

## **Oil sands shape public relations battle for Alberta**

*Researcher says media coverage has shifted away from economic side of oil sands development*

June 2, 2013, Victoria – An Alberta researcher says the province – because of its oil sands – is in the middle of a major public relations battle over how it's perceived by the rest the world. Both the defenders of oil sands development and its opponents are doing their best to shape public opinion.

Yet Geo Takach says too few people are aware of the battle, even though what's at stake is the province's (and to some extent Canada's) economic development.

Takach is an Edmonton-based filmmaker and writer, and doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication and Culture at the University of Calgary.

He has been researching Alberta's image in the media in relation to the oil sands, and is presenting the results of his work at the 2013 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences

Takach has been analyzing Alberta's image since 2004, the year the oil sands came to international attention when the United States included them in a list of the world's recoverable oil resources.

Takach says the way Alberta and its oil sands are presented in the media can be seen as falling into 15 categories ranging from anthropocentrism on one end – humans need the resource, so they should exploit it – to eco-centrism, or the belief that the need to protect the environment trumps everything else.

He says the way Alberta is portrayed has shifted since 2004.

Media reports used to focus primarily on the concepts of progress and the economic advantages of oil sands development; now, says Takach, coverage has shifted toward the eco-centric end of the spectrum, with more stories, for example, on the health impacts of the oil sands or how their development affects Aboriginal people.

Takach says the Alberta government and the oil industry tend to rely on utilitarian arguments when defending the oil sands – arguments that centre on progress, jobs and money, and how industry is getting better at extracting the oil sands and minimizing environmental impacts. The environmental voices on the ecocentric side use what he calls 'moralistic' framing – saying things like the oil sands project is giving Canada a black eye on the international stage, or that the Aboriginal peoples are suffering.

Takach said not enough people are paying attention to that battle, and where it is going.

"We live in an age where branding matters," he said. "Everybody is jockeying for tourism and trade dollars. Reputation is very important. The point of the research is to get people saying, 'Hey, what's going on?'"

**For more information, story ideas or to schedule an interview, please contact:**

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