

The true north strong and costly

“We’ve ships and oil and tar and brine, the port of the north at the end of the line.”
—Fort McMurray chamber of commerce slogan, 1964

“A boom town draws rogues like a jam jar draws wasps.”—Guy Vanderhaeghe, *The Last Crossing*



At one time, all of Canada was considered “the North.” Now the North has retreated, well, further north.

Nevertheless, geographers consider more than half of Alberta, the territory north of 55 degrees—essentially everything above Edmonton—to be part of the North.

As Tom Berger once remarked, “north” is a state of consciousness. We like to see ourselves as a resourceful northern people capable of transforming “a few acres of snow” into the promised land. In some ways our culture is distinguishable from the United States’ only by our northern geography and special concern for the north. Some of our artists regard our northernness with mystical awe. In 1933 Lawren Harris wrote: “Indeed a new vision is coming into art in Canada. It has in it a call from the clear replenishing virgin north that must resound in the greater freer depths of the soul... a blessed severity that leaves behind the heavy drag of alien possessions.”

This rhapsody seems almost absurd in our materialistic age. Alberta’s north is seen as a place to be plundered. It holds the world’s largest known oil sands deposit—300 billion barrels—and plays a key role in Canada’s “energy future,” with a forecast \$21-billion expansion.

The centre of attention is Fort McMurray. It had a population of only 621 in 1950. Back then, recovering oil from the sand wasn’t cost-effective. Eventually, new technology and skyrocketing oil prices made it feasible. With the construction, starting in 1964, of the grandly named Great Canadian Oil Sands

project (now Suncor) began the biggest boom ever seen in Alberta. When Syncrude opened the second oil sands plant in the late seventies, the influx of construction workers and employees swelled population to more than 30,000.

Building and operating oil sands plants takes a lot of people. Today Fort McMurray has grown to 47,000. Workers have been recruited from all over the world, enticed by the good salaries and employment opportunities. They tend to be young, single men with a “get rich quick” dream. The average age in Fort Mac is 25. The city faces all the problems of the frontier—drunkenness, prostitution, violence, drug abuse—and more subtle human suffering as well, such as loneliness, depression, alienation. Islanders band together in the McMurray Newfoundland Club to survive the dislocation.

In the 1980s families began to move to Fort Mac. Because of inadequate planning, stores, schools, recreational facilities and health care couldn’t keep up with the demand.

The recent signing of the Kyoto Accord gives us an opportunity to consider the true costs of developing the oil sands. Greenhouse emissions are extremely high: 125 kilograms of carbon dioxide equivalents are released for every barrel of synthetic crude oil produced from the sands. At first, the oil industry said the area wouldn’t be developed any further if Kyoto were implemented. But TotalFinaElf recently announced a billion-dollar investment in the oil sands, and Suncor says its costs associated with Kyoto are manageable.

The business costs may be manageable, but the costs to humankind and nature persist.