

## Climate Policy Quest Backgrounder

# Climate Change and Indigenous Relations



### About the Author

Mihskakwan James Harper is a passionate Nehiyaw (Cree) man from Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, located in Treaty 8 territory (northern Alberta). Born in Edmonton, and raised by his mom, along with his two younger sisters, he was brought up with a foundation based on the teachings of his ancestors. While he grew up in the city, his mother always made sure to lead by example by taking part in various political and grassroots movements, which helped him gain an insight into what it means to be Cree in a contemporary context. He graduated high school in Winnipeg the same year his mom graduated law school. He then pursued a mechanical engineering degree at the University of Manitoba, where he founded a vehicle design team that competed in an ultra-efficient battery electric vehicle in the Shell Eco-Marathon competition. To build even stronger aptitude in climate action, renewable energy, and decarbonization, he is currently completing a master's in science in renewable energy, a dual program that brought him to Stockholm and Paris. He is dedicated to bringing solutions that empower communities with clean technologies, ensuring that the children of the future get to experience the gifts of the land as much as he did.

### Introduction

This backgrounder is a brief insight into how climate action and climate policy is fused with Indigenous rights and empowerment. The common viewpoint in contemporary climate related discussions is that

Indigenous peoples and rights are a sidepiece, or a 'nice-to-have' supplemental to most policies. The narrative needs to shift to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples have carried a sacred relationship with the Earth since time immemorial, and will continue to do so, despite the hardship and adversity. The narrative shouldn't be Indigenous people can participate in climate action but rather that they must participate. This backgrounder is aimed to take the reader through an understanding of the sacred relationship with Earth that so many Indigenous communities have and carried for generations as a means to reinforce our role as Stewards of the Earth. A small note on colonization and how it extends past the (attempted) destruction of a people and culture, but also the climate and line of defense that the Indigenous peoples are. Finally, a brief introduction into how colonization isn't our story, but instead our story is how willing we are to defend the land to the end, and moreover, how we're learning to embrace new technologies to empower our communities and lead the climate action movement. It should be noted that many nations across Canada vary greatly in cultural practices, beliefs, languages, etc., and this is not intended to over-generalize. However, to keep the backgrounder as fully comprehensive as possible, this piece is written with a general notion that most, if not all, Indigenous nations across Canada have a shared sense of core values, colonial history, and stories of resilience. This piece is written in the context of the author's upbringing - nehiyaw (from Sturgeon Lake

Cree Nation), Treaty 8, Alberta, growing up of reserve. The pronoun 'we' and 'our' is used for the author's comfort when including himself in relation to Indigenous people.

## Stewards of the Earth

Indigenous peoples across the world have always and will always continue to maintain a healthy, reciprocal, and respectful relationship with the Earth. It is believed that the people carry a responsibility to honour the gifts that the Earth provides such that she is looked after and protected. In many Indigenous creation stories, a common theme of how and why we have come to exist on the beautiful and plentiful land of Turtle Island is that we have a sacred responsibility to be stewards of the land.

A core belief that carries many Indigenous nations is that decisions must consider our children, their children, and so on. The common saying 'looking seven generations ahead' considers how the decisions we make today have an impact on those whom we will never meet but have so much love for. In that way, short sighted actions that meant temporary prosperity, but intergenerational loss were forbidden. Thus, this spiritual truth we embodied into every aspect of our lives became a law that governed how our nations survived and thrived.

This sacred relationship manifested itself in every single aspect of who we are. For instance, the Cree language is gendered by inanimate and animate nouns. Words become conjugated differently depending on the classification of animate and inanimate. Not to focus on the literal distinction between all the possible nouns, as some nouns have seemingly arbitrary assignments, but instead to consider the principle of gendering nouns in such a way. The language is designed to ensure the speaker and listener are always unconsciously aware of the natural world around them.

Moreover, when hunters and gatherers descended upon the land, it was a ceremonial practice - not just one of survival. Tobacco, a traditional medicine, along with a prayer, was offered before taking anything, as a means of asking the Creator to take pity on us for having to take a moose or harvest

plants that would feed and clothe us. We always honoured and respected the gifts that were offered to us, and as a show of respect, we only took what we needed, and wasted nothing. Strict hunting and gathering laws were also in place, being careful not to take young calves, pregnant or new mothers, for instance. There's no question that Indigenous nations across Turtle Island held the utmost respect for the gifts the Earth gave us and for that, we always did our best to show gratitude and reciprocity.

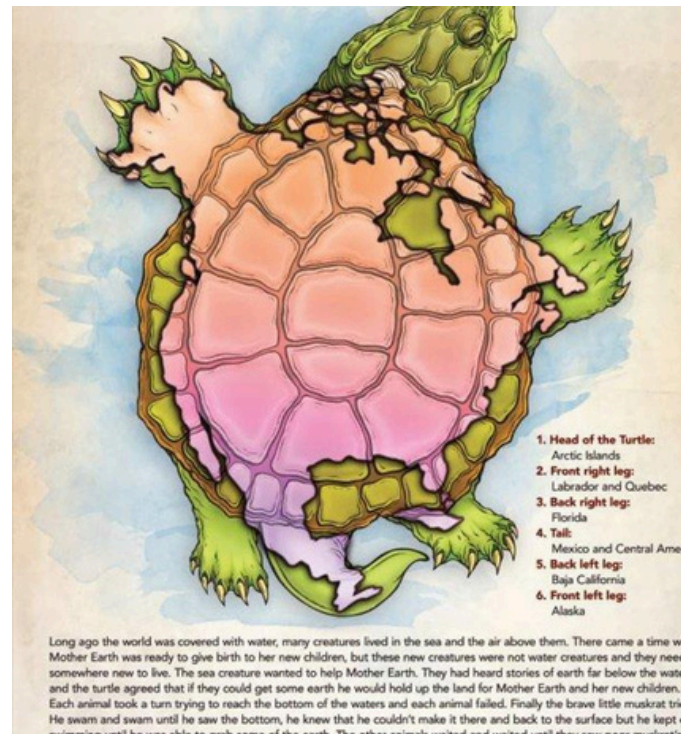
## Colonization

Upon the arrival of the settlers, came forth new concepts and belief systems, that in many instances, seemed entirely opposite and foreign to Indigenous nations. To illustrate this, consider the idea of land ownership. It is integral into the capitalist framework that allows for the for-profit and intensive resource extraction that has built the entire modern economy. However, many Indigenous leaders during contact could not grasp this concept. Sure, traditional lands carried territorial boundaries that belonged not only to nations and tribes, but certain animals and supporting ecosystems. But the land never belonged to one person, so much as the air and water could not belong to one person. Nonetheless, this is one of many conflicts of ideals and beliefs that forced the colonizers, and then the Canadian government, to accept they had to assimilate 'the Indians' through a legal document that still exists to this day, the Indian Act [11].

During the signing of various treaties, namely Treaty 8 in my case, the intent was to establish a shared land for everyone, under the spirit of coexistence. The premise was the colonizers were allowed to build settlements, enjoy the gifts of the land, and otherwise live in peace and prosperity, so much as the Indigenous peoples also were guaranteed such rights. Distinct nations were to be permitted to exercise a sense of sovereignty independent of the Canadian state, to facilitate the continuation of the sacred livelihood, while also having the Canadian state thrive as well.

## Sidebar: Turtle Island – The Creation Story and North America

Turtle Island here, as usually referenced by many Indigenous nations across Canada, represents the great lands of North America. It has been understood by most, if not all nations, that the lands were vast, expansive, and full of all kinds of life. One creation story that I have held onto is the one of the Anishinabek, which briefly tells of how the Creator flooded the Earth to create a new world. Several animals survived, of whom were asked to help build a new world by collecting soil from the ocean floor. Each of the animals attempted to make the dive, but it was too deep. The muskrat finally tried, and after several intense moments, he emerged, but only able to take one last breath. As he passed, they all noticed he was clutching on pieces of Earth. The turtle acknowledged that if the muskrat was willing to make such a sacrifice, then the new world would be built on his back. The Earth was then spread across the turtle's shell to build the land we now know as North America. At careful examination, Labrador/Quebec with Alaska form the turtle's arms, Baja California and Florida form the feet, Mexico and Central America form the tail, and the Arctic islands of Nunavut and Northwest Territories form the head. Many Indigenous nations hold the turtle as one of the most sacred animals, who commonly represents the teaching of truth. It is important to note that this is just one perspective and there are so many more beautiful and rich creation stories [7].



Source: <https://www.inspiringyoungminds.ca/turtle-island-poster.html>

We were created in the same and equal way that the plants, animals, and everything the natural environment contains, and for that we coexist; we are not more distinct nor separate to the rest of Earth. There are many teachings and beliefs that make this outlook distinct from Western views on the humanity-Earth relationship.

## Sidebar: The Numbered Treaties

In an effort to continue the expansion efforts in the late 1800's towards the west, and to assert the territorial claim against the competing American expansion, the Canadian government sought to claim the lands, then known as Rupertsland and Northwestern Territory from the Hudson Bay Company. Aside from the formal mechanism of the Land Transfer Act (1868), numerous treaties were signed with the Indigenous peoples to share the territories with the settlers, while given exclusive rights and privileges, that intended to ensure the peace and prosperity of both Indigenous nations and the new state of Canada. It is important to note that there are various treaty frameworks across Canada, like the Peace and Friendship Treaties of Atlantic Canada, to



the Robinson-Hudson Treaties along Lake Hudson, all with different spirits, intentions, and implementation (or lack thereof). The Numbered Treaties gave way to Canada's expansion efforts, while ensuring enough territory for Indigenous nations to live and thrive. Some examples of exclusive rights include the right to hunt and fish on unoccupied Crown lands, annuity payments, offer of agricultural and hunting equipment, educational rights, and so forth [9]. All the numbered treaties hold varying degrees of these specific entitlements, shaped by the signatories and what they saw was most important for their children to prosper. Therefore, the treaties are seen as a reflection of the vision the ancestors had for nations across treated territory. It is important to note that to Indigenous peoples, Treaties are sacred, and hold significant spiritual value. The exact wording of the text is not as important as the spirit and intent that it holds; what the ancestors wanted for the children when they signed these treaties, and the understanding of peace and prosperity for both nations to co-exist on a common land called Canada. This is why for me, and for so many Indigenous people, it is important to mention the treaty territory of which they come from, and honour and acknowledge the territory they are on, especially if they are a guest to that territory. There are also many contemporary agreements in Canada (modern land claims), Nunavut Land Claims Agreement [8], among others. There are still many areas of Canada where no treaties have signed, and therefore are unceded [10]. These territories therefore reject the Canadian claim to sovereignty, and have been a source of conflict, particularly with natural resource development projects.

While good in intentions, this marked the beginning of a gross, unjust, and traumatic process that was colonization. Residential schools, one of the most damaging mechanisms of colonization, had one goal: 'to kill the Indian in the child.' This quote is commonly used to describe the intent of Residential schools, which is also argued to be misattributed to poet Duncan Campbell Scott, who also helped lead the Department of Indian Affairs in the early 1900's, where it actually may have been said by an American military officer. Nonetheless, Scott carried a vision of

"I want to get rid of the Indian problem" [12]. This blunt and disturbing goal had the false pretense that the 'Indians' needed to become civilized and assimilated into Canadian society. Children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in schools that attempted to strip their identity by any means possible. Indeed, stories of all kinds of abuse permanently scarred their lives, on top of an aggressive curriculum that sought to make the children believe their heritage and ancestry was wrong, and that the church and industrial motives were good, which operated from the 1840's until the closure of the last school in 1996 [13].

While it is important to always acknowledge this hostile history, you may ask, what does colonization have to do with climate change and climate action? And I answer - everything.

These days, climate action is a new, trendy concept that only emerged to be a serious discussion point among scholars, politicians, and common citizens within the past 20 years. But climate action is not a 'nice to have' by any means in any Indigenous nation. This sacred relationship with the Earth defines who we are and how we live. It is the unspoken law that keeps us alive and thriving - that empowers our kids to chase their dreams and gives voice to our elders who carry important stories and teachings.

When the Canadian government chose to pursue their colonial agenda, they did it not for the 'good' intention of teaching the Indians - but because they knew that riches could be made from the very abundant land of Turtle Island, but the Indigenous people would not allow that to happen, given this sacred relationship. And so, the process of 'killing the Indian in the child' was a means to forcefully sever this connection for good, to extract from the land with as little resistance as possible. Our existence was and always has been this concept of 'climate action' and so the colonial process has impeded our ability to serve as guardians of the land.

## Contemporary Climate Action

The 2000's brought to light, for the first time in human history, a global acknowledgement that the way the world was operating was unsustainable. From Kyoto Protocol to the Paris Agreement, the world has seen many sets of policy frameworks, convincing speeches, and funding proposals in an effort to reverse the effects of climate change. Scientists worldwide agree that the anthropogenic emissions after the Industrial Revolution have been the largest contributor to the rise in the average global temperature. The idea of sustainability is now a political and corporate mechanism to earn a positive reputation as the public at large now takes climate change seriously.

All the while, Indigenous peoples across the world, have been fighting hard to protect their lands and rights, tirelessly, usually met with adversity and denial. On top of this, there is no question that the process of colonization has left an unquantifiable amount of pain and hardship. For many of our families and communities, socio-economic issues are rampant.

I acknowledge that I grew up from a place of privilege to be writing this piece, but I also know I'm statistically more likely to be in poverty, incarcerated, or a high-school dropout. And for many Indigenous people across Canada, adversity, pain, and coping is a daily reality, often disconnected from families and communities. The way everything unfolded is just so unfair - to be forcefully stripped of our identity that carried ideals and teachings that are now increasingly necessary to be shared given today's climate context.

The good news is that we are still here, and we are still willing to protect. We understand our duty to be stewards of the land and through the many instances in modern history, we are willing to put our own bodies on the line to protect the Earth, because after all, when we kill that moose, that's what the Earth has done for us.

## Resilience, Resurgence, and Renewable Energy

In 2018, construction of the Coastal GasLink Pipeline began, which would link the natural gas extraction sites to the port of Kitimat. The pipeline traversed the mountainous terrain in northern British Columbia, crossing through many traditional Indigenous lands, most of which have not signed any treaties that have ceded their land title. This led to numerous blockades setup by the people of Wet'suwet'en territory, whose hereditary chiefs never agreed to the construction of GasLink. The land defenders were met with great adversity, from confrontations from RCMP, to court injunctions, and strong public backlash across Canada. Soon after, many Indigenous land defenders across Canada began blocking highways and railways in a solidarity effort to support the sovereignty of Wet'suwet'en [4].

Through this example it is evident how interwoven climate policy and Indigenous rights are. At first glance, Wet'suwet'en appears upset over infringement onto their territory. Already a valid point, but this is just the tip of the iceberg. Underneath it reveals the sacred bond the people and the Earth share, and how willing the people are to defend, compromising their own time, money, and sometimes, their own safety. Across Canada, nations joined in their own efforts of solidarity, by holding rallies and setting up blockades of their own, mostly because, every nation knows what it feels like to experience the imposed and unconsensual advancement of development projects. Whether it's the sudden relocation of reserves to flood large areas of land for hydroelectric development, to the never-ending growth of the Alberta oil sands and detrimental health effects it has had on the neighboring Indigenous communities. Here, we note an important fact: you cannot have meaningful climate action without the empowerment and participation of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples make up less than 5% of the world's population but protect more than 80% of the Earth's biodiversity [5]. It is not out of pure coincidence that the advancement of the colonial

agenda has also occurred at the same time as the increase in average global temperatures. Nevertheless, an exciting future is on the horizon for Indigenous nations across Canada. Not only are we gathering to defend and be the physical guardians when the time comes, but we also are occupying new spaces that facilitate the creation of clean projects. Taku River Tlingit in Northern British Columbia operates a hydroelectric facility, one that was fully developed by the nation for the nation. It is an example of using clean technology to empower the community to be self-reliant and provide its members opportunities of growth and prosperity. Another example, the Niagara Region Wind Project, co-owned by the Six Nations of the Grand River, which sells clean, renewable energy to Ontario, shows how partnerships and clean technology empower the people. Here we notice that clean energy technologies go hand in hand with the Indigenous beliefs and values on coexistence and stewardship of the Earth. But it goes to another level. The money brought forth by the projects has led to scholarship funds for community youth [18]. It meant the water treatment plant can finally be afforded to be upgraded, improving the water quality for the community. It means that the struggling families with little job prospects in the community now have a place to work. These clean technology projects are also a source of economic income for communities, that have historically, always been at a disadvantage. They provide communities to build strong rapport with financial institutions and investors leading to more opportunities down the road. They provide construction and operational jobs for local community members. The income from selling the electricity pays off the project as well as giving the community money to invest back into things like infrastructure and education. Therefore, we note another fact: clean technology projects are more than just decarbonizing our energy sector; they are a tool of Indigenous empowerment and decolonization, that promise peace and prosperity for all.

### Sidebar: Autumn Peltier, a 16-year-old Water Warrior

There are currently 61 First Nations communities that have long-term water advisories in effect in Canada [21]. Simply, the public water systems in these communities are too toxic to be consumed directly, usually requiring the need to constantly boil the water and/or buy large amounts of bottled water. At the age of 13, Autumn Peltier, under guidance of her aunty, who was actively involved in the water protector's movement, recognized that not all people in Canada have access to clean drinking water. This was a turning moment for her to become a voice for the water and those who go without clean water access. She confronted Justin Trudeau with a copper water pot as a means to voice her concerns about pipeline construction and water protection. Since then, she has played an active role in advocating for clean water, being invited to several international conferences to share her unique perspective as a young Anishinaabe-kwe (Ojibwe woman) water warrior. Most notably, she spoke at the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit, alongside Greta Thunberg, both of whom continue their hard work in standing up for the Earth [20].

On the horizon in Canadian energy policy comes the introduction of various funding programs, all aimed at promoting and accelerating the implementation of clean energy projects in Indigenous communities [19]:

- Clean Energy for Rural and Remote Communities - \$220M over 6 years to reduce diesel use in remote and rural communities.
- Arctic Energy Fund - \$400M over 10 years for energy security in communities above the 60th parallel.
- Northern Responsible Energy Approach for Community Heat and Electricity - \$10.7M over 2 years to implement renewable energy projects in off-grid Indigenous and northern communities.

There is a long list of clean energy projects that have been or are currently planned, to be implemented in Indigenous communities across Canada, all with the national, provincial, territorial, and municipal policies

that have been put in place to facilitate this development [19]. In terms of lessons learned in implementing these projects, there are many considerations that must be factored in, which will help evolve the energy policies intended to facilitate this transition in Indigenous nations [19]:

- Understand timelines, assess risks, and manage expectations - Indigenous nations are reasonable to hold some sense of distrust and skepticism when corporations and governments make suggestions or propose new projects in their communities. It is crucial not to impose, overstep, and trivialize the concerns and needs of the communities. Relationship building is key - soup, tea, and bannock go a long way.
- Relationship to the land - time and time again, no matter how informed negotiators and developers are before consulting, this sacred relationship with the Earth is not acknowledged as much as it should be. For Indigenous peoples, the land represents life and survival.
- Capacity consideration - many communities are coping with the intergenerational legacy of colonization, which has reduced the ability to understand advanced energy and project development concepts. Try stepping into their shoes. Many community members ask the nation leadership for basic needs of survival like providing baby formula, maintaining heat in the elder's lodge, and making sure the school buses are getting kids to school in harsh winter temperatures. Even worse, some communities are dealing with such intense tragedies and hardships related to youth suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, and uncommon health ailments. So please, bear with Indigenous leadership, when they're not aware of a kWh, or unfamiliar with how key interest rates change a project's return on investment.

- Ensuring meaningful and equitable participation - making sure that despite some differences in capacity, Indigenous nations are always consulted and considered in major decisions, to which their opinion is always taken into account. Ensure that projects always include the community through youth advisory committees, elder's gatherings, employment of community members, use of local contractors, etc.

These are just some examples of how specific energy policy in Canada has been changing to be more inclusive of Indigenous nations. We are on the right track, but more work needs to be done, such that more Indigenous nations become empowered to implement these projects.

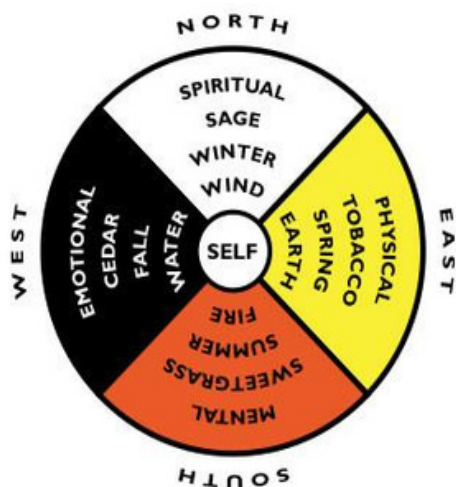
Conclusively, this isn't a story of sadness or affliction. It is a story of resilience, that despite all of the undue, unjust, and unwanted adversity, hardship, and struggle, we still hold our vision for a better future several generations ahead - one that holds our relationship to the Earth as the most sacred and one that we will always protect. *"We don't inherit the land from our ancestors, but we borrow it from our children."*

### The Medicine Wheel – Background

The Medicine Wheel is a symbolic representation of balance, reciprocity, and wholeness, all important principles in many Indigenous nations for peace and enlightenment. There are many variations of the Medicine Wheel, each dependent on the specific teacher, nation, and context. In general, Medicine Wheels are first constructed by a circle, which symbolizes the circle of life, the cyclical pattern of the natural world, and the interconnectedness of life. The circle is then divided into four equally sized quadrants, each with its own colour, the most common being, red, black, white, and yellow. The circle is angled such that each quadrant is aligned with a particular cardinal direction. It is important to note that here, there are many variations in order of the colors and which color is assigned to what direction. It's best to consult online resources to follow the one closest to the territory you are on, though this isn't absolutely necessary. In my teachings from Treaty One territory, mostly from

Anishinaabe and Niheyaw (Ojibwe and Cree) teachers, I was taught that each quadrant represents medicines, natural elements, and most importantly, states of being - emotional/social, spiritual, physical, and mental. The intent of the medicine wheel is to teach one the importance of balance in all aspects of being to ensure a peaceful and enlightened life. If one area for example, the mental, where one is not engaging their own learning and education, as much as say, their emotional aspect, where one spends a great amount of time on social media, then this is said to be imbalanced, with the Medicine Wheel offering a visual representation of this imbalance. No one quadrant shall be more or less important than the other. The closest to the Medicine Wheel teaching I received can be found [here](#).

The Medicine Wheel can be applied to essentially anything, as all things in life are in need of balance and wholeness. In that way, the Medicine Wheel provides a good framework to ensure a policy or project considers all aspects of livelihood, such that it moves forward with the best intentions as possible and ensures no one aspect is overlooked.



Source: [goo.gl/RLj84Y](http://goo.gl/RLj84Y)

### Sample Medicine Wheel Exercise

Below is an outline of some ideas on what the students can explore in their medicine wheels. It is important to encourage the students to think outside the box and go beyond the literal meaning of each quadrant. Assist the students with guiding questions

or examples if necessary. Encourage students to think intergenerationally, and beyond their communities.

This medicine wheel is adapted to fit Melina's story from the video regarding the tar sand projects nearby her community:

### North - spiritual

- Pollution of waterways by tailings ponds. Heavy use of freshwater.
  - o Effects community drinking water. Health hazard.
    - Health conditions arise, decreasing community well-being. Strains limited health care system.
  - o Aquatic life affected. Lower biodiversity can lead to a chain reaction in the ecosystem.
- Life on land is disrupted by land clearing.
  - o Trees, natural CO2 capturing, are cut down.
  - o Natural habitat loss, leading to decline of wildlife population.
- Global climate. CO2 emissions rise immensely.
  - o Contribution to the rise in global average temperature.
  - o Worldwide health effects due to air pollution. Contributes to drastic climate change events in other areas of the world.

### East - physical

- Access to food, affected by land use change and water contamination.
  - o Loss of local food can harm the local economy.
  - o Loss of local food means import of more expensive alternatives.
- Clean drinking water. Health effects. Air quality
- can induce respiratory problems. Can strain the
- health care system, making it harder for people to be diagnosed and treated in time.



### ***South – mental***

- Temporary community growth (if community is permitted to participate).
  - o Not generational thinking since it is a limited resource. Eventually the site will be expanded, and the future children will have to think of something else for economic support.
  - o The future children also may be dealing with a build-up of health ailments caused by the nearby oil sands.
- Education takes a toll - no initiatives to have community members train to be a part of the development. No funding for new schools or access to higher education.
  - o Community members don't learn about the pros and cons of the development project, leading to loss of trust and no relationship.

### ***West – social/emotional***

- Indigenous people are marginalized
  - o No equality as the local community is not included in the conversation to build the oil sands, while also being the ones who must deal with its effects the most.
- Unjust violation of treaties
  - o The nations must be consulted with in regard to any development project on Treaty territory. As such, the relationship is not honoured.

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