



The political ecology of tar sands spaces in Canada

Picture 1. Tar sands infrastructures across Canada



01. Introduction

Canada is one of the world's top oil producers and holds the largest tar sands reserves. In recent decades, Canada has increased tar sands extraction and built export-orientated fossil fuel infrastructures (Picture 1), creating transnational tar sands spaces. The Canadian government and the oil industry claim tar sands development contributes to economic development, energy security, and sustainability. By contrast, climate justice movements (e.g., environmental organizations, Indigenous groups/First Nations, and citizens) argue that tar sands expansion accelerates climate change, violates Indigenous land rights, and leads to environmental destruction. A focus on these contestations brings to the fore questions of how tar sands spaces are configured and whose interests they reflect.

02. Objective

Drawing on political ecology, this research further develops the concept of energyscapes to examine how tar sands spaces in Canada are produced, governed, and contested.

Literature

Adkin, L. (ed.). 2016. *First World Petro-Politics: The Political Ecology and Governance of Alberta*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Black, T., et.al. 2014. *A Line in the Tar Sands: Struggles for Environmental Justice*. Between the Lines Press, Toronto

Carroll, W. (ed.). 2021. *Regime of Obstruction. How Corporate Power Blocks Energy Democracy*. Athabasca University Press, Edmonton.

Carter, A. 2020. *Fossilized. Environmental Policy in Canada's Petro-Province*. UBC Press, Vancouver.

03. Methodology

This work uses the following methods:

- Critical discourse analysis (CDA)
- Archival research
- Participant observation
- Interviews

CDA and archival research shed light on how tar sands development involves the occupation of Indigenous lands and the consolidation of corporate and government control over energy policy-making. Participant observation and interviews with climate justice/Indigenous movements provide insights into how they seek to stop tar sands projects through multiple strategies.

04. Results

Energyscapes is a useful concept to examine how tar sands spaces are characterized by the uneven appropriation and distribution of the benefits and costs of fossil fuel operations. On the one hand, this concept makes clear that these spaces serve the political-economic interests and energy needs of corporate and government actors. On the other hand, the energyscapes perspective reveals that climate justice/Indigenous movements reshape such spaces by resisting the territorial expansion of hydrocarbon infrastructures and envisioning energy alternatives.

05. Discussion

This research suggests that tar sands spaces are made and remade by competing discourses, knowledges, identities, and worldviews (Table 1). Specifically, it argues that Indigenous land dispossession and struggles for climate justice /Indigenous self-determination are the key factors driving the constitution and transformation of tar sands spaces. These findings expand existing research on protests against fossil fuels activities in Canada, which tends to focus on specific conflicts without considering the broader processes and relations that shape their dynamics.

Table 1 . Contested practices around tar sands development

Actor	Strategies	Discourses	Knowledges	Identities
The Canadian government and the oil industry	Land-use negotiations Environmental assessments Public hearings	Economic growth Job creation Energy security Sustainability	Hegemonic scientific/technical knowledge	Unified Canadian identity around fossil fuel exploitation.
Climate justice movements	Blockades/ Land back Renewable energy projects Lawsuits Street demonstrations	Indigenous self-determination Climate justice Fossil fuel divestment	Indigenous knowledge systems	First Nations heterogeneous place-based identities

Source: Own elaboration

Picture 2. Tar sands extraction/mining sites in Alberta, Canada



Photo credit: National Geographic, 2018

06. Conclusions

Through the lens of energyscapes, this research elucidates the role of uneven power dynamics in (un)making tar sands spaces. In doing so, it contributes to political ecology discussions on how to overcome the entrenched interests in continued fossil fuel extraction and advance a just energy transition.

Picture 3. Protest against the Trans Mountain Pipeline in Vancouver, Canada.



Photo credit: CBC News, 2018