

Toxic Trail Exposure:



Youth Delegation Tracks Tar Sands in Great Lakes Region



By the Polaris Institute



*With Support from the
Sierra Youth Coalition*

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Routes of the Tar Sands

Tar sands oil, found on traditional land of the Dene and Cree in the Athabasca, Cold Lake and Peace River regions in Alberta, is tracking a path of ecological and social devastation eastwards to the urban and rural settlements of the Great Lakes Region. It is extracted in the impure form of heavy bitumen by open-pit and in-situ mining procedures, consequently consuming onerous amounts of water and natural gas. Forests, rugged muskeg outcrops and wetland habitats are quickly being turned into industrial landscapes by tar sands developments.¹

In order to transport and process tar sands oil, pipeline projects and oil refineries are being rapidly constructed across Canada and the U.S.A. Young people are concerned about the impacts the tar sands developments will have on the well-being of all affected communities and ecosystems—from the sites of oil extraction to the locations of oil refineries. From marginalized rural communities to city neighbourhoods, youth are mobilizing to voice their opposition to tar sands developments.

As part of these innovative organizing initiatives, ten young people from Ontario traveled together from August 20-22nd to Sarnia, Detroit and Windsor as participants in *Tracking the Tar Sands: Tri-City Youth Tour*. This initiative was organized by the Polaris Institute and the Sierra Youth Coalition with the support of Environmental Defence-Sarnia, Sierra Club Detroit Environmental Justice Program, Friends of the Detroit River, Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice, Canadian Auto Workers Windsor Regional Environment Council, and Toxic Free Canada-Ontario. Participants heard from community organizers as well as oil industry representatives, and took part in exposure tours of local industrial facilities. The following report provides a brief overview of the connections these three cities have to the tar sands developments,² highlights local environmental justice initiatives, and offers critical insights into the perspectives of participants and community members with whom they met.



**Tracking the Tar Sands: Tri-City
Youth Tour Delegation
(Detroit, USA)**
Credit: Kathleen Black
Cover Photo Credits: Kathleen Black

¹Tar sands oil generates three to five times more greenhouse gases than conventional oil and produces toxic tailings ponds that leach into ground and surface water sources (6 sq. metres of tailings for every sq. metre of bitumen).

²In this report, unemployment statistics are recorded according to census data from the respective government institutions. However, this measure of unemployment is recognized as not adequately reflecting the severe extent of economic marginalization experienced by residents in these regions (e.g. due to exclusions of those who are not actively seeking jobs; those who work on a temporary contract basis; and populations within specific communities facing systemic socio-economic barriers to employment).

SARNIA & AAMJWNAANG FIRST NATIONS RESERVE, ONTARIO

Sarnia's Population: 71,419

Aamjwnaang Population [On Reserve]: 850

Unemployment: 12.8% (Statistics Canada March 2009)



↑ *Oil Sponsored
Theatre in Downtown
Sarnia*
Credit: Allen Lissner

Overview: Concerning Realities

Home to over sixty large industrial facilities, including some of the top ten air polluters in the country, the City of Sarnia—located at the south end of Lake Huron and east side of the St. Clair River in Lambton County—has gained the ominous reputation as the urban centre of Canada's 'Chemical Valley'. According to a recent report by Ecojustice (2007), the proximity of many industrial facilities to the First Nations Reserve has led to the reality that Aamjwnaang residents are disproportionately affected with higher levels of toxins in their blood. They report significantly higher incidences of respiratory illnesses, cancers, skin disorders, thyroid and kidney problems, high blood pressure, severe and chronic headaches, learning and attention deficit disorders, miscarriages, and stillbirths than the general population of Lambton County. However, the health and well-being of all residents of Lambton County are severely impacted by the heavy burden of pollutants, demonstrated by widespread cancers, illness, and an observable decrease in the number of boys born (suspected to be related to endocrine disruptions).³

Tar Sands Connections

Four major oil companies operating refineries in Sarnia—**Imperial Oil, Nova Chemicals, Royal Dutch Shell and Suncor**—have been preparing their facilities to acquire heavy crude oil piped from the tar sands.

Imperial Oil employs approximately 1030 people in the Lambton County. Their current output of 119,000 barrels of oil per day and one million tonnes of petrochemical products per year will be increased with the inflow of oil from the tar sands. This company owns and operates the Cold Lake Oil Project (4000 active wells), is establishing open pit crude oil extraction at Kearl Lake with parent company ExxonMobil, and has acquired a twenty-five percent ownership of the largest tar sands production company, Syncrude Canada.

Nova Chemicals processes crude oil from Alberta in its Corunna refinery and produces ethylene, polyethylene and other petrochemical products at the nearby Moore and St. Clair River facilities. Nova's facilities rely on a workforce of approximately 1000 people.

The **Suncor** refinery, with a workforce of approximately 400 employees, processes 85,000 barrels of oil per day and is in the midst of investments to increase the amount of tar sands crude oil the facility can handle. To date, Suncor is the largest producer of tar sands oil.

Royal Dutch Shell's Corunna refinery has a capacity of processing 75,000 barrels of oil per day and employs between 350-500 people. Shell holds the controlling share of sixty percent in the Athabasca Oil Sands Project and has plans to expand its Sarnia based facilities in order to accommodate the processing of greater volumes of crude oil extracted from the tar sands.

³ E. MacDonald and S. Rang, Environmental Economics Exposing Canada's Chemical Valley: An Investigation of Cumulative Air Pollution Emissions in Sarnia, Ontario Area, Ecojustice, October 2007.

Economic & Social Injustice Perpetuated

The long-term health of the families, environment and economy of Lambton County are all at risk when oil companies expand their facilities to accommodate tar sands oil. Already in Lambton County, annual greenhouse gas emissions are recorded at 16.5 million tonnes, while toxic air emissions are measured at 5.7 million kilograms.⁴ Expanding the oil refineries will lead to an increase in the toxic pollutants contaminating the air, waterways, land, and ultimately the bodies of local residents.

To date, many of the jobs at the oil refineries and production lines are temporary or short-term positions and provide little job security. Given the pending exhaustion of our natural resources and the volatility of the petro-economy, the directions taken by multinational oil corporations are simply not economically, environmentally, or socially responsible.

Community Action On The Go

Good Neighbour Campaign

Organized by the Lambton Environmental Action Plan (LEAP), The Good Neighbour Campaign aims to foster a collaborative social responsibility approach with the major corporations operating facilities in Lambton County. According to Ron Plain of Environmental Defence, LEAP's initiative "is creating a dialogue to affect change in the valley."

Reflections...

Erica, Youth Delegation Participant:

"I feel deeply betrayed after seeing the flares at the Shell plant. When we were talking to Shell [representatives] they said, "You won't see flames at the Shell plant." But they [Shell Corunna refinery] are doing it in the dark [at night]. I felt sick seeing all these industries and the ways they are contaminating the community."

Carolyn, Youth Delegation Participant:

"What stays in my mind is when the Shell representative said that Shell is a leader in sustainable development. A multinational oil corporation is [exemplifying] the opposite of the principles of sustainable development. They were arrogant to even use the term when their product will likely not be around for our grandchildren."



One of our key challenges in Canada is opposition to oil sands...[So]what Canadians need is a complete picture of our story.-- Shell Corunna Refinery Powerpoint Presentation to youth delegation (Aug. 20/09)

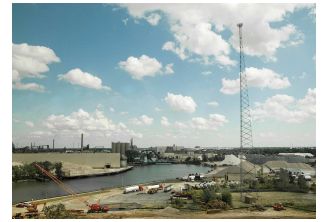
⇨ **Nova Chemical Oil Refinery Sarnia, Ontario**
Credit: Kathleen Black

⁴ E. MacDonald and S. Rang, Environmental Economics Exposing Canada's Chemical Valley: An Investigation of Cumulative Air Pollution Emissions in Sarnia, Ontario Area, Ecojustice, October 2007.

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

Population: 821, 792

Unemployment: 17-20% (US Census 2005)



↑ *Detroit's
Industrial Landscape*
Credit: Allen Lissner

Overview: Concerning Realities

Several incinerators, sewage treatment, steel, automobile and coal fire plants as well as an oil refinery are all based in Southwest Detroit—a neighbourhood predominantly populated by low-income people of colour. According to US Census data (2005) over one-third of the population of Detroit lives under the poverty line, many of whom live in the industrial corridor known as Detroit's 'Cancer Alley'. Cancers, respiratory illnesses, developmental disorders, and chronic headaches are all highly prevalent amongst the African American and Latin American communities living here. Industries have been rapidly expanding within the Southwest end of Detroit, and are situated in close proximity to the schools, playgrounds and the sole community centre. Medical data reveals that local children have alarmingly high levels of lead, mercury and other heavy metals in their blood, as well as high rates of asthma.

Tar Sands Connections

The **Marathon Oil** refinery currently employs approximately 300 staff people and processes 102,000 barrels of oil per day. Amidst opposition by local residents, Marathon Oil has embarked on an expansion to handle tar sands oil, and increase its capacity to 115,000 barrels of oil per day. The Detroit Heavy Oil Upgrade Project (HOUP) has been granted a ten year tax exemption worth 186 million USD for the HOUP and is expected to create sixty-one permanent jobs.⁵ Marathon Oil holds a twenty per cent interest in Athabasca Oil Sands Project and is developing an extension of oil pipelines to bring the crude from Canada to the USA. In addition, **Ajax Corporation** is expanding a local asphalt production line to handle tar sands petrochemicals, adding six new jobs to their workforce.

Economic & Social Injustice Perpetuated

Although Marathon and Ajax representatives are promoting their projects as economically beneficial, the fact remains that few permanent jobs will be created by these projects. Many of the new jobs will be highly technical, and residents expect that the standards set by the companies will lead to few local people being hired.

Detroit residents and community organizations are anticipating that Marathon's HOUP and the Ajax asphalt processing project will result in increased water, air and soil contamination. Consequences would likely include a corresponding rise in cancer rates and overall ill health of residents of Southwest Detroit. According to Rhonda Anderson, Coordinator of the Sierra Club Detroit Environmental Justice Project, oil companies "are discharging pollutants directly into the water... We have two choices--clean energy or dirty energy. The tar sands are the second option--they are not clean... These industries are not working for the people of this community."

"Hearing about the tar sands developments is upsetting to me. There are safer and cleaner ways to have a community. ...I hope to see a more sustainable Detroit in the future. This means people will have to transition towards a green economy with jobs based on that kind of 'green' perspective."
--Winnie Smith, Detroit student
Community Organizer

⁵ T. Lam, "Expansion approved for Marathon refinery, but concerns expressed", *Detroit Free Press*, 21 June 2008. <http://www.globalexchange.org/war_peace_democracy/oil/5771.html>.

Community Action On The Go

Sierra Club Detroit Environmental Justice Project

With the support of the Sierra Club Detroit Environmental Justice Project, collaborative initiatives have been launched in Detroit's Southwest communities between local community organizers and high school as well as university students. Recognizing that the rate of cancers amongst Detroit's populations of Black and Latin American residents is disproportionately high, a health survey was launched to raise the profile of this distressing situation. Community members were surveyed to identify members of their household who had been diagnosed with—or recently died of—cancer. Every household that gave an affirmative answer placed a white cross on their lawn. With a majority of households displaying the crosses, the epidemic proportions of cancer rates in Southwest Detroit became highly apparent. Other projects have included community air testing days to hold companies responsible for the emissions they release, and widespread efforts to call company complaint hotlines when violations of environmental regulations are observed.

Reflections...

Siwatu, Detroit Student Community Organizer:

"I am really concerned when I hear about the high cancer counts in this area. There is no one who seems to be paying attention and listening to us. It makes me wonder what I can do, and how I can be heard. Our community is well organized, but we are not recognized and listened to. Why? It all has to do with racial injustice. When the tar sands are transported here, it will mean an expansion of the industry, which in turn means more illness, more death, more industrial disasters. In the future, I'd like to see activists...run for city council. They...are well known as community advocates and are trusted. Then they would be elected representatives who would stand up for our rights."

Justin, Youth Delegation Participant:

"It was eye-opening in Detroit, listening to the members of the community tell us about the impacts of the pollution they experience daily...[and] to see the damage that big oil companies have caused to the environment, our breathing spaces and our communities."

Greg, Youth Delegation Co-Coordinator:

"Speaking with the residents...[of Detroit] I saw the strong and vibrant community they are working to build. People so hard done by are eliciting such community pride-- I am inspired to see how effective people can be in such a dire situation."

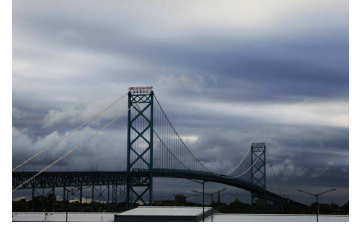


*Soaring Cancer Rates are a
reality in Detroit
Credit: Allen Lissner*

WINDSOR, ONTARIO

Population: 208, 425

Unemployment: 15.7% (Statistics Canada July 2009)



Overview: Concerning Realities

The Windsor community has become an urban centre with not only one of the highest recorded levels of unemployment in Canada, but also the most toxic air in the Great Lakes Region. Numerous studies have concluded that air and water contamination are the combined result of emissions from industrial operations in Windsor area and the adjacent city of Detroit, as well as automobile pollution along the Ambassador Bridge at the Canada-USA border.⁶ According to Dr. Margaret Keith, “Windsor is now facing serious air pollution problems which are made even worse by the thousands of trucks that cross its border everyday from US.” The incidences of several cancers and early mortality rates are higher than other Canadian cities. In addition, severe health concerns are diagnosed at alarmingly widespread rates, including disorders of the endocrine and immunity, blood, nervous, circulatory, musculoskeletal and respiratory systems, digestive system problems, and disorders related to skin and connective tissues.⁷ In recent studies, elevated rates of cardiovascular and respiratory morbidity have been linked to air pollution in Windsor.

With the closing of local auto plants, many of the manufacturing jobs based in the Windsor region have disappeared. In response to the local economic crisis, members of civil society are actively exploring opportunities to develop skills for jobs related to harnessing renewable resources.

Tar Sands Connections

With the proximity of Detroit and Sarnia to Windsor, the impacts of the expansion of the oil refineries will likely lead to greater air pollution, toxins in the soil, and increased rainwater and watershed contamination. According to Dr. Jim Brophy, “Refining tar sands oil in the southwest section of Detroit will pose a further burden of pollution and ill health...[in] communities that are already suffering from environmentally related disease.” A revitalized urban economy and a healthier future for residents of Windsor are possible-but only if jobs are developed locally that do not rely on dirty crude from the Alberta tar sands.

Economic & Social Injustice Perpetuated

If the trend of oil refinery development continues towards expanding the intake of tar sands crude, public health experts expect that incidences of respiratory illnesses and cancers will correspondingly increase in Windsor. As Mark Bartlett of the Canadian Auto Workers Windsor Regional Environmental Council explains, “An economic transformation for the long-term is needed. We need to remove the fear people have that they are going to lose their jobs and not be able to feed their kids. We have to be able ...to transition to a green economy.”

Elly Adeland, Youth Delegation Co-Coordinator:

“As youth, we call on society to recognize that the tar sands represent a step backwards. Now is the time when we must shift towards a more sustainable and just future for all.”

[Top photo: Ambassador Bridge. Credit: Kathleen Black]

⁶ J. Brophy and M. Gilbertson, “Community Health Profile of Windsor, Ontario, Canada: Anatomy of a Great Lakes Area of Concern”, *Environmental Health Perspectives* (Vol. 109), December 2001.

⁷ Ibid.

Community Action On The Go

Greening the Economy

Community meetings between local groups, union locals and student representatives are being launched to explore and expose the impacts of tar sands oil processing on Windsor's economy, environment and residents' health. Participants are also identifying concrete actions to take in order to transition towards a 'green' economic strategy.

Reflections...

Kathleen, Youth Delegation Participant:

"It's important to hear local people who have specialized knowledge and skills in the fields of environmental science and health speak about the impacts of the tar sands refineries and their concerns [about the social, economic and ecological consequences]. We need to develop community alliances because a lot of action needs to be taken—one step at a time."

Allen, Youth Delegation Participant:

"One of the most important parts of this [experience] has been meeting people and exchanging ideas. Comparing meetings we've had in each city, I find myself thinking about...how we as allies can offer some kind of support to community members that are speaking out, what we can do to remove the fear that people face to stand up for their rights [in the face of powerful corporations]... It's hard to compare the situations here to the people I met in Tanzania and the Philippines [surviving displacement and environmental destruction from various Canadian mining companies] because all they have to drink and bathe in is water contaminated by toxic tailings. But the commonality that ties people in these different communities together, is that all are living with the same fear, the same corporate thumb pushing down on their lives.."

Building Momentum for Change

As the "Tracking the Tar Sands" youth delegation traveled from Sarnia to Detroit and onto Windsor, we heard resounding warnings from students, community organizers and workers that tar sands oil expansion is a deadly investment, exacerbating economic, environmental and social injustices for generations to come. Together, we are calling for a **moratorium on all tar sands developments—from the pits in Alberta to the pipes and smokestacks in the Great Lakes Region-until:**

- *Environmental and social impact assessments are undertaken in all affected regions (including the Great Lakes Basin), and plans for the mitigation of impacts have been negotiated with full community participation;*
- *Studies undertaken in affected regions on air, soil and watershed contamination as well as community health are publicly released;*
- *Studies in affected areas are completed to identify current connections between public health concerns and cumulative exposure to toxins;*
- *First Nations in affected areas have granted free, prior and informed consent to the developments (as per the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) and land settlements in affected areas are negotiated with fair royalty schemes;*
- *All levels of government and implicated corporations listen to and address concerns of affected communities;*
- *Concerns of affected workers and their unions are met;*
- *There are verifiable assurances that no oil or by-products will be supplied to Canada's or any other country's military forces;*
- *There are verifiable assurances that oil and by-products will be directed towards transitioning to a renewable resource-based economy; and*
- *Affected communities have explored opportunities to implement local food production and acquisition policies, as well as policies on progressively lowering greenhouse gas emissions*