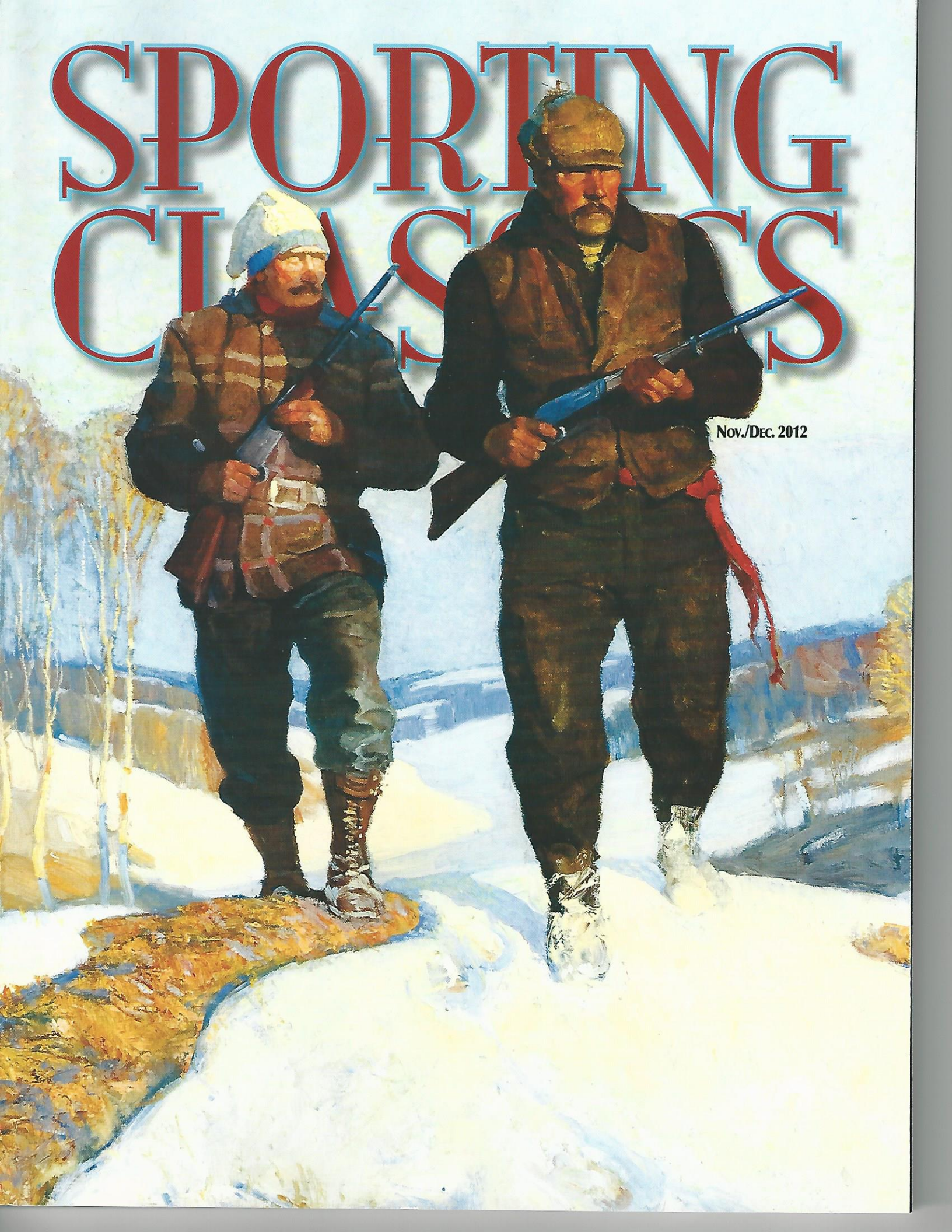


SPORTING CLASSES

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Wild Heritage

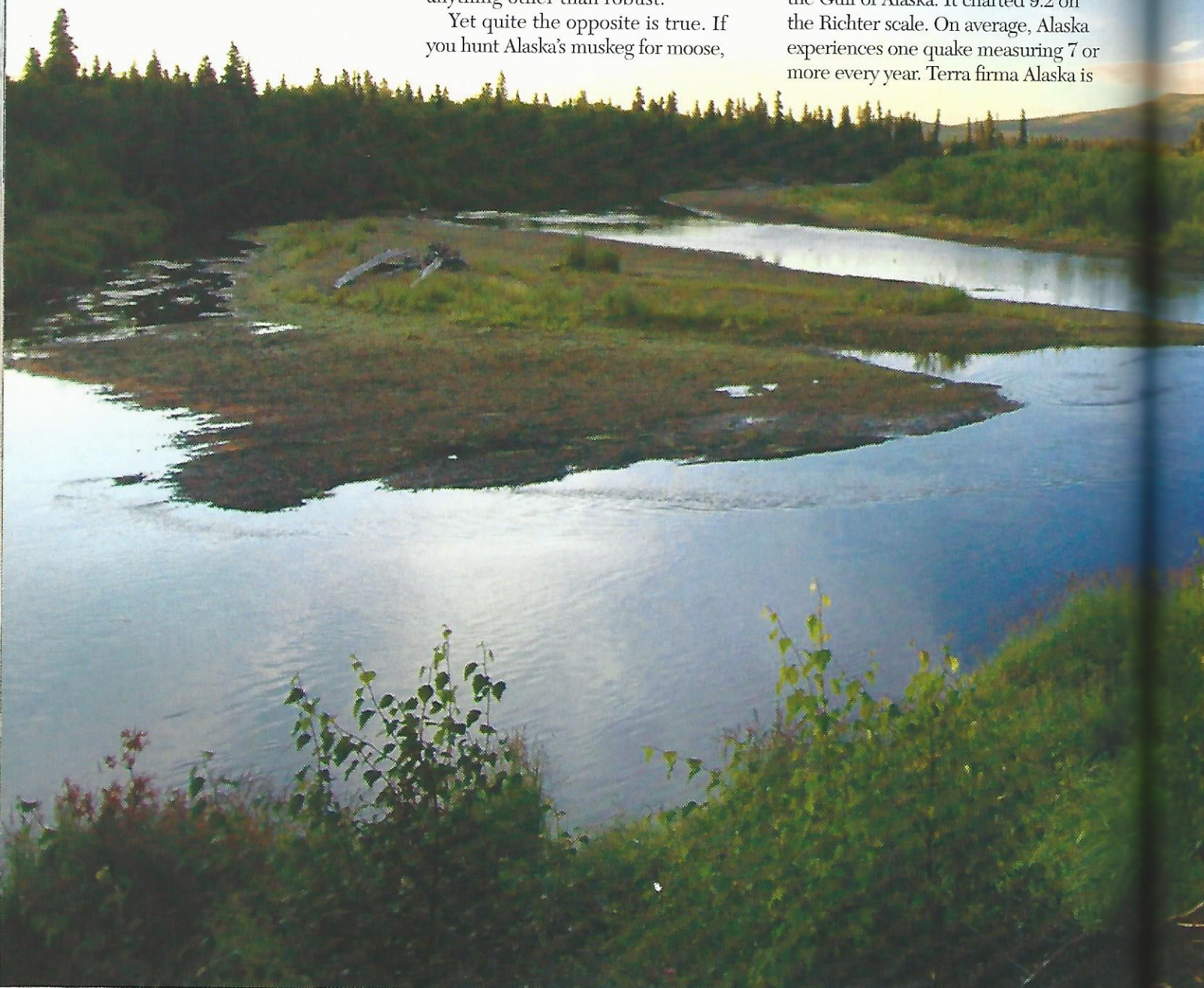
By John Ross

Alaska lodges and conservation groups have banded together to stop what is almost certain to be a devastating environmental calamity.

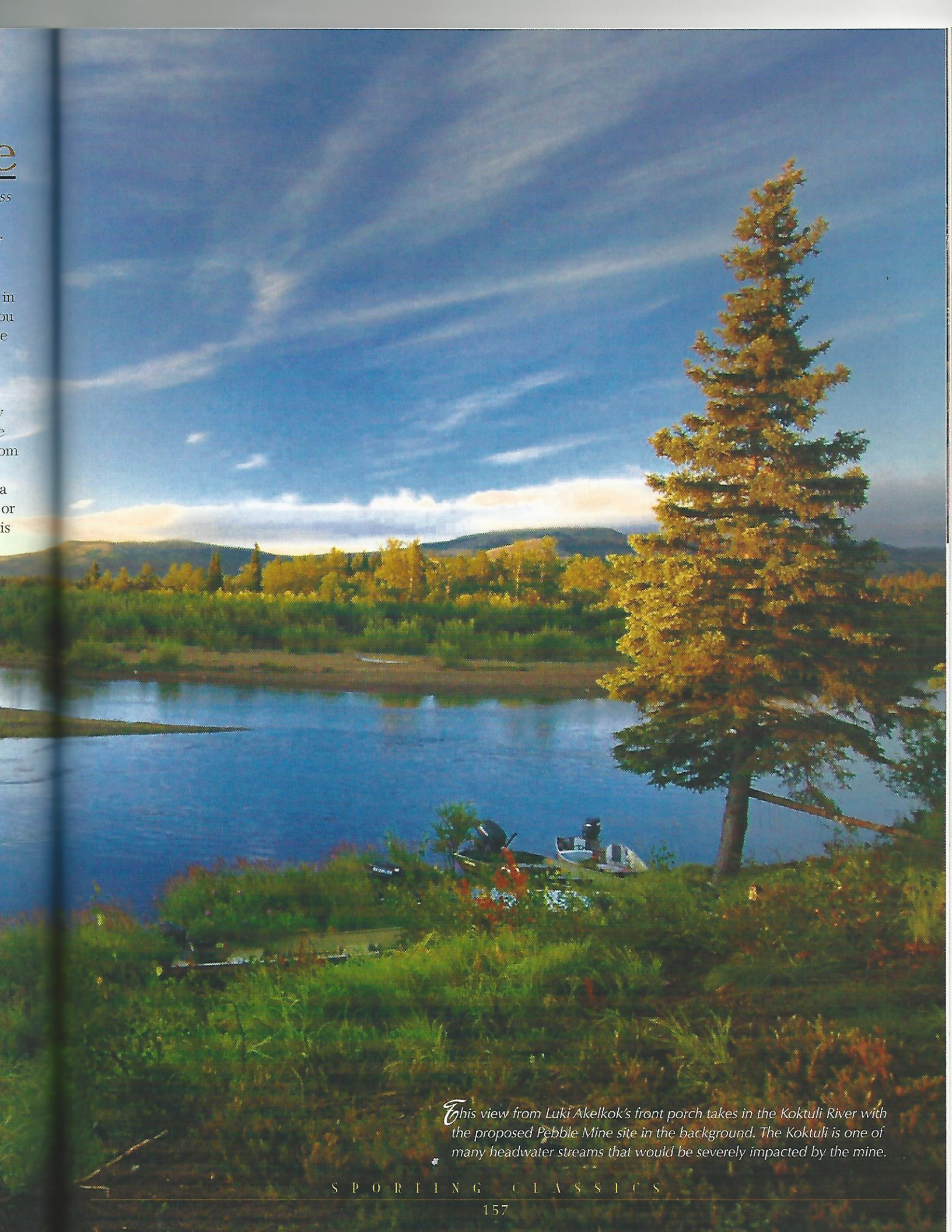
When you climb into the Talkeetna Range, bow slung across your back, glassing the 8,000-foot peaks for Dall sheep or when you wade into Talarik Creek, casting egg patterns for ten-pound rainbows grown fat on salmon spawn and attempt to ignore fresh grizzly bear footprints the size of dinner plates in the sand, it's hard to think of the environment of Alaska as anything other than robust.

Yet quite the opposite is true. If you hunt Alaska's muskeg for moose,

with every step you'll sink up to your ankles in bog. Unlike most areas, no layer of rock or lens of permafrost separates surface from groundwater in the flats north of Lake Iliamna. As you slog along, keep in mind that you're close by the Denali Fault. Along it in November 2002, an earthquake measuring 7.9 caused 29 feet of horizontal offset. The Good Friday quake of 1964 devastated Anchorage and many towns along and inland from the Gulf of Alaska. It charted 9.2 on the Richter scale. On average, Alaska experiences one quake measuring 7 or more every year. Terra firma Alaska is



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This view from Luki Akelkok's front porch takes in the Koktuli River with the proposed Pebble Mine site in the background. The Koktuli is one of many headwater streams that would be severely impacted by the mine.

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not. *Terra fragilis* is a much more accurate appellation.

Your search for a bull with a 50-inch spread has taken you into the heart of the 53 square miles where Canada's Northern Dynasty Minerals Ltd. and London-based Anglo American PLC joined forces to create the Pebble Limited Partnership to develop one of the world's largest copper and gold mines. Over Pebble Mine's projected 78-year life, ore would be dug from an open pit that would be 4,000 feet deep and three miles long. In addition, Pebble would include underground mining as well.

Only one percent of the rock removed is actually mineral ore, the rest is waste. Tailings from the mine would be contained by two and perhaps more huge earth-fill dams. The larger is planned to be 740 feet high, topping Hoover Dam on the Colorado by 14 feet. This massive structure will be up to 4.5 miles long and will hold back two billion tons of toxic tailings. Imagine the flood when the dam is breached by an earthquake.

To support mining, 23 billion gallons of water would be withdrawn from the headwaters of the Kaktuli River and another 8.5 billion gallons from Talarik Creek, effectively dewatering the upper watersheds where world-famous runs of sockeye salmon spawn.

Pebble Limited says it plans to neutralize chemicals in the wastewater before it's released. And when the mine closes, the huge open pit will be allowed to fill, creating a new lake. Acid mine drainage, poisonous to salmon and trout, will seep from the impoundments forever.

Failure of any of the components of Pebble Mine threatens Bristol Bay's salmon-based economy, which brings about \$420 billion into the region and sustains roughly 4,500 jobs every year. That wild-caught Alaska salmon, so delectable when charcoaled, and week-long vacations spent battling chinook,

coho, sockeye, pinks (my favorite on a 4-weight), and yes even chum salmon and the football-thick rainbows stuffed with their eggs could become but a memory.

To stop this environmental calamity, an organization representing more than 1,500 businesses and sporting groups are waging a campaign in Anchorage and Washington. The battle began eight years ago when Brian Kraft, who built Alaska Sportsman's Lodge on the Kvichak River in 1997 (*Sporting Classic's* Fishing Lodge of the Year for 2008), formed the Bristol Bay Alliance.

"Pebble mine will consume the headwaters of three rivers that feed Bristol Bay," says Kraft. "The mine will be a huge environmental and economic disaster, and will set a dangerous precedent threatening all of Alaska's wild rivers that flow through pristine country, which could someday be mined."

Last April I joined Brian and about 40 other leaders of Trout Unlimited and the Sportsmen's Alliance for Alaska including owners of Tikchik Narrows Lodge, Bristol Bay Lodge, Alaska Sportsman's Lodge, Copper River Lodge and Bear Trail Lodge to meet with President Obama's staff, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson and her staff, and members of Congress. Our message was simple. Pebble Mine must not gain required state and federal licenses.

I was able to tell them the story of Luki Akelkok, a Yup'ik tribal leader. He was 71 when I met him four years ago in Ekwok, a village about a quarter of the way up the Nushagak River and a principal tributary to Bristol Bay. I'd flown in from Anchorage via Dillingham to learn about the Pebble Mine for a chapter in my book, *Rivers of Restoration*.

The first night we sat together in his sweat lodge, cooling ourselves with rags dipped into a 5-gallon plastic bucket of water. He told me of how salmon had sustained his

people for thousands of years, of his fears for the failure of Pebble Mine's tailings dams, and his worries that without salmon his grandchildren would have no future in their homeland.

The next morning we loaded my flyrods into his outboard and motored 120 miles up the Nushagak to the Mulchatna, then up the Mulchatna to the Swan where the Koktuli comes in. Here he has his cabin. To the north are

the Jack Rabbit Hills. To the east across a low range of unnamed mountains lies the site of Pebble Mine. Flotillas of sockeye salmon, brilliant red after spawning, chased each other in the shallow run of the river in front of his cabin. With my six-weight, I caught a half-dozen rainbows in the 16-inch class.

Luki did not fish with me. Instead, he sat on a chair on his front porch gazing at the verdant muskeg and

ridges that stretched endlessly eastward. He wanted, I believe, his wilderness to soak into me like the steam from his sweat lodge.

In the morning we headed back down river. Here and there we cast for cohos holding in ebb water. They would take my streamer in a flash, then dash out into the heavy current. I could not hold them.

At the end of the trip Luki posed this: "They (owners of Pebble Mine) think we are dumb and cannot see. But they are the ones who don't see. For them, it is about money. For us, it is about our grandchildren and their children's children. The mines will close one day, maybe not for fifty or sixty years. What will happen then? What will happen if the salmon are all gone?"

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Pebble Mine can still be prevented. Up-to-date information on the status of mine is available from the Sportsmans Alliance for Alaska, www.sportsmansalliance4ak.org, and Save Bristol Bay, sponsored in part by Trout Unlimited, www.savebristolbay.org. Visit these sites, learn more about the mine and its impacts on the fishery and this fragile wilderness, and if you are concerned, write or call your members of Congress in Washington. Their contact information can be found at www.contactingthecongress.org.

The alliance and the American Fly Fishing Trade Association will match dollar for dollar up to \$200,000 any contributions to fight Pebble Mine.

"Bristol Bay needs every sportsman and woman that has fished there, or wants to fish there, to make a donation to prevent foreign mining companies from devastating the world's greatest sockeye salmon run," said Pat Vermillion, who owns Sweetwater Travel, Royal Coachman Lodge and Copper River Lodge with his brothers. Check out The Sportsmans Conservation Fund Challenge at www.savebristolbay.org.

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