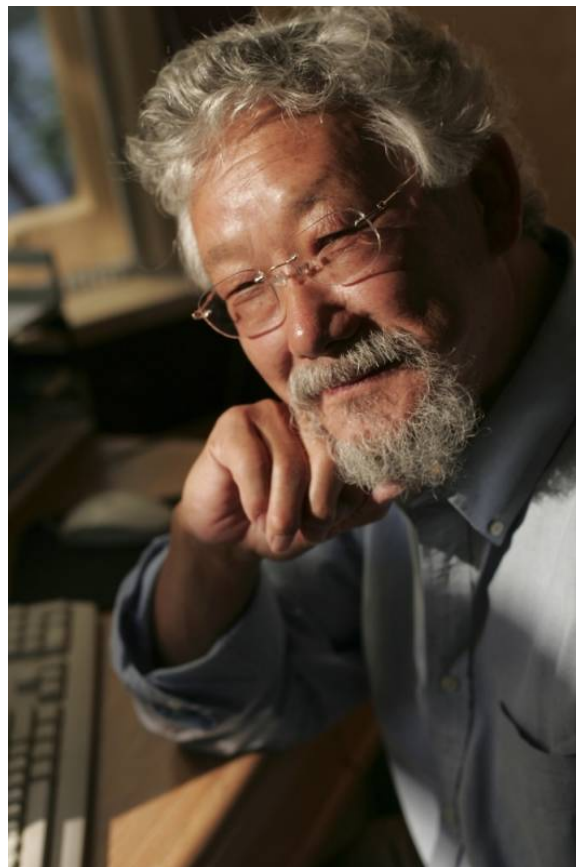


COMMENTARY »

David Suzuki: Beaver Lake Cree case reveals flaws in environmental review process

by [David Suzuki](#) on August 27th, 2013 at 4:11 PM



summer months, it offers near-constant sunlight, providing habitat for birds, fish and mammals to flourish. Fossil fuel exploration and development would threaten that entire web of life.

For a *Nature of Things* television episode called “Arctic Oil”, I interviewed a spokesman for Panarctic, one of the companies that wanted to drill in this unforgiving environment. Pressing his pencil onto a map of the projected site, he said the environmental consequences of a single test well were insignificant, less than the impact of the dot. He was probably right.

For a program on the proposed [Great Whale Dam](#) in Northern Quebec, Hydro Quebec’s CEO showed me a map and offered a similar argument: Although the dam would flood thousands of hectares, considering the massive size of the largely uninhabited north, it was a small area. Again, he may have been right, in a limited sense. But while the human population was sparse, I saw the area as fully occupied by countless plants and animals that had evolved to thrive in that specific location, and people who had lived there for millennia.

This illustrates a fundamental flaw in the environmental assessment process: It focuses on each proposed development as something that stands alone. But an individual well or dam is not separate or isolated from its surroundings—air, water, plants, and animals pay no attention to our imposed, artificial boundaries.

We only have limited understanding of the exquisite ways in which everything on Earth is interconnected. Suppose environmental assessments had been conducted before we sprayed DDT onto open fields or topped up spray cans with CFCs. We didn’t know about [biomagnification](#) or chlorine degradation of the ozone layer until long after these technologies were approved. This is a fundamental problem. We can’t anticipate long-term consequences of any major technology if we are ignorant of how the world works and too impatient to invest the time and effort to learn more through scientific research.

A second defect in the EA process is the case-by-case examination of projects as if there were no collective impacts. In Alberta, energy review boards rubber-stamp proposals to drill wells. Again, each individual well might have a tiny effect on surroundings, but wells drag a lot with them, including seismic lines, electrical wires, and roads that later entice hunters and adventurers in four-wheel-drive vehicles.

A lawsuit launched by the [Beaver Lake Cree Nation](#), described by Carol Linnitt in a [DesmogBlog article](#), illustrates the problem. The Beaver Lake people are suing the federal and provincial governments for failing to uphold indigenous rights, guaranteed by treaties and the Constitution, to fish, hunt, trap and gather plants and medicines. The BLCN contends that “cumulative impacts” of the Alberta tar sands are destroying activities governments are legally bound to

has 35,000 oil and gas sites, 21,700 kilometres of seismic lines, 4,028 kilometres of pipelines and 948 kilometres of road. Traditional territory has been carved into a patchwork quilt, with wild land reduced to small pieces between roads, pipes and wires, threatening animals like woodland caribou that can't adapt to these intrusions.

As Alberta scientist [David Schindler](#) and others [point out](#), provincial and federal government programs monitoring the impacts of tar sands development on air, water and land are so desultory that the data they collect are essentially meaningless. This echoes the federal government's evasive approach to climate change. The idea seems to be that if proper studies aren't conducted, we won't learn what's happening, so we can ignore any problems. That can't go on.

The BCLN court case makes us look at the impact of development in a cumulative, holistic way. As BCLN lawyer Jack Woodward said, the case "is based on protection of the entire ecosystem." If we don't take that perspective, our hacking away with small cuts will destroy the underpinnings of the whole system.

Learn more at www.davidsuzuki.org.

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JUN 14 THU
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