

Environmental and Public Health Disaster: Canada's Tar-Sands Cesspool

High Incidence of Cancer

By [Michael Werbowski](#)

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The Paris based, French monthly journal, "Le Monde Diplomatique", in it's April edition took a long, hard, and deep, look into the immense toxic cesspool which are the Alberta tar-sands today. According to the in-depth report (entitled in French: "Sous les sables bitumineux de l'Alberta") , around the Athabasca lake region, the cancer rate is becoming "alarming"; or 30% above the Albertain provincial average. The culprit is suspected to be the 230 Km2 toxic reservoirs where the effluence from the oil industry's operations is collected. The massive scale extraction of the "black oil," underway for years now, seeks to suck out the remaining 170 billion barrels of beneath the Boreal forest, of which huge swaths are by now cut and destroyed to get to the oil (as the earth is transformed into toxic sludge) underneath. Massive quantities of fresh-water are used to "steam out" the viscous petrol from the tar-like sands. The process gives off vast amount of CO2 gas as well.

Oil bonanza spikes Alberta's cancer rate

The reporter (Emmanuel Raoul) spoke to locals (most of them Amerindian tribes) from nearby Fort Chipewyan who tell sordid stories, of catching poisoned and deformed fish,often reeking with the stench of putrefied petroleum. Provincial and Federal health officials, for their part, have tended for some time to either deny or down play, the apparent causal links between the oil tar- sands' open pit operations, and the high- incidence of cancer in the surrounding region. Almost as if if the oil companies' presence there, had nothing to do with the disease. The intrepid investigative reporter, also found that doctors' concerns are often dismissed, despite the statistical evidence which indicates, that there is an increased incidence of cancer where oil extraction exists. The "cesspool cancers" are linked to a host of factors. The reporter interviewed Dr. Kevin Timoney, who was put in charge by the local community to examine toxicity levels in the environment.[quote] "One has to ask if the level of toxins in the air, water, the fish, and the animals are high enough to have an impact on heath" [/quote]he explains. However, health authorities maintain the high content of toxic chemicals (also a by product of the extraction) is in the region's river is caused naturally.

Disproving the obvious or obfuscating the facts for the sake of profit?

Personally, I have heard this argument many times before while reporting and researching the other very destructive and dirty extractive activity of mining over the years. For instance, the mining industry, also (like the tar -sands)) uses vast amounts of water in the extractive process. In addition, while mining carcinogenic chemicals (cyanide, arsenic, mercury etc.) are also used to separate the ore from the precious minerals which are dug

up, then “leached”. The waste from this method, enters and seeps into the local rivers, lakes and streams as a result. Hence, river basin down stream in places like the Brazil’s Amazon contain fish with abnormally high amount of mercury , arsenic and other heavy metals linked to a whole host of serious health hazards; coincidentally and usually in the vicinity, mining activity is located and watersheds are polluted as a result. Is there a link here to cancer? Maybe not, but when indigenous communities in tropical parts of the world for instance, complain to public health or environmental regulators about undrinkable water or high mercury levels in their fish and food some-thing is likely to happen: often and in great haste, studies are then done to seemingly disprove the linkage between the mining and mercury and other chemical in the water supply and the resulting poor health.

Researchers and biologists (hired in some cases by the mining company itself) carry out “independent studies” to “pacify” the concerns of the local population. They (those contracted to do the environmental impact reports) also trot out the familiar argument or cant readily offered by officialdom, which seems to be far too close to the oil industry in Alberta : that the rising levels of these toxins in the water supply is mainly due to a natural occurrence and has little or no connection what so ever to the oil or mining operations nearby.

Syncrude and Shell Oil: Digging deep and wide in Canada’s “Dead Zone”

Syncrude of Canada limited (of which the energy starved China is 9 percent stakeholder) has 6 open pit oil operations with huge earth moving equipment humming almost round the clock around the town of Fort Mckay in the Athabasca area. The surrounding region (once pristine marshes for water fowl) is stripped of all its forests and vegetation. It looks like (from the many photos made available to the public) like an almost lunar landscape: a kind of barren waste-land or “dead zone”. According to the “[i]Le Monde Diplomatique’s [/i]feature report ” artificial lakes” the size of 720 million cubic meters, have become vast bird and duck cemeteries or gargantuan receptacles filled with putrid gases. The tar-oil processing factories nearby, relentlessly spew out sulfurous gases and highly pollutant emissions, which the local population breathes and is exposed to. Another much bigger oil giant, Shell is preparing is exploit and dig for oil, a 33 kms wide area in the tar sands sector.

Who will clean up the mess: The Government- Taxpayer or the Petroleum Industry?

Alberta is Prime Minister Harper’s political territory and his riding in Calgary is the city which is host and home to Canadian and foreign oil company majors . Surely there is some not so insignificant linkage between “big oil” in the Rockies and the federal powers regulating the industry in Ottawa. An investigative report like the one mentioned above is not needed to deduce this fact. One needs the other, in order to conduct business as usual. However what remain unclear, is who will pick up the tap one day when the oil- rush is over? Who will clean up this colossal mess?

This question remains unanswered.

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Articles by: [Michael Werbowski](#)

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