

Unit 8: Sean Kheraj: What impact do oil pipelines have?

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A: So I started looking at oil pipelines as a new area of research as I became interested in energy history. So this is a subfield on the subfield of environmental history that looks at humanity's relationship with different forms of energy, where we derive our energy from, what the consequences are of the waste products from the consumption of those forms of energy. And, of course, in Canada in the 21st century, oil was reemerging again as a substantial political issue. I had been living in Alberta in 2011 when there was a massive onshore pipeline oil spill in Northern Alberta, on the eve of a federal election at that. And news of it began to trickle out into the national media after the election, and the response from the provincial environment minister and the premier was that while the spill was tragic and unfortunate, it was exceptional and unusual. And, in fact, there was a really good track record of the transportation of oil via pipelines in Canada. And after seeing that and reading that, I thought, "Well, what is the track record?" We don't actually know. Nobody's ever counted how many onshore oil spills there have been in Canada. And I had known as a Canadian historian that Canada has had a long history with oil as an energy resource, going back to the 19th century, but of course, its 20th century history with the use of oil since the discovery of conventional crude oil resources in Leduc, Alberta in 1947 has been the more substantial period of Canada's oil history. So then I set out to start counting how many onshore oil pipeline spills there have been in Canada. And just in the preliminary investigation of publically available documents within the past 20 years, it was actually an extraordinary number. We're talking thousands of spills, millions of litres spilled across a large geographic area, spread out over time. And so that has led me down a path of wanting to know more about where these spills occur, what the products are that spill, what the environmental consequences are of oil spills and how communities respond and react to the risks involved with the movement of very large volumes of hazardous material. And it's been quite interesting because it's, I think, revealing new things about 20th century Canadian history that Canadian historians have not thought about. For example, in 1941, the majority of energy resources that Canadians consumed came from organic energy resources: animal power and wood. Canadians didn't become majority mineral energy consumers until after the 1940's. And this is actually kind of unusual. In Britain and in the United States, the energy

regimes in those economies shifted to a mineral energy regime in the earlier parts of the 20th century, to coal and to high energy fossil fuels. Canadians were much slower in that transition. And so I think that this recent finding in Canadian energy history can give us new ways of thinking about Canada's economic history and its political history and its social history in some new ways. Because I think that we've been negligent or blind to the degree to which that shift was quite radical, quite fast and quite fundamentally transformative in the ways we live our ordinary lives. And this ties back to the research that I've been doing on animals. That shift from our everyday lives being quite closely connected to animals through direct engagement with living animals, wearing animals and consuming animals was fundamentally transformed by the change in our energy use in the second half of the 20th century. As we moved towards high energy fossil fuels and the trucking of goods, we were able to displace our relationship to animals such that most Vancouverites never see the live animals that they consume. The clothes that they wear come from petroleum products that they never would've had access to earlier in the 20th century. And this, in many ways, fundamentally changed our relationship with the natural world because of our changing relationship to the energy that we consume. And so the research project that I'm looking at in terms of pipelines is a part of that because the pipelines create the possibility for a high energy society. Being able to take a centrally produced energy resource from one region of the country and distribute it everywhere and the pipelines are absolutely fundamental to that, the the lynchpin of a high energy fossil fuel society that emerges in the second half of the 20th century, which we now live with the consequences of that society today.