

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

Tar Ponds become the centre of racial controversy

Canada's largest toxic waste site is being ignored as a "non-issue"

BY NATALIE MACLELLAN

More than a quarter of the blacks and natives living in Nova Scotia are living within five kilometres of a dump.

This, said local black activist Rocky Jones, is symptomatic of a phenomenon recently coined environmental racism.

"All around this province you will find that waste sites are constructed where the people are poor, where they're native, and where they are black," Jones said during a Sierra Club sponsored lecture.

"That is how our institutions, our government, uses their power in a very racist fashion."

"As you know," Jones said, "the native communities are reserve lands. All around these reserve lands, [the government is] putting dumps. So the community can't even move away from the dump. And those communities are not producing the waste...when you get up from a table in a poor community, there is very little waste."

Environmental racism and environmental justice are terms which are gaining popularity very quickly as activists are discovering that environmental issues tend to be dealt

with much more quickly and effectively when they are the concern of the white middle and upper class.

The Sydney Tar Ponds are a prime example of an environmental justice issue, said Elizabeth May, executive director of the Sierra Club. The Tar Ponds are Canada's largest toxic waste site, the second largest toxic waste site

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in North America. Yet they are virtually unheard of in local and provincial politics, as well as in the mainstream media.

"I've been a Cape Breton resident forever," May said, "and I didn't know the Tar Ponds existed. It was a revelation to me that Canada's largest toxic waste site was in [Cape Breton]."

"Nothing was more horrifying than actually going there and seeing it."

The Tar Ponds, which coincidentally are neither full of tar nor are they ponds,

are the result of 80 years of steel making in Sydney.

The Tar Ponds problem encompasses a much larger area, the Muggah Creek Watershed, including a tidal estuary of the south arm of Sydney Harbour. Sludge from the steel mill and coke oven site have been dumped into the estuary for years, as well as PCBs from the nearby rail line and raw sewage from the town.

"There are 700,000 tonnes of toxic sludge in the estuary of the Tar Ponds, not counting what's found up Coke Oven Brook, in the abandoned coke oven site, in the soil, and in the dump," May said.

"How much toxic waste was in Love Canal, that became so famous for a community living with toxic waste? The answer is 22,000 tonnes. But it was a nice white suburb. I think there are some differences here."

"What we all have in common in Cape Breton is that we are politically forgotten, and that makes this issue for me, an issue of environmental justice."

Zelda Lucas, a black Sydney native

in the audience, took this suggestion even further.

"It is an issue of racism, because if [the Tar Ponds were] in a white community, it would have been cleaned up many years ago. Many, many years

it wouldn't be in Toronto. People wouldn't allow it."

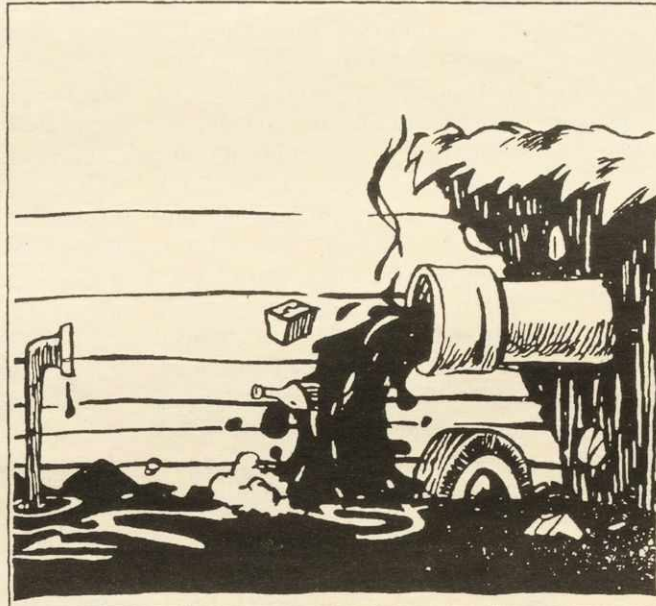
In the late 1980s, \$80 million was put aside to clean up the Tar Ponds, \$55 million of which was wasted building an incinerator which has never worked.

In the winter of 1996, the government announced their "Encapsulation Option" which involved burying the estuary in slag and seeding it with grass to make a nice recreational area. Needless to say that idea was short-lived.

Since then, nothing further has been done to clean up the Tar Ponds. It has become a "non-issue". The solution, May says, is to make it an issue again.

"If [Nova Scotia premier] Russell MacLellan is able to go to his former colleagues

in the Liberal Party in Ottawa and say 'I need to be able to tell people I've done something about cleaning up the Muggah Creek Watershed, people are upset about it, people want a clean-up, people are dying and this is something I must be able to include in my platform; those are where the political windows of opportunity are.'



ago."

Although Sydney is not a predominantly black community, the black population of the city is concentrated in the area closest to the Tar Ponds.

"If it was in South end Halifax, it would have been cleaned up long ago," May agreed. "If it was in Toronto—well,

Environmental martyrdom on a massive scale

BY CHRIS MILLER

Imagine being tortured and executed by your own country for speaking out against environmental degradation.

That is what is happening in Nigeria according to Barenika Gbarazia, Atlantic regional director for the Canadian chapter of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP).

Barenika Gbarazia is a Nigerian refugee who recently arrived in Canada. While living in his homeland, Gbarazia witnessed atrocities most of us find difficult to even imagine — but they are all too real for him. He spoke to a small group of concerned citizens in Halifax on Sunday, Jan. 18.

Gbarazia spoke of a place where soldiers slaughter their own people, children can't attend school, women are raped and young men are tortured before they are hanged.

"Repression is happening and we have to stop it," Gbarazia said. "The [Nigerian] government has no shame. It murders people in jail."

It all started, innocently enough, approximately 40 years ago, when oil gushed from a test drilling site on the Nigerian Delta, in the heart of what is known locally as the Ogoni lands. To the joy of the poverty stricken Ogoni people, the mega multi-national company, Royal Dutch Shell, tapped into one of the largest oil deposits in Western Africa, and spoke of local prosperity.

This enthusiasm quickly began to fade, Gbarazia says, when oil spills,

contaminated groundwater and gas explosions began to environmentally degrade this once thriving agricultural heartland. He says that drinking water became polluted and fish populations began to die.

"Nigeria gets richer from oil, but the [Ogoni] people become poorer," Gbarazia said. "We gradually lose our environment. We gradually lose our heritage."

"The [Nigerian] government has no shame. It murders people in jail"

According to Greenpeace, 6.4 million litres of oil have been spilt, in 27 separate incidents, by Royal Dutch Shell in Nigeria. This is more than the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska.

Gbarazia says bringing about environmental reforms is difficult, when dealing with a company that accounts for almost all of Nigeria's exports. In 1994, the Nigerian government began to crack down on the Ogoni people's anti-Shell sentiments, in what Gbarazia refers to as "murder" and "genocide".

Ken Saro-Wiwa, Bariner Kiobel, John Krinen and six other Ogoni leaders were executed on Nov. 10, 1995 despite outcries from the international community.

Gbarazia speaks harshly of Dutch-owned Shell. He is calling for a boycott of the company and refers to their

profits as being dirty.

"[The money] is the blood of the Ogoni people. It is the blood of the Ogoni land."

Shell Canada — subsidiary of the multi-national Royal Dutch Shell — has stated that it is not involved with the Nigerian controversy.

"I can confirm that Shell Canada does not import crude oil from Nigeria, nor do we have any other business dealings with the government of Nigeria," says Margaret Sparkes, communications advisor for Shell Canada, via e-mail.

"The situation in Nigeria is complex and does not lend itself to simple answers. It is also true that society today is calling for multi-national companies to play a different role than they have played in the past," she said.

Sparkes concedes, however, that "[Dutch-based] Shell does not claim to have a perfect record in Nigeria, but [Shell Canada] believe [the Shell Petroleum Development Company] is playing a positive role there".

Canada is a leader in the push for human rights reforms in Nigeria, and Barenika speaks highly of his new, northern home.

Local community groups are also getting involved with this issue.

Betty Peterson of the Ogoni Solidarity Network of Nova Scotia has taken up the cause. She helped organize a protest against a Shell gas station in Halifax, and was involved in bringing executed MOSOP President Ken Saro-Wiwa's brother to the city for a series of lectures last year.

"We had a strong protest against Shell," Peterson said.

The Social Action Committee of the Universalist-Unitarian Church is also getting involved. They helped organize Gbarazia's recent presentation in Halifax. Roger Davies of the Church says he was "pleased to have sponsored the presentation" and anticipates the Social Action Committee becoming more involved with this issue in the near

future.

Shell Canada is a major player in the \$3-billion Sable Gas Project, in the waters off Nova Scotia. Gbarazia and others are concerned that Shell's involvement with this project may damage Canada's internationally acclaimed human rights record.

"Today [it] is Ogoni. Tomorrow [it will be] another place," warns Gbarazia. "Together we can make a change."



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