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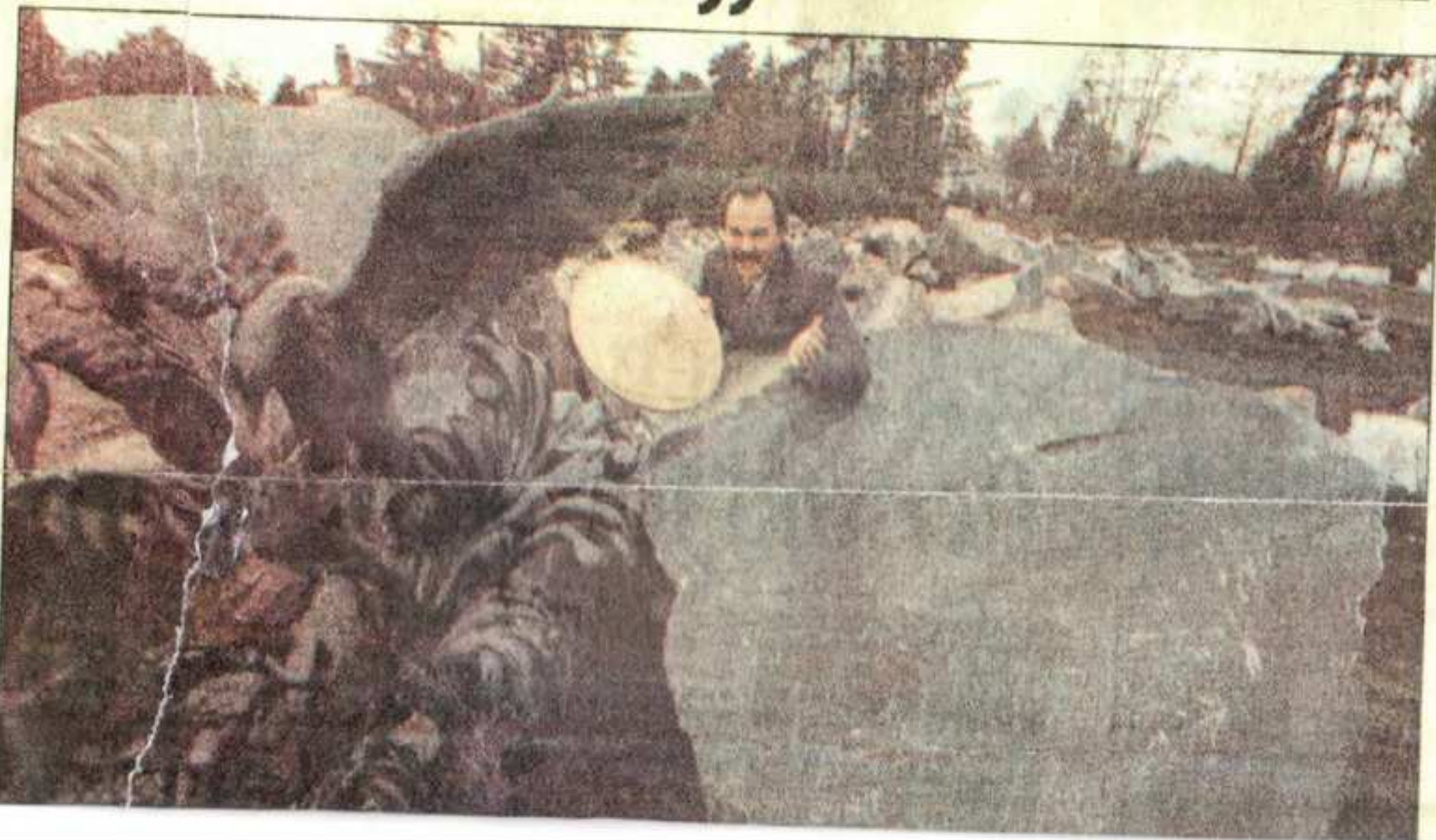
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The Asians buy it cheap and manufacture it cheap and we get it back in products

KYLE SOPEL

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GREEN PIECE: Kirk Makepeace shows off an 11 tonne block of jade destined for China

MARK VAN MANEN

GREEN GOLD

DAVID SMITH
Sun Business Reporter

Asia prizes it, but B.C. jade is one of Canada's best kept secrets

It's a semi-precious mineral, tougher than steel and green as all outdoors.

Jade, more properly called nephrite, was once considered more valuable than gold by the Chinese who refined the carving of it into a major art form during the Ming dynasty.

B.C. is one of the few places left in the world where good quality nephrite can still be found. Here, it has been designated as the provincial stone, a distinctive emblem much like the dogwood or western red cedar.

Natives along the Fraser River

used it to make axes and scrapers. In the gold rush days, Chinese placer miners found chunks of it in the Fraser Canyon and, the stories go, shipped them home in coffins to be buried with their countrymen's bones.

There was a lull when jade was just left in the ground, then rock-hound clubs rediscovered it in the canyon and a small industry developed.

In the 1950s, more jade was discovered. This time, around Dease

Lake and Ogden Mountain in the Cassiar area of B.C., all of which brings us to Kirk Makepeace, president of Jade West Resources Ltd. in Surrey, and some of the things we do with this resource.

Jade West, Makepeace says, is "the leading jade mining company in B.C." and, he adds, Canada leads the world in jade production.

"But it's probably the country's best kept secret."

His company spends the summer

months tearing jade out of Ogden Mountain, 200 miles north of Fort St. James, and sending it by truck and ship in 20-tonne lots to the People's Republic of China, which supplanted Taiwan as the prime export destination during the 1980s.

Makepeace spends the other nine months each year trying to sell jade through his other company, New World Gemstones.

It's a private family business, employing eight and it makes money, says Makepeace. They charge \$5 to \$15 per kilogram for their jade and hope to sell 200 tonnes of it this year to the Chinese,

Please see JADE, D2

JADE: B.C. artists laud semi-precious mineral

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about the same as last year's figure.

They also sell jade in smaller quantities to New Zealand — which stopped exporting uncut jade years ago — Germany, Hong Kong and the Japanese, who have just started buying it from them.

Makepeace's company also makes coffee tables and vases out of jade which they send to a customer in New York.

The Asians use the highest grades for jewelry and for carving traditional statues and Buddhas. "There's a huge market in the Orient for the West Coast animals that are shipped back here to be sold as souvenirs," he says.

Souvenirs.

A lot of the jade exported offshore and then manufactured winds up as a small carving in Gastown or earrings in a Robson Street boutique. Lift them up and the label says it all: Made in China.

But it's B.C. jade.

Even Makepeace has his doubts about exporting jade: "The Canadian jade industry has been shipping it off for pennies per pound. Historically, this stuff had more value than gold but by shipping so much, we've degraded it."

If Makepeace sold 200 tonnes last year abroad, he sold only five tonnes to local artisans. He says there's 17 in all scattered throughout the province. That number needs improving, says Makepeace, and who would argue with that?

Kyle Sopol runs a gallery and studio on Esplanade in North Vancouver and claims to be among only a

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JEANNIE MACCULLOCH

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“handful” of Canadian artisans capable of taking jade and making it an art object.

He says he's been carving jade for 18 years.

“There's nowhere else really to get jade. This is some of the best quality in the world,” he says, “the only reason I can exist as a sculptor is because I'm in Vancouver and have access to good quality jade.”

He carves North American wildlife subjects for U.S. and some Canadian collectors willing to shell out \$1,500 to \$20,000 for each piece.

It takes time to build up expertise in carving jade. It's difficult, expensive and can take two years to train staff to create jade carvings. The jade jewelry manufacturing is “completely Oriental” he says.

There's a bit of irony here: Sopol wouldn't be in business if Makepeace didn't mine the jade and export it to the Chinese — it would be far too expensive to mine just to meet the domestic demand.

“The costs of manufacturing jade are very high,” Sopol says. “If we didn't have Oriental buyers, we wouldn't exist.”

In 18 years, he says, they've learned to refine the way they work with jade, their skills as artisans have improved — and all the good jade is getting harder to find.

“The easy jade has been mined. Twenty years ago, they were virgin mines. You could literally go in with a truck and just load it in off the ground. Now you've got to get it out of hardrock placements.”

That, plus “it's been exploited to the point where people have misconceptions of what it is. They think it's cheap green stuff that you make jewelry out of.

“The fact of the matter is it's a rare semi-precious mineral that we have the best quality of in the world and it's mined here and the Asians buy it cheap and manufacture it cheap and we get it back in products.”

Canada doesn't have an established market for jade that manufacturers can plug into, he concludes. “It's like exporting the maple leaf.”

Jeannie MacCulloch owns Jade World in Vancouver, a business that produces locally-carved jade products, that sells imported carved products and conducts tours of the manufacturing operations for tourists.

The fact is, she says, we can't compete with Asian labor costs.

“Thank heavens there is an Asian industry. It's keeping us going. We have these rocks that are available in B.C. and because of them we have something for the tourists. If we

were the only people manufacturing it, it would be far too expensive for the tourists.

“If we didn't have the Orient to make our products at a reasonable price, we'd have a problem, but a lot of people don't agree with me. They say we should be charging more for B.C. jade.”

Any solutions? MacCulloch suggests things won't change unless for some unlikely reason the Asians stop carving jade. Sopol thinks we should develop a manufacturing base that can compete with the imports or impose tariffs, a traditional North American response to low priced imports.

The mineral policy branch of the ministry of mines, energy and petroleum started collecting figures on nephrite production in B.C. in 1959 even though there were several years of significant production before that.

Production hit 600 tonnes in 1989, worth about \$2.6 million, and it came mostly from the Cassiar-Asbestos Corp. operation and Jade West. Preliminary figures for 1990 show a drastic drop to 200 tonnes.

Asked to explain the drop, Makepeace says the other guys stopped production and, of course, Tiananmen Square.

It's hard to say exactly how much jade there is in B.C., says Stan Leaming, a retired field manager for the federal geological survey branch and author of the government publication *Jade in Canada*. He figures about \$12 million worth of jade has been mined in B.C.