

Keepers of the Water III: Water is Boss!

Something in the water

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Since early July, members of the Keepers of the Athabasca Watershed Society (KAWS) have been travelling the length of the Athabasca River Basin. Along the way, they're holding conferences in communities alongside the river as part of their Keepers of the Water tour. The tour started on Jul 6 at the river's origins in Jasper, and is set to culminate in a five-day gathering of environmental organizations, community leaders and First Nations groups in Fort Chipewyan—where the river ends.

The aim of the event, according to KAWS, is to highlight the importance of the river, as well as the effects that the ongoing abuse of this precious resource is having on the ecosystem and the communities that live along the Athabasca.

“I think a major concern for many of us is around what quantities of water need to be left in the river [during the river's] low-flow conditions in the winter,” explains KAWS co-chair Harvey Scott, from his farm in Athabasca.

A professor emeritus at the University of Alberta who specialized in outdoor education and ecotourism, Scott is a deeply insightful man of nearly 70 who has been making noise about environmental sustainability since long before it was in style to do so.

As Scott points out, last year—and only after a lot of criticism—the Alberta government finally came up with a water-allocation framework to protect the Athabasca River and the communities that depend on it. But these new regulations on corporate water usage by companies like Suncor and Syncrude, Scott charges, amount to little more than a farce, and fall far short of addressing the concerns raised by those that live by the river.

“Alberta Environment is not doing its duty in monitoring and addressing what the impacts are. They tend to minimize [the impacts of the tar sands development], and their position seems to be primarily to run interference for the [companies],” Scott continues. “They would never close the taps on tar sands projects, even if the water levels became very, very low.”

Essentially, Scott proclaims, a number of people in Alberta are now finding themselves living in what he calls the government's “sacrifice zone.”

The people of the Mikisew Cree First Nation make their home in part of that sacrifice zone, in Fort Chipewyan. The remote northern community is just downstream of the tar sands developments, and the Mikisew depend on the Athabasca River for their livelihood. George Poitras is the former chief of the Mikisew and shares Scott's concerns about the enormous amount of water used by industry, an amount that some reports say would have otherwise been

enough to sustain a human population of two million people.

Poitras cites studies that have found the river level has dropped by a third in just a few decades, but adds that in addition to the oil industry's negative impacts on water quantity, communities are also seeing frightening effects on water quality.

“Recently, we’ve been observing multiple health issues in the community of Fort Chipewyan. In the worst cases, we’re seeing very rare types of cancer showing up in our people,” Poitras notes. “These are cancers that our doctor says that you should find one case of in every 100 000 people. Our community is 1200 people and we’re finding five to six cases currently.”

The doctor Poitras is talking about is John O’Connor. When O’Connor was hired as the town’s fly-in doctor in 2000, he was quickly astounded by what he called a disproportionate number of citizens suffering from sicknesses that ranged from thyroid disorders to a rare form of bile duct cancer. Concerned that something might be wrong, O’Connor first brought it up with his colleagues. In 2006, he took it a step further and publicly announced on CBC radio his suspicions that tar sands development was responsible for these health problems.

However, instead of praising him for bringing to light his concern, Health Canada demanded that O’Connor be investigated for causing “undue alarm” and called on the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta to revoke his medical license. Today, government officials admit that O’Connor may have been right, and a comprehensive report on cancer rates in Fort Chipewyan is due out this fall.

The situation is reaching a critical point not only in matters of human health, Poitras stresses, but in terms of the environment as well. Horror stories about grossly deformed fish downstream of the tar sands developments abound, as do stories about moose and other animals with massively enlarged livers. Many Mikisew are now afraid to eat animals that were once a traditional part of their diet. The area around Fort Chipewyan is also home to endangered species like the whooping crane. Until they are given more answers, Poitras concludes, the Mikisew First Nation is calling for a moratorium on tar sands development.

Kim Capstick, a spokesperson for Alberta Environment, isn’t ready to commit to such a bold move. She says that the ongoing government monitoring of the river, in place since the 1970s, has shown no significant change in water quality. Any chemicals in the river, she says, are naturally occurring, and originate from the oily soil in the Athabasca’s riverbank.

“What’s unique about the Athabasca River, and I think needs to be considered when we look at that river and where it goes, is that the oil sands deposits—quite a large one—are there, and the Athabasca River actually runs right through the middle of [the deposit],” Capstick points out. “So if you go upstream of the oil sands development projects, you will see—on a hot day, for example—you can see the oil actually seeping out of the river banks, out into that water.”

As for water level concerns, Capstick adds that the government has very stringent regulations in place about how much water industry can take out of the river.

“It’s actually limited on a week-to-week basis based on how much water is in the river, and when levels are at their lowest—which is typically in the winter months—we can limit industry back significantly on the amount of water that they can take. And we put that regulation in place to ensure that the ecosystem is protected downstream of the Athabasca.”

As Scott points out, though, independent studies have found serious flaws with the way the government conducts its monitoring and its assessments of environmental impact. He points to research done by University of Alberta ecologists Kevin Timoney and David Schindler—among others—that has shown that industry is indeed having a significant effect on water quality and the environment.

Scott adds that while the issues surrounding the Athabasca River and the tar sands are the easiest to use as an example, the Keepers of the Water are concerned about other rivers and industrial projects as well. Coal-fuelled power plants, the recently proposed nuclear power plants and several massive damming projects that are currently being planned are among the other projects that pose a huge danger to Alberta’s watersheds—not just the Athabasca River, but the Peace and the Slave Rivers as well. He wishes that the government would force industry to find more sustainable ways of using these resources, or encourage the use of more sustainable power sources like solar, wind and geothermal.

“The governments seem to think [the oil’s] going to go bad,” Scott muses. “But it’s already been in the ground for hundreds of millions of years. So why do we have to develop, all of a sudden, all of it in such a short time frame? I don’t know the answer to that.

“I have friends who are geologists, and a bit of geology background myself, and it seems that the stuff isn’t going to go bad in the ground. So why is there such a hurry?” V

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