The Extractive Industries and Society xxx (xxxx) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Extractive Industries and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/exis

Original article

The curious case of Cuyuna: Re–Envisioning former extractive sites to stimulate local communities

R.D Bergstrom

University of Minnesota Duluth, 324 Cina Hall, Duluth, MN, 55812, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Economic development
Community development
Iron ore mining
Tourism
Recreation
Mountain biking

ABSTRACT

Thirty years after the closing of the iron ore mines in the Cuyuna Range, the last of Minnesota's three great "Iron Ranges", a grass-roots, locally-led initiative set about to re-envision the range and the region through the establishment of the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area. Their goal was not only to stimulate local economies after mining, but also to preserve and protect the region's mining heritage and its natural environment. The objective of this study was to track the history of the Cuyuna SRA to understand better how former extractive sites can be re-envisioned and re-appropriated to benefit local communities and the natural environment long after mining ceases, and how the curious case of Cuyuna can be applied to other former extractive sites. Findings suggest that former extractive sites can be re-envisioned through ecological revitalization to benefit local communities and the natural environment, and that the closure of mining activities does not necessarily signal the demise of adjacent communities. However, each mine and its surrounding communities are at the mercy of their individual and collective context, including local decision making and the will of stakeholders, and it is this context that ultimately determines the success or failure of such endeavors.

1. Introduction

In his 1964 song *North Country Blues*, Bob Dylan wrote, "come gather 'round friends and I'll tell you a tale of when the red iron pits ran a-plenty. But the cardboard-filled windows, and old men on the benches, tell you now that the whole town is empty." By the time Dylan, who grew up in Minnesota's famed "Iron Range" (Fig. 1) wrote these words, he had seen several boom and bust cycles that often accompany resource dependent towns. By the early 1980s, however, the Iron Range had not just collapsed; it had imploded. Out-migration was eclipsing one percent per year, 11,000 out of 12,000 miners had lost their jobs (Serrin, 1992), and unlike the busts that occurred during Dylan's youth, there would be very little boom to follow. In fact, for the first time in generations, those living on the Iron Range began looking outside of mining for their livelihoods.

At the same time, Japanese consumers were using 80 million disposable chopsticks daily, and high labor costs and a timber shortage in Japan led to global demand. To then Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich and the Iron Range Rehabilitation Resource Board (IRRRB), created decades earlier for economic development in the region, the timing seemed right to build a chopstick factory on the Iron Range. Lakewood Industries Inc., hoped to use locally sourced aspen to produce seven million chopsticks per day, and turn a vacant property in Hibbing, Minnesota, into a $15 million a year economic diversification showcase. Unfortunately, after just three years, $5.275 million in public financing, and losses exceeding $3.5 million in 1987 alone, the factory closed due to the Japanese market being less than satisfied about the "fuzziness" of Iron Range chopsticks (Wahl, 2002).

While the dreams of chopsticks and foreign markets as panacea failed, there was hope, and not from the distant shores of a foreign country whose taste and traditions were difficult to satisfy (Kraker, 2016a). Jeno Paulucci, also an Iron Range native, was owner of over 70 companies, including Bellisio Foods, Chung King, and Jeno's Pizza Rolls. Paulucci convinced the city of Hibbing to sell him the chopstick factory for $1 so that he could build a $51 million pasta factory on the site. It seemed a perfect solution; employ up to 600 residents, leverage existing public dollars, and repurpose abandoned facilities. Unfortunately, by 1992 the project had failed before it even broke ground, with Paulucci moving the operation to Ohio due to financial differences with the city (Zdechlich, 1996).

While many community and economic development efforts have fallen short throughout the years (Wahl, 2002), the case of the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area highlights how self-organizing, grass-root efforts led by visionary local residents, as opposed to government-led initiatives, can re-envision former mining sites to stimulate local economies and protect the natural environment. As such, the objective of this study was to track the history of the Cuyuna SRA to understand better how former extractive sites can be re-envisioned and

E-mail address: rbergstr@d.umn.edu.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2017.10.005
Received 22 August 2017; Received in revised form 11 October 2017; Accepted 12 October 2017

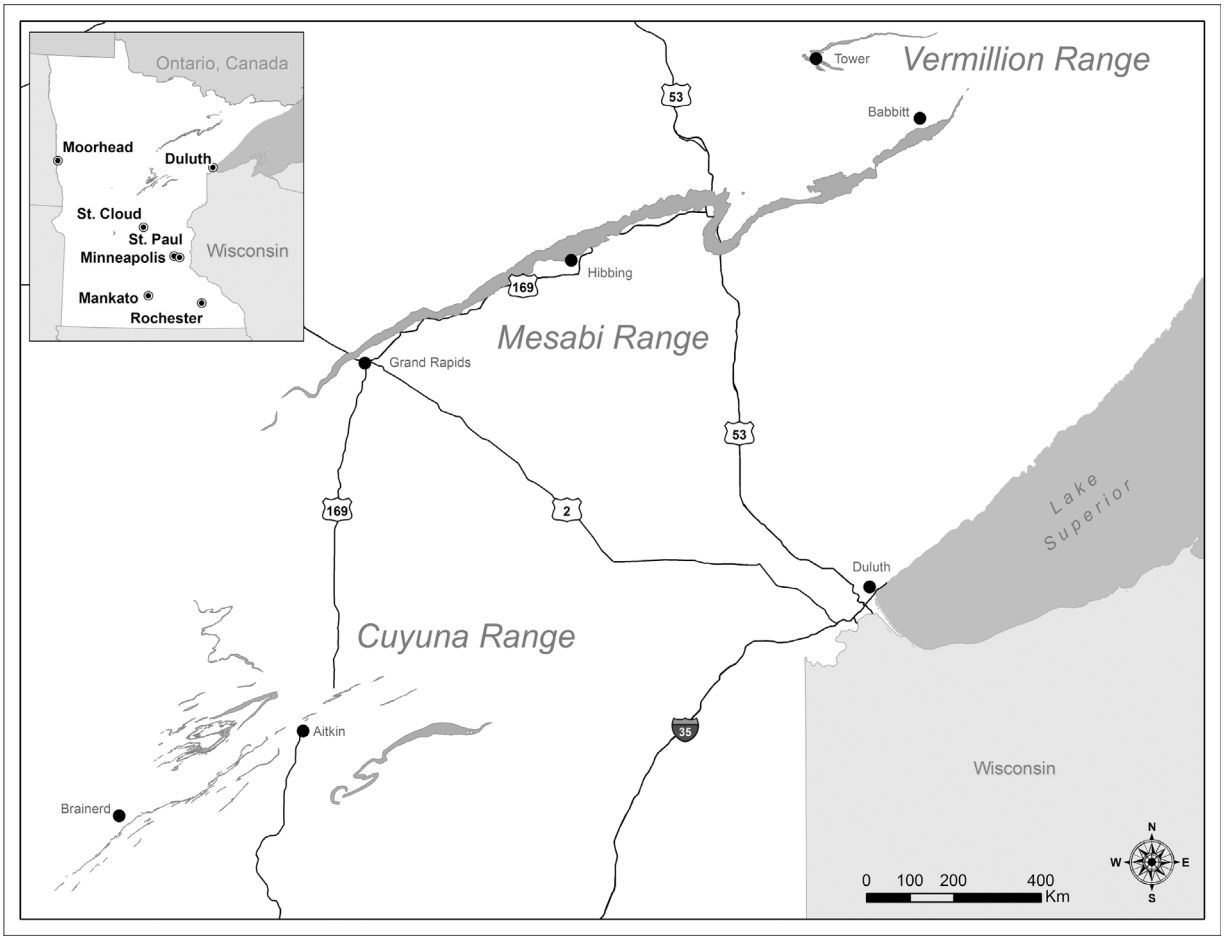

Fig. 1. The Iron Ranges of Minnesota. (Data Source: Minnesota Geospatial Commons, 2017).

appropriated to benefit local communities and the natural environment long after mining ceases, and how the curious case of Cuyuna can be applied to other former extractive locales. This is particularly relevant for regions and communities where top-down diversification initiatives have failed in the past, and where local decision-making, as opposed to extra-local, may help stakeholders transition toward long-term sustainability.

2. Minnesota's iron range

Minnesota's "Iron Range", a collection of elongated iron-ore producing districts including the Cuyuna, Vermillion, and Mesabi Ranges, is located in northeastern Minnesota, approximately 130 km northwest of Duluth and nearly 400 km from St. Paul, the states capital. Since the discovery of natural ore in 1884, over 400 mines have extracted millions of metric tons of iron ore throughout the region, attracting immigrants from over 40 countries, and resulting in a distinct cultural heritage (Lass, 1998). Beyond northern Minnesota, the influence of the Iron Range is profound, extending through two World Wars, and the economic booms that followed them. As Aaron Brown (2013) suggested on the importance of the Iron Range, "put simply, America is America because steel, the most important man-made element in all forms of manufacturing and construction, was relatively easy to produce with the abnormally rich and abundant iron ore of northern Minnesota."

Thus, iron Ore production is big business in the state of Minnesota, and especially in the communities that are dependent upon mining for economic vitality along the Iron Range. In a 2012 report, the University of Minnesota Duluth indicated that iron ore production contributed over $3 billion to the state's economy annually and created nearly 12,000 jobs. In addition, although the industry constitutes just five percent of the state's economy, extraction constitutes over 30 percent of the gross regional product on the Iron Range, substantially higher than other northern Minnesota economic staples such as tourism (11 percent) and forestry (10 percent) (Tuck, 2014).

2.1. Boom and bust on the range

The Iron Range, like most resource dependent regions, is prone to boom and bust cycles. From the opening of the Vermilion Range in 1884, until the stock market crash of 1929, the Iron Range boomed, with production exceeding 181 million metric tons during the first decade of the century, and nearly doubling to 363 million metric tons between 1920 and 1930. However, the 1930s saw production drop to 227 million metric tons and the beginning of the region's first major bust. The onset of World War II brought about another boom, as large amounts of steel were needed to support the war efforts (Manuel, 2015). During the war years, nearly 70 percent of the iron ore produced in the United States came from the Iron Range, and production rose to 318 million metric tons. It was not long before the market collapsed again; by 1964, the bust was so pronounced that the Oliver Mining Company, the largest in the region at the time, reduced production to four days per week, and local religious leaders met to discuss how to respond to the decline with their parishioners (Manuel, 2015). In a pattern that would repeat itself for decades to come, the primary culprit of the decline was international investment in ore production. Until World War II, iron ore operations in the United States were insulated because of the high transportation costs associated with international ore and the easy accessibility of locally sourced ore through the Great