

THE EYES OF THE WORLD ARE UPON US:
THE ROLE OF VISUAL IMAGES IN THE FIGHT OVER ALBERTA'S OIL SANDS

Emily Groom

Dr. Craig Palmer, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

In the controversy over the mining of the Alberta oil sands, tourism has become a tool used by both those who want to stop further development of the oil sands and perhaps also by those who want it to continue. The goal of this research is to examine how the visual images of the environment, within the context of tourism, are being used to influence public opinion over the oil sands operations. Through a multistep process, promotional materials from tourism brochures, guidebooks, and websites, and also from anti-oil sands campaign websites, were analyzed according to their content, with just under 2000 images examined. Nature-tourism is the dominant form of tourism in the oil sands region, and therefore tourism experiences and images from the oil sands region largely feature images of wildlife, scenic views, and outdoor activities in the oil sands region. In contrast, images used by the Rethink Alberta campaign and other anti-oil sands organizations focus on mining operations themselves and their immediate negative effects on the environment. Results of the examination found differences in means of distribution, environmental emphasis, and geographical scale between material from tourism and from anti-oil sands campaigns. The differing goals of the tourism industry and the anti-oil sands campaigns were also reflected in the imagery used, with tourism attempting to attract visitors to pristine environments, while anti-oil sands groups are trying to discourage visitation as a form of protest. By promoting the availability of outdoor experiences through advertisements for nature-tourism activities, and wide use of visual images featuring aspects of nature, the tourism industry may be unintentionally countering anti-oil sands campaign groups' allegations of wanton ecological destruction and unsustainability.