

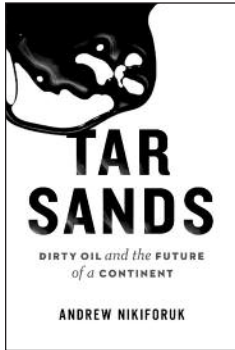
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Reprint from Volume 21 Number 6

Mar 26, 2009

Petrostate Canada and the Tar Sands - Patrick Brown



The Tar Sands, says Calgary journalist Andrew Nikiforuk, are making Canada into an 'oil-addled petro-state'. This is the most serious conclusion of his book, *Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent*, co-published by Vancouver's Greystone Books and the David Suzuki Foundation.

Significantly, the entire book was available

online all last week. In the form of a PDF file, it was free to read. The PDF notched up some 9,100 downloads in a couple of days, at least five times the normal first week's response, says Greystone.

Nikiforuk's book is important. It's provoking. It should restart the national debate. It is an exhaustively researched, comprehensive, survey of everything about the tar sands, compressed into some 180 pages. As you would expect, it is not a pretty story.

The US needs oil; Alberta has something called bitumen, mixed with sand, spread over (or under) a very large area of the province. It is tar; it's not oil; but in theory, the bitumen could be extracted and processed into a supply of oil that would last for many years, and cure all North America's energy problems. In theory.

A Litany of Complications

As you might have guessed, Nikiforuk says it ain't that simple. You might think you have heard it all before: the stripping of the boreal forest, the excavation of the land, and the total lack of reclamation; the use of massive quantities of Athabasca

River water, the use of enormous quantities of natural gas to extract, process, and 'upgrade' the bitumen to synthetic crude, the construction of pipelines to both transport the bitumen and import condensate to dilute it so it will flow; the accumulation of toxic waste in vast ponds visible from space, the leakage of those ponds into the water table, the downstream pollution of the river, the soil, the air, the uncontrolled emission of large quantities of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases; the unlivable conditions in Fort McMurray, the cancers of Fort Chipewyan downstream, the accident rate on the highway from Edmonton, and so on and so on.

The average Canadian, he says, uses 25 barrels of oil a year; the average Albertan, 60 barrels. If that oil is from the tar sands, that 60 barrels represents 180 barrels (6,303 gallons) of Athabasca river water, 120 tonnes of sand, and 84,000 cubic feet of gas; it results in 78 barrels of toxic sludge, and 187 pounds of CO₂ (even before the fuel is used).

Some researchers have calculated that a shortage of water will eventually strangle tar sands development; others have calculated that at some point Canada will have to choose between exporting natural gas to the US and using it to process bitumen

for export to the US.

You have heard it all before, but just in case you hadn't organized it in your own mind, Nikiforuk has done it for you, in a thorough, mind-numbing and frightening litany. There's an index, a pipeline map, and list of references in the back of the book.

You will also have heard that at today's oil price—around

Twelve Steps to Energy Sanity:

1. Admit the magnitude and complexity of the energy crisis;
2. Slow down tar sands development and cap production at two million barrels a day;
3. Establish a national energy strategy for Canadian energy security and innovation;
4. Impose a carbon tax with a 100% dividend;
5. Challenge the First Law of Petropolitics—mandate transparency and freedom of information, separate tar sands revenues from general revenue to build a national sovereign fund, and reassert accountability in tax regimes;
6. Challenge continental energy integration;
7. Relocalize food production;
8. Abandon economic dead-end activities such as carbon capture and storage;
9. Orient all urban and rural planning to renewable energy;
10. Pick the lowest-hanging fruit first (in emissions reduction and energy conservation);
11. Don't wait for government; and

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This article was published (March 26, 2009) in 'Island Tides'. 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing 17,500 print copies throughout the Gulf Islands and the Canadian Strait of Georgia from Victoria to Campbell River to Howe Sound.

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\$50 per barrel—they can't afford to develop it, so they've slowed down. Don't assume this hiatus will last for long.

You have also heard that Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS), on which governments will spend billions, will solve the tar sands greenhouse gas problem, and that nuclear power will solve the tar sands energy problem. Nikiforuk says they won't.

Petrostates

All this, anyway, is prelude. Nikiforuk draws a direct connection between an economy based on oil and the corruption of government. He quotes Thomas Friedman's First Law of Petropolitics: 'The price of oil and the quality of freedom invariably travel in opposite directions.'

He blames the rapid development of the tar sands for the 'bizarre and unsettled' state of Canadian politics, for the government's 'obsession' with North American union, for the 'impervious nature' of the Stephen Harper regime, for the 'authoritarian character' of the Albertan provincial government, and for the nation's 'dismal' climate change record.

And also he points to plenty of international examples of the First Law: Venezuela, Iran, Nigeria, Russia, Texas—yes, Texas. The 'paradox of plenty', he says, results in states with low taxes, low voter turnout (Alberta, 2008 provincial election, 40%; Fort McMurray, 21%), governments that don't listen to citizens and discourage dissent, but buy votes to stay in power, and a decline in the integrity of civil institutions. Oil-rich states, he says, rarely achieve political maturity, and become 'fat and lazy'.

He has plenty to say about Alberta's absurdly low oil royalties (1% on tar sands until their capital cost is covered, which hasn't happened yet) and the government's lack of accountability in actually collecting the money.

Canada's federal government under Albertan Stephen Harper, he says, is becoming a 'petrostate'; he points to Harper's naming Rona Ambrose, daughter of an oil executive, as his first Environment Minister.

As further evidence, Nikiforuk accuses Canada of having no energy plan and no security of supply, and of supporting US access to and dependence on tar sands oil. He goes on to point out that the federal government has used its tax windfall from tar sands development to reduce corporate taxes and the GST.

The Future

Another quote: from M King Hubbert, the man who first told us about peak oil, pointed out the dependence of western society on continued exponential growth: 'it is incapable of dealing with problems of non-growth.'

That quote was, believe it or not, from 1976. And this is now. Alberta, and maybe Canada, has all its eggs in one basket.

Nikiforuk anticipates—and indeed begs for—a national debate: on Canadian sovereignty, water security, petrodollars, nuclear energy, and climate change. He expects two sides: one, I'd call precautionary, which would plan for, and reduce, tar sands production; the other would grow the economy, unplanned, and rely on markets to ensure it all works out. Nikiforuk does not belong to the 'don't worry—be happy' school of thought. He's genuinely concerned about our governments' ability to solve the problems that the tar sands present.

To arrange a book talk call Alison at Greystone Books, 604-254-7191.

Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent, Andrew Nikiforuk, Greystone Books and David Susuki Foundation, Vancouver, \$20. ☞