



Fighting the Good Fight—and TALKING about It



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Opening his remarks at a mining conference in New York in early May, mining magnate and philanthropist Rob McEwen summed it up very well:

“Most people don’t know the mining industry exists, and those who do... hate us.”

This theme of effective communication and changing perceptions of our business reared its head throughout the SME Current Trends in Mining Finance Conference. I sat on a panel during which we lamented how to get generalist investors to fund exploration. Later in the conference, I chimed into a Q&A session with some inflammatory comments about the lack of effective communication from industry leadership. The mining industry, and exploration in particular, is foundational to all heavy industry, manufacturing, and technology businesses. Remember the old bumper sticker, “If it can’t be grown, it has to be mined”? It is not an option to “do without” mining.

Where, then, is the messaging that extolls the virtues of what we do and the critical role played by geologists in the ultimate supply chain? Perhaps it’s futile to persist in this battle. So, I shall try, at least, to make my comments entertaining.

Mining CEOs who take the podium (willingly) to convey a vision or challenge us to engage with the public rather than slink around the fringes are rare. There are plenty of mining executives who pitch and promote to friendly audiences, but how many take advantage of their bully pulpit to inspire, issue a charge, or push back against an anti-mining or green narrative that has run amok? The answer: not many. How many readers of this column even recognize the last names: Henry, Stausholm, Palmer, Bristow, Nagle, or Adkerson? It’s OK, I had to look up a few of the CEOs of our largest mining houses as well. If the names of our corporate leaders are not known to a broad audience, it is doubtful their message or the good work of their teams will resonate with that audience.

Geologists, can we help? Can we change any of this? Who are the passionate communicators among our ranks?

Have you ever been asked (told) to host a tour of your project or your mine? I bet a lot of you didn't like that idea very much at all. Those tours often come at bad times. I remember the mine tours well at Kennecott's Ridgeway mine in South Carolina. We were the only sizable gold mine east of the Rockies in the early 1990s. That meant that every university geology department, environmental activist group, and many politicians within 1,000 miles were clamoring for tours.

This young geologist, who didn't even know the rocks yet, got "stuck" with giving those tours...dozens of them over those years. If this is you, maybe you're perceived to be a good communicator? Maybe people see you as enthusiastic? Or, maybe mining engineers give terrible mine tours? Whatever the reason, if you are talking to people—regular people—about rocks, minerals, exploration, mining, mineral processing, reclamation, or your research related to any of the above, you are a potential bridge builder to the future of economic geology and mining.

Recently, many of us have been in meeting rooms, board rooms, restaurants, and bars for conversations along these lines: "Now that people are seeing that we need to mine lithium, cobalt, copper, graphite, and rare earth elements for a green future, maybe society will respect us. Maybe we will get grants. Maybe we will get tax incentives for exploration. Maybe our mines will get permitted."

How's that working out for you?

Billions of dollars of capital in mainstream investment funds are on the sidelines with respect to funding the development of new mines, whether they be for lithium, copper, cobalt, nickel, silver, REEs, or gold. The market consumes and demands. We are tasked with supplying... but is that even possible with today's barriers to finance and development?

I won't go on my usual diatribe about the supply chain shortfalls to eliminate hydrocarbons. Instead, see Dr. Simon Michaux's well-documented presentation on that subject from the Geological Survey of Finland (www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBVmnKuBocc); he does a much better job than I. We all know that this sort of content is not designed for consumption by the masses. It's not humanized enough for them. It's not perceived to be relevant in the average person's life. And most of the critical information needed for informed decision-making (or voting) on these subjects is just too technical.

Maybe geologists can help with that part? After all, economic geologists, engineers, and miners are just people. We geologists spend more time enjoying and appreciating the environment than most. The fact is, we have a good story to tell and we have some incredible people to help tell it. I was struck by the persistence of this thread last month in New York at that SME conference. We need to do more than just affirm that our efforts include an environmental, social, and governance (ESG) program. We need to do more than apologize for past transgressions and comply with environmental standards and regulations. And we must do more than generate returns on investment—an objective at which we have often failed. We must innovate, learn, discover, design, build, and execute...AND we must tell people about it!

It is my contention that if we geologists and our broader teams do these things, do them iteratively, the future that we will build shall speak for itself. Until our success does speak for itself, however, WE must speak about our journey and our successes, and in doing so, we must inspire the best and the brightest.

SEG and our Foundation are about the next generation of economic geologists; hence, much of our strength comes from the co-mingling of three (3+) generations of economic geologists in one Society. Mentoring, networking, teaching, coaching, and leading (in all forms)—or contributing to those who do—are the best ways I know to grow and improve our impact. Today's world and its media are about the narrative. Wouldn't it be nice to control at least some of that narrative? I look forward to seeing our future economic geology leaders and communicators in London on August 26.

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