

# Life and Death Over a Barrel of Oil



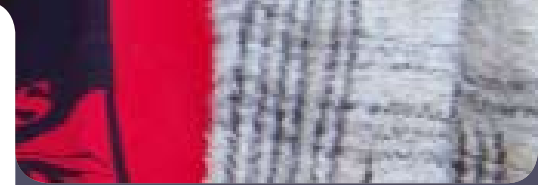
**F**ort Chipewyan is a small First Nations community nestled on the northern shores of Lake Athabasca. Home to a population of 1,200 people from the Mikisew Cree First Nations, the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nations and the Métis local, the community has a strong history of living in harmony with the land and water.

That is changing now, as the oil industry creeps closer, pillaging nearby lands to extract billions of barrels of oil from the tar sands. Mike Mercredi grew up in Fort Chipewyan and returned there a few years ago to work and be with his family. What he has seen has led him to speak out about the high price his family, friends and neighbours are paying because of the unrelenting toll tar sands extraction is taking on the air, water and land. He spoke with *Canadian Perspectives* recently about his experiences and shares this story in his own words.

Sometimes you just look around and say, “Where did all of this come from?” Some nights when you are out there, out on the lake, or when you are out in the bush, when you look towards the south you can actually see the lights glowing from industry, which tells us this is coming. It’s coming towards us.

The trees are gone and being cut, the land is upside down, and the water is being poisoned. It’s like a moonscape out there. You can see the shovels digging into the land and taking everything away – just turning it upside down. And then what’s left behind is nothing but dark, black, dirty soil.

In the last year people have changed their attitudes towards the industry. A few years ago people used to be real nice to them because all they saw was job opportunities and training opportunities and chances for money. In the last year or so, because of Doctor [John] O’Connor raising awareness of the rise in cancers, and because of deformities in the fish and the water being bad, people are just disgusted by it. A lot of anger is coming out in the meetings. When Suncor came up to talk about the spillage they had in the river this year and the millions of litres they’ve been leaching over the years,



Mike Mercredi has lost family members to cancer and has seen his community of Fort Chipewyan struggle to deal with the effects caused by the increasing proximity of Alberta’s tar sands. Here, he addresses more than 200 people gathered at the Alberta Legislature to oppose the tar sands.

people were shouting and screaming at them. Suncor was trying to tell us that what is in the water is nothing bad. And the stuff they release a mile or so down the river – that it would accumulate and that it would be fine by the time it got to Fort Chip.

Things have changed here. Commercial fishing isn’t happening any more. People have to bring their own water into the bush with them now, where they didn’t have to before. Some people used to trap a lot and they don’t do it any more. In some times of year the trapping seems to be okay, but other times it’s not enough to make a living off of it. In their homes, some people still just use the water right out of the tap and some don’t. Some put in filtra-

tion systems but they don't know how effective it is. They don't know if the filtration systems get the carcinogens that cause cancer.

The kids are scared to swim in the lake. For some that do it's because they just aren't aware of [the concerns with the water], or aren't believing

[them] because they've been living like this their whole life. They don't understand when all of a sudden people are saying, "Don't drink the water, don't go in the water, it's not good for you." People have gone into the water and gotten sores on their bodies. There was a guy that I know who went into the lake for a swim and when he came out he had sores all over his arms and legs. And there were some people that were getting cysts on their bodies – they didn't say that they were swimming in the water, but they were drinking the water and showering in the water. [Doctors] are telling us the cysts are some kind of bacteria thing, like a viral bacteria. When we ask [doctors] where it comes from they won't say.

The community has been having meetings about what to do about the water and what to do about the industry. The industry has these industry relations corporations and agreements that they sign with First Nations and they use these to consult with them, and when First Nations bring concerns to them, the industry says there isn't anything they can do – they say, "We're doing everything within regulations." So the meetings don't go over very well. People are saying, "We don't believe what you are saying any more," especially when they are burying another friend or family member. So next is to go after the government.

But the government isn't doing anything – they're allowing this. They've been told about what's happening, they've been given the facts, but they

just dismiss it and say it's not as bad. [Alberta Premier Ed] Stelmach has been told what is happening here – he has been told the facts – that people

are dying. I mean, look at all the [cancer] cases we've got – six cases in the last year. Since 1999 there have been 108 people that died from cancer.

But the government is still approving [tar sands development]. They are just approving the genocide of the people. Plain and simple.

It's people in industry allowing people to die. It's just phenomenal that not everyone knows. I went to B.C. and people were like, "It's really that bad up there?" and I said, "Yeah, it's really that bad." All they hear is a one-sided story about how prosperous it is and how good it is for the economy. It's all they hear. But what is really happening is that it is killing off the people. It's not just one First Nation, it's more than one.

It's just a matter of time before we run out of places to live. It's just a matter of time before we run out of air. It's just a matter of time before we run out of water to drink. And what's left? Because what people need to know is that the tar sands is just starting.

I buried my Auntie this year. And I buried my Uncle a couple of years ago. And I have another Auntie living with cancer. To me, their lives are worth more than a barrel of oil. This is where part of my strength comes from. It just keeps pushing me to keep going. I just want people to listen – to take the message and see what they can do. It all comes back to what people can do because if Canada is still a democracy then we all have a say about the direction our country is going in. The majority needs to come together and say, "No more. Enough is enough."

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# Touring on the Tar Sands

by Harjap Grewal

As one of the largest industrial projects in human history, infrastructure for the tar sands is spreading across the continent to support the transportation and energy requirements of the Alberta operation.

With support of local partners, the Council of Canadians hosted a multi-city tour in British Columbia in December to raise awareness of the devastating impacts of the tar sands, both locally and nationally. Mike Mercredi from the Fort Chipewyan First Nation in northern Alberta and Jessie Kalman from the Polaris Institute joined local activists Dustin Johnson, Will Horter and Neskie Manuel on a speaking tour in B.C. communities about the impacts of the tar sands industry in Alberta and British Columbia. The tour – which stopped in Kitimat, Vancouver, Kamloops, Courtenay, Nanaimo and Victoria – attracted hundreds of people.

The infrastructure proposed in B.C. is crucial for future tar sands development, as it will facilitate the shipment of crude oil to U.S. refineries on the Pacific Coast and to the international market. Both Enbridge and KinderMorgan have pipeline proposals to Kitimat, and KinderMorgan is also expanding an existing pipeline that carries crude to North Burnaby.

Even as we are watching oil corporations struggle due to the current economic crisis and falling oil prices, the Council of Canadians, in partnership with local allies, will continue speaking out against the B.C. projects and support efforts to obtain justice for indigenous communities and the environment impacted by tar sands development.