



## Going with the Flow

### Learning Canadian geography through pipeline pedagogy

BY DR. TREVOR NORRIS

**C***anadian Geographic* is one of the oldest and best known environmentally-oriented magazines in Canada, widely used in schools across the country in geography and science classes. It has traditionally focused on endangered species, fragile ecosystems, the challenges that technological progress presents, and the importance of environmental stewardship. In addition to extensive use in schools, such magazines also form what educational theorists call “public pedagogy”: they not only educate students when used in schools, but they educate the larger public as well (Sandlin, Schultz, Burdick, 2010).

However, the focus of the magazine has recently shifted. The spring 2014 issue is titled “Energy Nation” and promotes classroom-based activities that normalize fossil fuel consumption and a lifestyle and culture oriented around dependence on fossil fuel consumption. This issue forefronts the importance of the oil and gas industry to the Canadian economy and how it fits into Canadian geography. The magazine has partnered with the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), which is portrayed as a non-partisan and non-profit

organization but is widely recognized as an advocate for the Canadian oil and gas industry.

*Canadian Geographic* developed this close relationship with the oil and gas industry in order to fund the distribution of educational resources to schools across the country. Canadian Geographic Education, or CG Education, “is the educational committee of The Royal Canadian Geographical Society.” Its programs “aim to strengthen geographic education in the classroom” and promote “geographical literacy” (<http://www.cgeducation.ca/>). With financial aid from CAPP, CG Education has developed an “Energy IQ” program which “aims to increase energy and geographic literacy in Canada” (*Canadian Geographic*, “Energy IQ”, 2014). One of its more popular resources is

an interactive energy map and a giant floor map. These free floor maps are as big as a classroom, and the website states that “Students will enjoy learning about the often-unseen system that plays such a big part in their daily lives through engaging, teacher-created activities” (*Canadian Geographic*, Floor Map, 2014).

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of young Canadians. It is also becoming promoted with increasing frequency in school and in “educational” literature (Norris, 2011, Molnar, 2005, Sandlin & McLaren, 2010, Saltman, 2013). Whereas students once learned about the flows of rivers and patterns of species migrations and the shape of mountain ranges, they will now learn about the natural world from the perspective of the oil and gas industry and through the framework of fossil fuel extraction and distribution. For example, students learn geography through the system of pipelines set up across the country, learn about science through the lens of its benefits for industry. Science is portrayed as the same instrument that can be used

to solve the very problems that it creates. The profit motive remains unquestioned and corporations are portrayed as servants of the larger public good that serve the interests of citizens. Fossil fuel consumption is normalized and naturalized, claimed to be unavoidable and necessary to the country, and construed as benign and inconsequential. While environmental issues are still presented, they are downplayed in relation to the benefits of scientific exploration — or exploitation — of the natural world. Alternative sources of energy, and alternative sources of transportation, are not extensively presented. However, one potential classroom-based counter measure would be to allow students to identify where pipeline leaks have occurred in the past (particularly near schools), what kinds of ecosystems are most at risk in the event of a spill, and what impacts oil spills have on different species of plants or animals — or humans.

It is perhaps no coincidence that this “partnership” between CAAP and *Canadian Geographic* occurs just as Enbridge seeks approval to build a pipeline to the Pacific and expand a pipeline through a heavily populated region of southern Ontario.

This example demonstrates that schools are increasingly becoming places where consumer values are developed and consumption is normalized. There are many reasons why corporations would want to access schools — and many reasons why it is highly problematic. (Norris, 2009) While *Canadian Geographic* doesn't take an overtly political stance, this is a case of sins by omission: there is no mention of such issues as climate change or frequent pipeline leaks; instead it attempts to be only descriptive: emphasizing the importance of pipelines to the Canadian economy. This is perhaps most problematic, as it conveys the impression that there is nothing contentious about this issue, nothing to potentially object to or question. However, when Al Gore's documentary “An Inconvenient Truth” was shown in schools, many corporations demanded that teachers emphasize how the documentary was ‘biased’. A *National Post* article critical of teachers who show the documentary states that teachers are “unaware” that there are other sides to the argument. In the UK, schools are required to issue a warning about the bias of the documentary (*Daily Mail*, October 3, 2007). However, there are no requirements to declare a bias on the CAPP-sponsored classroom resources being distributed by *Canadian Geographic*.

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Some concerned high school students in Vancouver—where a pipeline spill occurred in a residential area in 2007—have written a letter titled “We’re young, not stupid,” which outlines why they oppose this “partnership”.

The ultimate consequence of this shift in *Canadian Geographic’s* focus is to change how nature and the fossil fuel industry are portrayed to youth and in the school system. While there are many resources available for teachers who would like to teach about the oil and gas industry in their classrooms, what is deeply problematic about this particular case is that it benefits from exploiting a trusted, iconic, public resource — as if it weren’t enough that the oil and gas industry is already exploiting a natural resource. It perhaps would be less problematic if the CAPP had started their own magazine to advance their political and pedagogical project. The appropriation of this crucial voice in Canadian public discourse and crucial resource for teachers makes it doubly problematic. Naomi Klein has recently critiqued the ways in which the environmental movement sometimes aligns itself with those same interests it previously critiqued, its critical project sometimes placed in jeopardy as a result (Klein, 2013).

*Canadian Geographic* has even begun to “partner” with specific oil and gas corporations: Shell Canada has recently “partnered” with *Canadian Geographic* to offer “exploration expertise” in the search for the lost Franklin expedition in the Arctic. How ironic that the Arctic passage is only now becoming navigable because of the contributions of oil corporations like Shell to global warming, who benevolently help find ships that couldn’t make it through the same ice that is now melting. And how ironic that new oil and gas exploration opportunities in the Arctic will now become available to Shell and other corporations who for so long denied that global warming was happening.

This initiative by *Canadian Geographic* raises fundamental questions about who educates our kids, what values guide them, who should shape public discourse about environmental issues, and whether the current generation of students will adopt the same consumer values that have led to such a significant environmental crisis. Should oil corporations be permitted to gain access to schools and classrooms? How compatible are commercial interests with educational objectives? Should education reproduce consumer values or aim to critique

them? What is the difference between educating and acquiring a new market of consumers? The health of our schools — and of our planet — depends on how we address this question.

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