

# Alberta Oilsands Projects: Canada's Hiroshima

By [Eric Walberg](#)

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Canadian rock legend Neil Young has taken to the road with a mission. Sunday night, he laid down the gauntlet [on national TV](#), calling the Canadian government “completely out of control” as he began his “Honour the Treaties” tour in Toronto. His goal is to help First Nations in their fight against the expanding oilsands projects in Alberta. To the government, “Money is number one. Integrity isn’t even on the map.”

Honour the Treaties is a series of benefit concerts in Toronto, Winnipeg, Regina and Calgary to raise money to support the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN) in their battle against a multi-billion dollar expansion of the oilsands project in northern Alberta. ACFN’s 2007 court challenge to Shell’s lease at the Jackpine Mine failed in 2011, but is being appealing to the Supreme Court of Canada.

“The oil sands projects are among the very dirtiest on earth,” said a defiant Young. Just to extract and process the toxic sludge each day “produces as much CO2 as all the cars in Canada”, three times as much as more efficient methods. “This oil is going not to Canada, but to China where the air quality has been measured at 30 times the levels of safety established by the World Health Organization. Is that what Canada is all about?”

This is bad PR for the scandal-plagued Conservatives. Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s office immediately issued a statement insisting that Canada’s environmental laws are “rigorous”, and piously vowed to “ensure that companies abide by conditions set by independent, scientific and expert panels.” The statement snidely accused Young of hypocrisy: “Even the lifestyle of a rock star relies on the resources developed by thousands of hard-working Canadians every day.”

Young wasted no time in turning the tables, insisting that the tarsands “violate our laws, traditions, values” and the “inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples under international law”, that it is the Harper government that is being hypocritical. Young went to see for himself, touring one of 50 oilsands sites, and was shocked at “the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen. It’s the greediest, most destructive and most disrespectful demonstration of something that has run amok.”

Fait accompli?

Shell, Marathon and Chevron plan to massively expand their mining operations at Jackpine, about 70 km north of Fort McMurray, in Cree territory. According to CBC, “Shell’s assessment projects that 185,872 hectares of wetlands in the area will be lost or altered as a result of the Jackpine Mine expansion and other industrial activity ... 21 kilometres of the Muskeg River would be destroyed as a result of the mine extension.” When the Conservative government announced final approval last December, Shell stated—anticipating smooth

sailing—that it had already purchased 730 hectares of former cattle pasture to compensate for this destruction.

“And that’s Shell’s calculations! What about ours?” asks activist Jennifer Tsun. “Can someone let the migratory birds know? The caribou also need to be notified. And the fish in the water.”

The Athabasca deposit is located within the boundaries of Treaty 8 and overlaps traditional Indigenous lands of the Dene, Cree and Metis. “ACFN has, for the longest time, fought industry and government to really set lands aside for ACFN for the practice of treaty rights”, said Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation Elder Pat Marcel. “I have been pushing for 20 years now for consultation to happen.” A dispirited Marcel fears that the expansion will lead to a rush of other mining projects, destroying irrevocably what’s left of their environment.

Canada’s Federal Environment Minister Leona Aglukkaq admitted, “that the designated project is likely to cause significant adverse environmental effects.” Nonetheless, she okayed the expansion, since the Cabinet “decided that the significant adverse environmental effects that the designated project is likely to cause are justified in the circumstances.”

#### Protest groundswell

Opposition to the tarsands and the Northern Gateway pipeline project to move the oil to British Columbia for export is gaining momentum, building on the Idle No More movement among natives across the country, as well as campaigns by non-native Canadians who are haunted by the Conservative government’s disregard of the disastrous fallout of its mania



for money. In his CBC interview, Young compared what he saw in Fort McMurray to a slow-motion version of what the US did to Hiroshima on August 6&9, 1945. “I always felt that Canada was a different place, where the values were different and where we cherish the natural surroundings that we’re in,” he lamented.

The campaign against the tarsands has several aces up its sleeve: for one, the support of US natives and environmental activists, and (so far) US President Obama, who has shown little enthusiasm in the scheme, recently appointing an opponent of the tarsands, John Podesta, as a White House adviser.

Secondly, even if Alberta’s Conservatives (and judges) support the project, the toxic sludge dredged up and refined at such a terrible cost must transit British Columbia, where there still is no clear legal title to the land in question, since the BC government expropriated the land as “unoccupied wilderness” prior to the arrival of European settlers. Hmm. Tell that to BC natives.

This is only one of several campaigns against the Conservative agenda for natives and energy exports, stretching from coast to coast. Last November Alberta’s Lubicon Lake Nation peacefully occupied an access road to Penn West Petroleum’s oil lease site. Penn

West plans to frack the natives' territory, a process arguably as destructive as the extraction of tarsands. Whether or not their seismic pounding will find gas, it will cause widespread destruction, including the poisoning of Haig Lake and Sawn Lake, the community's main source of fish.

In western Ontario, Grassy Narrows Council and Chief Simon Fobister rejects Ontario's plan for another decade of clear-cut logging on Grassy Narrows territory, which would destroy what little mature forest remains.

In New Brunswick, the standoff in Mikmaq territory continues at the encampment at highway 11, so far preventing the fracking of Mikmaq lands, despite harassment by the RCMP. The corporate 'Goliath' there is Irving Oil, which operates Canada's largest oil refinery in Saint John, New Brunswick, and has made New Brunswick a 'company town', where Irving controls much of the economy, including media, lumber and transportation services. The Mikmaq 'Davids' are already a legend.

#### Blowback from Ecuador

Harper's energy and native troubles are not confined to Canada. An Ontario court recently ruled that Ecuadoran farmers and fishermen can try to seize Chevron Canada's assets, based on a 2011 Ecuadoran court decision which found it liable for soil and water pollution near oil wells, which has ruined the health and livelihoods of people living in nearby areas of the Amazon rainforest. Since then, the victims have been trying to collect \$18 billion in environmental damages without success. A Chevron spokesman vowed, "We're going to fight this until hell freezes over. And then we'll fight it out on the ice."

Ecuadorans are also resisting the attempt by a Canadian mining firm to buy up and flatten a mountain (I'm not kidding), wiping out the village where locals have been mining gold in a low-tech, relatively environmentally friendly way for five centuries. This latest scandal is the subject of a documentary "Marmato" by Mark Grieco to be released this year.

I wonder where Harper's sympathies lie in far-away Ecuador? Will he do what's right—tell Chevron to pay up, tell his mining buddies to leave Marmato's villagers in peace? Is there hope for justice for Ecuadorans from Canada's legal system? Even the US ambassador to Ecuador in 2011 said, "I think we should be cleaning up the oil, and the lawyers are telling us not to. And we've got to figure out a political compromise. We've got to figure out a way to just get this done." Imagine a Canadian ambassador willing to say that.

#### Harper's silver lining?

Chevron's tarsands assets would go a long way to undo the devastation that it (and its predecessor Texaco) did in Ecuador over the past half century. Hey! That would mean stopping the tarsands, which would let Canada cut its outsized CO2 emissions. As for fracking, putting a stop to that obscenity would be a blessing to everyone except a few Conservative cronies. This show of good will would be a great way to make peace with Canada's First Nations and recoup some of Canada's tattered reputation in the world. Win, win, win.

Neil Young's Honour the Treaties tour is a risky gamble in the messy oilslick of politics. He's staking his personal legend on solidarity with Canada's First Nations. But the creator of "Heart of Gold" clearly sees a 21st century legend in the making, and wants to be part of it.

“You want to know who is leading this protection?” asked one shivering Mikmaq protester last November. “The people that walk this earth, my ancestors. It is in our hearts to protect this and our hearts are leading this.”

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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