Keepers of the Athabasca

Flowing into Right Relationship events: Join our River Journey

Celebrating the Athabasca River Commemorating Canada’s 150th
Acknowledging Keepers of the Athabasca’s 10th Anniversary

While Canada’s 150th Birthday is on July 1, 2017, Indigenous peoples have been present and sustainably caretaking this land for over 15,000 years. Keepers of the Athabasca’s Flowing into Right Relationship paddle and workshop series invites us to learn more about our history, and better ways to move forward into the future together.

We will paddle the Athabasca River to celebrate our beautiful river, the original highway for these parts of the world.

Paddlers will set out from Smith on Thursday, June 29, after a send off BBQ and a historical talk from Friends of Northern Alberta Historical Society and Treaty 8 First Nations of Alberta. We will have two overnight camps, one at Tomato Creek, a traditional ‘over wintering spot’, and one at 17 Mile island.

Another group of Keepers will meet us closer to Athabasca, a couple of hours from town, so we can arrive together at the River Rats Festival! There we will set up our new 30’ tipi with Driftpile Healing Gathering for the Land and Water.

Healing Gathering for the Land and Water July 14—16, 2017

This year’s Healing Gathering takes place once again at Indian Beach, near Anzac, Alberta. At this location, thousands of supporters have gathered to walk around tailings ponds and bitumen processing for five years on the Tarsands Healing Walk.

In 2017, we gather again for the 3rd Healing Gathering: healing ourselves and the Land and Water with prayer, tradition, learning, sharing, and love.

Last year, about 250 people participated in Traditional Food preparation, hide tanning, Plant medicine teachings: HG 2016.

First Nation Drummers, and have our first public ‘Flowing into Right Relationship’ workshop.

We look forward to lots of campfire discussion, understanding our various histories and how colonial attitudes continue to affect our lives today. What are we going to do differently to help future generations? Contact Barb Courtoiselle for more information or to register 780 843—5179

Contact Jule Asterisk 780 805—1709: Flowing into RR workshop series
Keepers opposes proposed new bitumen mine in northern Alberta

Does Alberta need another, brand new bitumen mine? Teck Resources Ltd., a Vancouver based multinational corporation whose stock was downgraded to ‘junk’ status just last year, has an application for one. Teck’s proposed Frontier Oil Sands Project is before the Joint Review panel (Canada/Alberta) now. This proposed new open pit bitumen mine, which includes more tailings ponds, is being contested by Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Mikisew Cree Nation, and others, including Keepers of the Athabasca. Some of the original objections have been withdrawn after ‘negotiations’, however the three named entities have promised to counter Teck until the end.

Since the Alberta Cancer Board commented in 2009 that upstream communities were wrongly told their cancer rate was ‘normal’, no additional studies have been done, and cancer numbers continue to climb.

The chair of the Scientific Committee at that time, was simultaneously the Health and Environmental Advisor to the Oilsands Developers Committee, which he did not disclose. He was also the Medical Officer of Health for the region, so too many hats creating potential conflicts of interest.

Continued suffering by those who live close to the land upstream of the bitumen mines is not acceptable. Full containment of tailings would help.

Keepers of the Athabasca are in the middle of an interesting negotiation process with SUEZ Environmental, the French company who currently has the contract to operate the SHTC. So far, we have been able to confirm that SUEZ will perform one extra lake sediment core sample as part of their annual monitoring program. We had asked for 3 samples, near Athabasca, Slave Lake, and Fort Assiniboine. If we have to choose only 1, it may be somewhere east of the plant, due to prevailing winds.

So far, Keepers’ staff have given presentations about this file to the Town of Slave Lake, Town of Athabasca, Swan River First Nation, Sucker Creek First Nation, Tri-Council Wellness Committee, Woodlands County, and Municipality of Lesser Slave River. We have asked all of these, and hope that they can help us ask for the number of lake sediment core samples to be increased back up to 3, as this information will be crucial in determining whether contamination is traveling further than expected.

Keepers of the Athabasca successfully challenged the Alberta Environment Approval in 2015. In our challenge, we included the 2015 ‘State of the Watershed’ technical report, commissioned by the Lesser Slave Watershed Council, in which PCB’s are found in Lesser Slave Lake sediment core samples, increasing in the years SHTC has had accidents, explosions and fires. The samples analyzed for that report were actually taken in 2009, and because sediments take from 3—5 years to ‘settle’ at the bottom of a lake, will not include results for the incident that took place at the plant that year. On July 9, 2009, a very serious fire and explosion shut SHTC down for 10 months with millions of dollars in damages, and unknown amounts of PCB’s released into the air. The wind was blowing toward the Town of Slave Lake on that day.

We first met with SUEZ on September 9, 2016, and then again on April 24, 2017. These meetings were facilitated by Alberta Environment, who will take over the mediation of our concerns if we are not satisfied with the results from SUEZ. Representatives from Alberta Health came to the second meeting, as requested. Unfortunately, Alberta Health will not be able to help us with proposed health survey.

Major concerns for residents include increased cancer and other health risks due to potential low - medium grade contamination across a widespread area. Keepers, along with local volunteers, will be performing a door-to-door health survey in the T0G 1K0 area code, as requested many times through the years by local residents. This health survey will also be available on our website for those in a different area code. We are currently involved in confirming an academic partner for the health survey.