

COMMENTARY »

David Suzuki: It will take more than rebranding to make tar sands oil “ethical”

by [Faisal Moola](#), [David Suzuki](#) on February 1st, 2011 at 4:05 PM



Ripping a page—or the cover—from fellow Conservative and former tobacco industry lobbyist [Ezra Levant's book](#), Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his new environment minister, Peter Kent, have taken to referring to the product of the Alberta tar sands as “[ethical oil](#)”.

The Prime Minister and Mr. Levant go back a long way. It was Mr. Levant who reluctantly stepped aside as the Alliance candidate in Calgary Southwest so that Mr. Harper could run in a by-election there in 2002. But the “ethical oil” argument they promote has holes as big as the ones in the ground around Fort McMurray.

To start, the logic is faulty. Just because a country or society is considered “ethical” does not mean everything it produces or exports is ethical. If we are going to delve into the ethics of the issue, we must look at the ethics of energy overall. That means considering the impacts of various energy systems on people and the environment.

Here, the science is troubling. It shows that the Alberta tar sands contribute to about five per cent of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions and are the country's fastest growing source of emissions. To date, they have disturbed 600 square kilometres of boreal forest with little or no chance of true reclamation, use enormous amounts of water, and pollute the surrounding air and water.

This past summer, an [independent, peer-reviewed scientific study](#) showed that toxic byproducts from the tar sands extraction industry are poisoning the Athabasca River, putting downstream First Nations communities and the fish they eat at risk. Health studies show these First Nations communities already have elevated rare cancers associated with exposure to such toxins.

If this is the most “ethical” source of oil we can find, we need to ask other questions about the moral purity of our intensively processed bitumen. For example, if we sell the oil to countries with poor human-rights records, like China, does that affect the product’s “ethical” nature? And how “ethical” are the companies operating in the tar sands; for example, Exxon Mobil, well-known sponsor of climate-change disinformation campaigns; BP, responsible for last year’s massive oily disaster in the Gulf of Mexico; or PetroChina? There’s also the effect of greenhouse gas emissions on our children and grandchildren, which to me is an intergenerational crime.

In this light, wouldn’t energy from technologies or sources that limit the greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change and that have a minimal environmental and health impacts be far more ethical than fossil fuels? And, from an economic perspective, wouldn’t these more ethical technologies or fuel sources be doubly attractive to foreign buyers if they came from an “ethical” country like Canada?

As award-winning Alberta author [Andrew Nikiforuk](#) has argued, with proper development, the tar sands could help provide Canada with the oil and money we need to shift to a low-carbon economy. But major changes are needed. Environmental regulation and monitoring must be strengthened. Pollution and related health problems must be addressed. More of the revenue must go to Canadians rather than fossil fuel companies. And a national carbon tax would help us move from oil to less-polluting energy sources.

The problem is, no matter what Ezra Levant and his friends in government say, oil has never been about “ethics”. It has always been about money. Those who argue the case for “ethical oil” should work to ensure that our energy needs are met in a truly ethical way, now and into the future. In the end, the only truly ethical solution is to phase out oil. The black eye that tar sands oil is sporting can’t be remedied with meaningless phrases such as “ethical oil”.

To be seen as truly ethical when it comes to energy policy, Canada must slow down tar sands development, clean up the environmental problems, implement a national carbon tax, improve the regulatory and monitoring regime, and make sure that Canadians are reaping their fair share of the revenues. We must also start taking clean energy seriously. Rather than subsidizing the tar sands and all the fossil fuel industry through massive tax breaks, we should be investing in energy technologies that will benefit our health, economy, and climate.

It might also help if Canada’s environment minister spent more time protecting the environment rather than appeasing the oil industry and its apologists.

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