letter writing campaigns and articles in local news outlets, interviews with media, and other community outreach and canvassing.

Our current focus is on providing education about the risks of sulfide mining, narratives to counter the greenwashing and divisiveness that some mining companies promote, as well as forging connections to other communities concerned about sulfide mines in Minnesota, across the Midwest, and around the world. Thank you for your contributions to our work.

REQUEST Presentation On Risks of Sulfide Mining for your group, Rotary Club, church or community club. Send us an email at waters@tamarackwateralliance.org.

DOWNLOAD Tamarack Water Alliance fact sheets/flyers [here](https://tamarackwateralliance.org/resources.html#flyers) (<https://tamarackwateralliance.org/resources.html#flyers>).

Sign-Up To Receive Updates from the DNR on Talon Metals Environmental Impact Statement [here](https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/input/environmentalreview/tamarack-nickel-project.html) [here](https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/input/environmentalreview/tamarack-nickel-project.html) (<https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/input/environmentalreview/tamarack-nickel-project.html>).

Volunteer with the Tamarack Water Alliance. Send us an email at waters@tamarackwateralliance.org.

Sign Up For This Newsletter: Encourage your friends, family and neighbors to sign up for the monthly Tamarack Water Alliance email newsletter at tamarackwateralliance.org/php/articlereg.php.

Savannah Portage History and Ojibwe Stewardship Past and Present



Early History

The Savannah Portage trail has been referred to as an ancient and rare highway, where the waters of the Mississippi and the Great Lakes allowed for a short portage of six miles between two main water courses, the St. Louis River and the Mississippi River. This became the site of one of the most important portage routes in the Northwest, as travel was primarily by canoe and portage during its use [1]. Both rivers are just a few miles apart and are separated in elevation by only six feet. Water flows east to the Atlantic Ocean and south to the Gulf of Mexico, near where the glaciers stopped.

Before Europeans entered the picture, Indigenous people are thought to have lived in area for thousands of years. Dakota and the Ojibwe people used the portage for commerce and communication with other bands throughout the upper Midwest as an important part of a historic trade route between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River. They would travel to seek marital partners outside their band as they knew the risks of inbreeding. Later, the French voyagers used this land bridge to widen their fur trade endeavors during the mid-1700s until the fur trade died off in the mid 1800's.

Travelers began their journey at the mouth of the St. Louis River on Lake Superior. They traversed the rocky, difficult gorge of the lower St. Louis River to paddle up the East Savannah to the long portage through tamarack and spruce bogs before it joined the West Savannah River flowing into the Mississippi [3]. Journal entries by traders, travelers, and missionaries during 1763 to 1850 are full of accounts of the difficult passage of the eastern trail portion in Tamarack swamps wading through mud chest deep, fallen trees, sink holes, and voracious mosquitoes [1].

The French explorers used the name "la Savanne" which originates from the Ojibwe name Mashkiig-onigami-ziibi, meaning "marsh-portage river." [3] The Savannah Portage was referred to as a 'wretched portage route' due to the changing terrain of marsh, swamp, forests, and biting insects.

"Thin Place" of Spiritual Significance

Savannah Portage has been referred to as a "thin place" as the veil between the physical world and the spiritual and historic world is narrow. Historically the portage has existed, for centuries as a major natural passageway, where many lives intersected. Interpreted from both a symbolic and literal perspective, the area holds special significance given the normal barriers between different worlds vanished. This portage path was both a journey of difficult physical hardship and a bridge to new people and destinations.

From the Christian spiritual perspective the flowing rivers were an outward sign of spiritual grace. The portage stood at the crossroads of two different water flows to two different oceans, unique geographically, and thrilling to consider, a place of "geographical intimacy." [2] As a "thin place" it brought people closer to God, in the spirit of exploration and those seeking something new. Savannah Portage became a state park in 1961 to protect its historic heritage.

It is likely that along this trail that the first Ojibwe traveled from their homes on Lake Superior to the territory occupied by the Sioux around Sandy Lake. The two indigenous tribes engaged in conflict for twenty years from 1730 to 1750, with the Ojibwe establishing control of the land near Sandy Lake.

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1855 Treaty

In the era of treaties, the Ojibwe chose this area as one of the places they wanted to reserve to preserve their culture for the future generations, "as long as the grass is green and the sky is blue" and friends reunited. They consider the 1855 Treaty protected by Federal law as sacred, granting them the right to hunt, fish and gather. In addition to enjoying the living spirit of Mother Earth, the Ojibwe sought to protect their traditional food sources- giigoonhyike (fishing), manoominike (wild rice harvesting), waniigige (trapping), maawinzo (berry-picking), gitige (gardeining), and wiigwaasike (bark harvesting) seasonally. The area's prime wild rice waters, manoomin are sacred to the Ojibwe culture, and the best ricing in Minnesota. Its pristine lakes, towering pines and rare peatlands and bogs support wildlife, fish and healing plants vital to the Ojibwe way of life. Its forests contain birch and black spruce for basket making, and maple trees for iskgamizigan (sugarbushing) a

traditional practice where sap is collected and boiled, an activity where families and friends reunited [4].

Ojibwe Concerns About the Proposed Talon Metals/Rio Tinto Mine

With the proposed high sulfide mine in Tamarack, many Ojibwe are concerned about the lowering of water levels due to the 2.3 million gallons of water or more that would be pumped from the underground mine on a daily basis. They believe this would lower water levels of prime wild rice areas as well as Lake Minnewawa, a shallow wild rice lake which would threaten manoomin gathering and fishing.

While Savannah Portage is not within Ojibwe land, there is concern about what would happen underground given the huge amounts of water pumped on a daily basis, and the close vicinity of the park to the proposed mine site.

There are also concerns that the Federal Treaty of 1855 would be violated if the mine is built. They face a dilemma. If they stand up for their treaty rights, will their treaty rights be taken away again? Yet, if they don't, the land will suffer spiritually.

References:

1. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20160657> The Old Savannah Portage, Hart, Irving, H. "The Old Savanna Portage", Minnesota History, Vol. 8, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 1927.
 2. <https://jacobsonminnesota.com/blog/the-savanna-portage-great-lakes-to-the-mississippi-river>
 3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Savanna_River ,Wikipedia East Savannah River
 4. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/iskigamizigan-sugarbush.htm>,National Park Service, Food From The Forest, Iskigamizigan (Sugarbush).
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MINING OPPOSITION

Rio Tinto Pauses Plans for \$3.7 billion Lithium Mine but Serbians Remain Concerned

"Rio Tinto may have mothballed its proposed \$3.6 billion lithium project in Serbia's Jadar Valley, but opponents have vowed to keep fighting until the mining giant leaves the area for good. "...

"...the decision has been made as the company simplifies its operations and prioritises other projects under new chief executive Simon Trott, who has embarked on a restructure and cost-cutting exercise at Rio.... However, given the lack of progress in permitting, we are not in a position to sustain the same level of spend and resource allocation..."

"...There has also been strong community opposition to the project, with tens of thousands of Serbians turning out to protest in recent years, concerned that the mine would be an environmental and agricultural disaster."...

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-11-18/rio-tinto-jadar-valley-mine-paused-amid-huge-opposition/106020944>

ABC.net News, November 17, 2025,
European Bureau Chief,
Mazoe Ford

Mining Companies Say They Are Listening, But Are They Really?

"...Tamarack Water Alliance meets face to face with Talon Metals periodically. Our last meeting was in mid-September for 90 minutes. Talon "listened" - however, we might add that nothing in its redesigned mine plans proposed in the last two and a half years addressed any of the concerns we have raised. Instead, Talon's plans seemed to be aimed

at reducing its costs to improve its business case. Talon's redesign is little more than moving the deck chairs..."

"...A great deal of dust is created managing rock and crushing it to form a gravel to be mixed with cement to backfill the stopes. Confining all this dust inside a building creates dangerous levels that must be mitigated in order to ensure safe breathing. This dust not only includes sulfides but asbestos and other hazardous substances. Two mitigations can help. One is venting buildings, yet Talon plans no filters on the vents to remove sulfides and hazardous particles. The second includes spraying down rock piles to reduce dust emissions, yet Talon has no plans to line the floors or remove the water from the spraying. Contaminated water will seep into the sandy soil and aquifers, causing long-lasting environmental damage to the area and prime wild rice waters. This is a terrible tactic that does not address the environmental risks yet is marketed by Talon as innovative. Seriously?..."

"...With no filters on the mine vent shafts, dust will blow across the landscape and pollute surrounding watersheds, including the nearby St. Louis River. ..."

<https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-iron-range-nickel-sulfide-mining-pollution/601523149>

Star Tribune, November 11, 2025,
Lynn Anderson,
Tamarack Water Alliance Volunteer

Who We Are

Tamarack Water Alliance is a group of local residents and landowners working together with others from across Minnesota to protect water and community health from the dangers of sulfide mining near our beloved lakes and wild rice beds, at the headwaters of the Kettle River and in the Mississippi River watershed. Visit our website [here](https://tamarackwateralliance.org/index.html) (<https://tamarackwateralliance.org/index.html>).

A proposal by a foreign owned mining company, Talon Metals/Rio Tinto to mine nickel and other metals near Tamarack in Aitkin County threatens the health of our communities. This kind of sulfide mining, especially in water-rich environments, has never been done without severe impacts to water and the health of those downstream. Mining here is also a threat to environmental justice and the long-term economic security of nearby native and rural communities.

Review our [community slide presentation](#) (tamarackwateralliance.org/docs/TamarackMineConcerns-Consolidated.pdf) and download [informative flyers](#) (tamarackwateralliance.org/resources.html):

- Talon Mine Risks,
- Geology of Aitkin County,
- Talon Dumping Toxic Drilling Waste,
- Minnesota Declares Round Lake Impaired
- High Sulfide Mines Create Acid Mine Drainage,
- Nickel Not Needed for Future EV Batteries,
- Minnesota's Prime Wild Rice Lakes Under Threat,
- Difference Between High Sulfide Mining and Taconite Mining,
- Minnesota Regulators Poor Record In Protecting The Environment,
- Eagle Mine Environmental Report & Saving Our Meager Nickel Reserves

- Is There Really A Talon Tesla Supply Agreement? (no)
- Rio Tinto: A History of Corruption
- Green Bridge Metals -Canadian proposed sulfide mine near Duluth seeks to acquire battery rich mineral assets
- Copper and The Green Economy
- Prove It First!

We will send this monthly newsletter to keep you informed about this project, to share information and opportunities to act to protect clean water and community health.

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