Discourses of the Alberta Oil Sands: What Key Stakeholders Really Think About Sustainability

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Abstract

In an attempt to determine the key challenges and opportunities of creating a dialogue about sustainability in regards to the Alberta oil sands, 13 professionals from four key stakeholder groups (industry, government, media and NGO) were asked the same set of seven questions about their conceptualization of sustainability. Key findings included the following: (1) Vague language pervaded many of the discussions including references to 'responsible development,' 'corporate social responsibility,' or 'triple bottom line.' (2) The sample illustrated a continuum of positions regarding both the notion of sustainability writ large and within the context of the oil sands specifically. (3) The largest concentration of discussion about sustainability surrounded practices and values, with goals and indicators figuring much less prominently. This paper provides useful insight to both the areas where stakeholders are still struggling to agree upon and those places where there is in fact some overlap. Areas for future research include exploration into one more key stakeholder: the indigenous voice.

Keywords: sustainability, sustainable development, oil sands, stakeholders

I. Introduction

The third largest oil reserve in the world after Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, the Alberta oil sands hold 170 out of Canada's 173 billion barrels of oil reserves, 168 billion of which are recoverable from bitumen (Government of Alberta, 2016). As well as supplying oil for Canada and other countries around the world, these oil sands also provide jobs by the hundreds of thousands, predicting a growth of 5,170 operations workers by 2020, a 17% increase from 133,053 jobs in 2014 (Government of Alberta 2014; 2016).

Unfortunately, a healthy supply of oil and the economic benefits that come with it are not all the oil sands have to offer. Producing 2.3 million barrels of oil per day, a number expected to rise to 4 million in the next ten years (Government of Alberta 2014), comes at a cost. Environmental damage due to extreme extraction processes have been an increasing cause of concern and questions of sustainability are rising amongst many Canadians and oil sands observers worldwide. National and international attention has been peaked with increasing mass media coverage on issues such as wildlife drowning in tailings ponds (Ramsay, 2015; Canadian Press, 2012) efforts by industry to present the resource as ethical (de Souza, 2012), and current pipeline concerns (Bird, 2014).

These arising questions about the sustainability of Alberta's oil sands have lead to further queries about exactly just what sustainability means. Accordingly, this paper aims to explore the following research question: How do key stakeholders define sustainability as it relates to the Alberta oil sands? To do so it asks those key players working in different areas of the field to comment on the topic. What follows is a review of existing literature on this topic. Next, the methods of this project are explained. After which, key findings are presented. Finally, this article offers concluding thoughts and considers implications of the study results for future discussions of sustainability.

II. Literature review

A Google Scholar search of the Alberta oil sands, stakeholders and sustainability since 2012 yields approximately 300 articles on this topic. However, a careful review of abstracts indicates that very few of these discussions are on how sustainability is communicated. In fact many deal with rather technical dimensions that give very little clarity to what this concept means to those groups responsible for communicating about it. Some samples of these articles include:

Foote (2012) who examines mining effects and wetland reclamation in Alberta's mineable oil sands to estimate thresholds of biophysical realities, time scales, economic allocations, and social tolerance; Allen (2008) who explores process water treatment in the oil sands, and how continuous recycling of tailings pond water is contributing to a decline in water quality that has consequences to bitumen recovery, water consumption and reclamation efforts; and Rooney, Bayley & Schindler (2012) who have quantified the wholesale transformation of the boreal landscape by open-pit oil sands mining in Alberta, Canada to evaluate its effect on carbon storage and sequestration.

While such technical articles are constructive for providing some ideas about specific issues associated with the oil sands, they do problematize the concept of sustainability itself. There is, however, a small body of social science literature that attempts to explore some of these issues. For instance, Slawinski & Bansai (2015) conducted interviews with 60 respondents in five oil and gas companies in Alberta in an attempt to appreciate how they approach the long-term and short-term pressures of climate change. They found that firms appreciated the complexity of this issue and looked for solutions both within and outside their organizations that would balance both societal and business needs which included long range planning, two way stakeholder engagement and cross sector collaboration. Moreover, Paskey, Steward & Williams (2013) set out to determine how the discourse in documents and news articles pertaining to the Alberta oil sands that have been produced by government, industry, academia and non-governmental organizations, and the news media over the past 40 years has changed. Upon exploration one of the most notable shifts is that since the 1970's there has been a considerable decrease in evidence and facts provided by government funded research and an increase in promotion and marketing by stakeholders as industry, government and NGO's began to attempt to push their own agendas into the public eye. In addition, Murphy's (2015) search into the media's construction of climate change states that there is a lack of global responsibility perspective by media opinion leaders and that is part of why science, an institution usually assumed to be influential, is having little impact on societies like Canada when it brings troubling news (specifically, environmental news in regards to harmful effects of the oil sands). This idea is also present in Richards (2012) exploratory case study on green house gas emissions from the Alberta oil sands. In a claim tracing document review, Richards (2012) found several issues, which could be accepted as reasons for compromising effective dialogue about GHG emissions, such as speaking different languages, unclear ultimate sources, vague assumptions and processes, lack of academic sources, potential magnification of misinformation, and poor direct engagement. As a solution, Richards suggests a more central role for science in the processes of policy-making and related deliberation, also, that a physical institution may be required to facilitate social consensus-building and movement in positions instead of opposing sides becoming further entrenched in their initial stances.

Other findings in the reviewed articles include Tran's (2014) look into news content (2007-2009) about the oil sands and noted a concentrated level of media surrounding the economic aspects of the oil sands, with lesser on ecological, political, scientific and other dimensions. As well, Nelson, Krogman, Johnston & St. Claire (2015) analyzed 747 newspaper articles surrounding the issue of 1,600 ducks flying into an oil sands tailing pond and uncovered that most solutions to the issue presented in the media were short-term and depicted a zero-sum- trade-off between environmental and economic interests. They suggest that more sustained media attention with a greater diversity of voices and solutions could foster greater dialogue around environmental challenges.

A preliminary look at the literature reveals that there are several common issues reiterated in the literature surrounding the Alberta oil sands: [1] The media is having an effect on how the public is receiving information about the oil sands and moreover, affecting their interpretations on associated issues (Murphy, 2015; Nelson, Krogman, Johnston & St. Claire, 2015; Paskey, Steward & Williams, 2013; Tran, 2014); [2] There has been a shift away from stakeholders sharing factual, evidence based information and towards a more marketing and promotional focused approach, with an emphasis at times on industry concerns, when it comes to oil sands information presented by industry, government and non-governmental organizations (Paskey, Steward & Williams, 2013; Tran, 2014); [3] There is a need for a larger scientific presence, and clearer ways to talk about complex issues, when it comes to sharing information about the environmental issues associated with the Alberta oil sands (Richards, 2012; Tran, 2014); and [4] there is a need for better communication within and across at these sectors (Nelson, Krogman, Johnston & St. Claire, 2015; Paskey, Steward & Williams, 2013; Slawinski & Bansai; 2015).

It is also worth noting that not only are there some significant issues in how issues associated with the oil sands are communicated, the term 'sustainability' itself is a word that can be problematic. Berry (2015) for instance, analyzed the industry perspective on sustainability and the Alberta oil sands from a metaphorical perspective. Her study showed that a vast portion of industry literature, about 10% of 26 documents analyzed, were metaphorical. Common metaphors used by industry were, "sustainability as a journey", or "sustainability as a scale/balance". Understanding these metaphors is important because it shows that industry is very vague in their communication about sustainability. She also reminds us that such "metaphors are so ingrained and common they become less and less meaningful for promoting a rich and varied discussion of oil sands sustainability" (Berry, 2015, p.19).

Understanding sustainability through metaphor is not the only way to approach the topic. Another way of talking about sustainability is to seek a concrete definition. Kates, Parris, & Leiserowitz (2005) suggest that in its most basic form sustainability is "creatively ambiguous" and is often described as "meet[ing] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Kates, Parris, & Leiserowitz, 2005, p.1). They argue that "this malleability allows programs of environment or development; places from local to global; and institutions of government, civil society, business, and industry to each project their interests, hopes and aspirations onto the banner of sustainable development" (Kates, Parris, & Leiserowitz, 2005, p.2). They worry that "if anyone can redefine and reapply the term to fit their purposes, it becomes meaningless in practice, or worse, can be used to disguise or greenwash socially or environmentally destructive activities" (Kates, Parris, & Leiserowitz, 2005, p. 20). What Kates, Parris, & Leiserowitz (2005) and Berry (2015) thus illustrate is that sustainability is a concept that can be appropriated by different groups in problematic ways.

In sum, while it is apparent in this literature review that there is some discussion surrounding issues directly associated with sustainability and the oil sands; it still remains rather underdeveloped as a topic. Existing discussions are often quite technical or explore views from simply one discourse community, which is often that of industry (Berry, 2015. Murphy, 2015.) Consequently, a study on stakeholder views about sustainability promises important and meaningful results for appreciating how the notion of sustainability

and the Alberta oil sands can be better understood as we move into the future.

III. Methods

When trying (as Kates, Parris, & Leiserowitz (2005) above suggests) to map the "interests, hopes and aspirations" of government, industry, and civil society qualitative interviews are a useful method for assessing different views on sustainability as it relates to the oil sands.

According to Bryman, Bell & Teevan (2012) interviews in this form are advantageous because face-to-face interaction is the fullest condition of participating in the mind of another human being (p. 140). While this methodological approach does have some limitations such as being difficult to replicate, facing problems of generalization and being criticized for being too subjective (Bryman, Bell & Teevan p. 143), qualitative interviews are still an important departure point for accessing specific and everyday understandings of complex topics like sustainability.

In terms of researching the oil sands at least four groups have played an important role for determining the environment in which debates about this resources occur: the mass media, government, industry, and non-governmental organizations (Paskey, Steward & Williams, 2013). Consequently, the project's target was between 10-12 participants (3-4 respondents from each sector). In the end, interviews were conducted with 4 industry respondents, 3 NGO respondents, 3 journalist and 3 government respondents (N=13). These interviews were conducted in person, unless geographical barriers were present in which case interviews were done via telephone. The interviews lasted from anywhere between twenty minutes to an hour, they were also recorded and transcribed in full.

The same set of questions was used for each of the interviews and interviewees were provided with the list of questions prior to the interview. Questions included how the interviewees organization defined sustainability, what the challenges and opportunities of creating a dialogue about sustainability were, if sustainability was specifically an environmental, social or economic issue, what success for sustainability looked like, and what the future holds for sustainability.

The study uses a non-representative sample (Bryman, Bell & Teevan p. 209). To create this sample, different methods were used: convenience and snowball. According to Bryman, Bell & Teevan

(2012), "a convenience sample is one that is used because the elements are readily available to the researcher" (p. 219). A convenience sample was used during the first round of interviewee selection as a fairly comprehensive list of stakeholders was available from a previous media analysis project (Williams, 2015). Once the first list was completed, interviewees were then contacted via phone or e-mail, this was when the second round of sampling began deploying a snowball approach.

Snowball sampling is "when a researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research project and then uses them to establish contact with others" (Bryman, Bell & Teevan, 2012, p. 220). Once the initial sources were contacted, further sources were requested and/or recommended and then contacted for interviews. In the end, 31 sources were contacted and offered an opportunity to participate. Out of those 31,16 potential participants responded, and 13 agreed to participate in an interview.

The sample was diverse and the professional positions of the interviewees varied. Industry positions ranged from Sustainability Issues Manager and Senior Sustainability Advisor to Development Support and Manager of Oil Sands Communications from some of the leading companies in sustainable development practices such as Suncor, Syncrude, MEG Energy and Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP). Government positions included Senior Manager, Senior Advisor of Integrated Resource Management and Regional Director from key government institutions like Alberta Energy Regulator, Alberta Innovates - Energy & Environmental Solutions and Sustainable Development Technologies Canada. NGO positions included the Vice President of Research and Director of Strategic Communications from organizations such as Pembina Institute, EcoJustice and Canadian Energy Research Institute. The media section of the sample consisted of journalists currently working or who previously worked on stories surrounding sustainability and/or oil sands issues for publications including The Edmonton Journal and The Toronto Star. Interviewees have all been assigned pseudonyms associated with the specific communities they represent in order to respect the ethical protocols of the project.

Once the interviews were conducted and transcribed they were uploaded to Dedoose (a mixed methods computer assisted software) where they were then coded. The framework deployed for coding which was based on the categories discussed by Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz (2005) in which they suggest sustainability can be

understood in four specific ways: (1) as a goal, (2) as an indicator, (3) as a value and/or (4) as a practice. Goals are used to describe sustainability by talking about exactly what it seeks to achieve and is organized into three categories: long term (beyond 2050), medium term (up to 2050), short term (under 5 years), or no time frame given. Indicators are a way to define sustainability through initiatives, policies, commissions etc. set out by industry or government stakeholders. Values are a way to define sustainability through expressions, beliefs, the worth of objects, qualities, or behaviours and "they are typically expressed in terms of goodness or desirability, or, conversely, in terms of badness or avoidance" (Kates, Parris, & Leiserowitz, 2005, p.16). Specific values associated with sustainability historically have included freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. Finally, practice:

Includes the many efforts at defining the concept, establishing goals, creating indicators, and asserting values. But additionally, it includes developing social movements, organizing institutions, crafting sustainability science and technology, and negotiating the grand compromise among those who are principally concerned with nature and environment, those who value economic development, and those who are dedicated to improving the human condition (Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz, 2005, p.16, 17).

IV. Findings

In terms of the definitions of sustainability present in the data, several key findings emerge of note. Firstly, in congruence with Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz (2005) suggestion, the responses reveal that definitions of sustainability as it relates to the Alberta oil sands were often "creatively ambiguous" (p.9). Vague language pervaded many of the discussion including references 'responsible development', 'corporate social responsibility' or 'triple bottom line.' Such terms were used (primarily by industry) to talk about sustainability without really using the word. A sample of what this looked like includes the following quote: You are going to hear phrases like 'the triple bottom line', but the way I like to think of it a bit more simply is you have got three different forces: you have social, you have environmental, you have economic, and really what we are trying to find is the optimal balance between those three forces. (Industry 1)

Despite the tendency to generalize, the findings also indicated a continuum of comfort levels with the term. For example, there were the "optimists", those who recognized the difficulty of the term

but saw value in it as way to create a dialogue about the oil sands. They believed it was still an appropriate term in some contexts. This position was typically found in industry. A sampling of these sorts of comments in the data set include the following: Terms like 'sustainability' have just naturally evolved and become much more widely used because of that awareness and interest of people to ensure that we do... We are on this earth for only a short period of time and we need to make a minimal impact, but at the same time ensuring that our actions today are able to provide... provide, you know, reward future generations and provide benefits for future generations. (Industry 2)

Sustainably for us, as an oil sands producer is to ensure that we don't do any—while making profit—we do not harm the environment, or we do not increase the impact on GHG emissions," or whatever metric you want to appease society, right? So then you get to a second stage of it and you say, well, "How do you operate?" To make money, that is the main thing, and the second piece is we are going to use society's definition or categorization of sustainability and now we have to talk about the environment. How we are impacting the environment while we are making money. (Industry 4)

There were also those who showed a little more caution with its deployment, and took on a sort of "fence sitting" or a "pragmatic" positionality. Such respondents, typically found in the media and government interviews, tended to question the validity of the term but not the notion of sustainability in the context of the oil sands specifically. Below are some illustrations of this:

... I guess the term 'sustainability' it is kind of a trendy word, of course, but what does it actually mean when it comes to the oil sands? ... I am not too sure what it actually means except, I guess you could say it still is an issue of can the oil sands continue to grow? I think that the status quo we have got right now isn't going to be enough, it looks like, so can the oil sands continue to grow? It is not an issue that I can say our organization looks at in any sort of formal level. It is not something we look at, of course, as environmental groups look at this, or government groups, or groups in the industry, they all look at this differently than what we look at it at, but we don't actually sit down, to my knowledge, and discuss the sustainability of the oil sands. What we tend to look at is a more pragmatic sense of if the oil sands are in trouble from environmental attacks, can it continue to work even at the status quo? (Media 1)

So the government sets the policy on energy development, the regulator enacts the policy on energy development. So with that we don't actually define sustainability. The government uses sustainability, but if you check government documents you will find very few instances of the word 'sustainability'. (Government 1)

Finally, there were those who outright questioned it as a term, the "rejecters", who not only problematized the term itself but also its use in the context of the oil sands specifically. This position, not surprisingly (given their strong environmental focus within the dataset), was typically found in the non-governmental responses. Some examples of this include the following quotes:

The technical, like, definition, as I am sure you know, of sustainability revolves around the idea of making sure that future generations have the same access to resources that ours had now. One thing about the oil sands is.... that the oil sands fundamentally can't be sustainable, but development can be responsible. So no matter what there is going to be a certain amount of environmental issues that you can't continue to develop indefinitely this way, but the push that we aim for is to strive for more responsible development, so basically development that keeps in mind what the environmental and social thresholds are for development to make sure that basically, eventually, that land can be reclaimed. (NGO 1)

We do a bunch of work around energy development projects, meaning we really take a hard look at projects that we deem to be unsustainable, and currently the organization defines those as ones that depend on the extraction or the transport, or burning of fossil fuels. (NGO 3)

In sum, it is clear that in this range of positions respondents within these different discursive groups appear to be having quite different conversations. While all interviewees tended to accept that sustainability can be a problematic term, whether it should be used at all is not something that is consistently agreed upon. This finding illustrates why when trying to talk about this issue it can be challenging to move forward in a collaborative and cooperative manner and provide the public with an understanding of what sustainability could or should look like in the context of future oil sands developments.

A second finding of interest comes from a breakdown of the coding framework deployed (i.e. sustainability as a goal, indicator, value and/or practice). In total 90 excerpts were isolated within the dataset at a paragraph level, which were deemed explicit efforts to try and define sustainability. Of these 90, it was discovered that the

largest concentration of discussion surrounded practices (42) and values (32), with goals (10) and indicators (7) figuring much less prominently (one excerpt was dual coded hence the total of 91 codes). This finding is important as it shows that stakeholders were most prone to discussing sustainability in terms of either how they are going about being sustainable (i.e. an action), or why sustainability is important as a broader philosophical position (i.e. a normative value position). Of the 4 stakeholder groups, industry and government were the largest presence under the practices category (N=31) while all discursive communities tended to invoke value statements. Some examples of stakeholders speaking about sustainability through practices are the following:

We are an innovation company that makes money through bitumen extraction, we use cogeneration, we reduce the steam to oil in our SAGD process, we are one of the industry leaders in that and that reduces GHGs immensely. We have actually got another research project that we are working on to actually further reduce that, and then we are looking at partial upgrading which will reduce the environmental footprint, and also make money for the company. So that would be our take on it, and what we would say for sustainability, you need innovation to maintain sustainability. (Industry 4)

Our role is to be an agency of the Government of Alberta that is funding projects in the province, and they can be in more industries than just oil sands, but when we talk about oil sands in particular we are funding the projects that intended to deliver on those [responsible development] targets. (Government 2)

Often times these practices were also highlighted in an industry context as an act of balance and recognizing the needs of three "special" (Industry 1) issues: social, economic and environmental. Some example of this include the following:

I think we have always kind of taken the origin of sustainability from the definition from the Brundtland Commission, which was 1987 or 1988. I would say the word 'triple bottom line' has sort of fallen out of favour and now we are talking more about balancing, sustainability is a balancing of those three forces. (Industry 1)

Every decision that we make, you even look at our capital project analysis, you know, it does incorporate all three of those factors in it [environmental, social, economic], so it is engrained in every decision that we make. And now, with this

board committee on corporate sustainability, there is a much more strategic focus on ensuring and addressing each of those areas. (Industry 2)

While the NGO stakeholders spoke of their practices largely in terms of determining what is sustainable versus what is unsustainable, for example: We don't view what is happening in the Alberta oil sands as being sustainable in any form. And that is the position the organization has taken in its work. So when we look at, you know, tar sands mines or expansion, or extraction, we do not look at that as sustainable practice. (NGO 3)

Further, following the overview offered by Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz (2005), once an excerpt was coded under the values category, values were split into six categories including freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. Out of those categories, the most commonly expressed views amongst interviewees were shared responsibility (13) and respect for nature (9). All discourse communities used both of these values when talking about the resource. This is important as it shows that sustainability is often times not just about how we act or behave, but also taps nicely into our "interests, hopes and aspirations" Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz (2005, p.10). An example of shared responsibility includes the following statement: I do tend to think that sustainability kind of has a taken for granted quality as a term, sort of an understanding that it is the responsibility across the board of corporations and governments to have a sort of sustainability ethic, but I am not sure how often that is really analyzed in media. (Media 2)

The idea of balance also reappeared in the context of sustainability as shared responsibility between three areas in all of the interview responses. This was actually a more common way to express this value. A sample of this is shown below:

Separating them [environmental, social and economic issues] out as individual pieces, I think, is ... it devalues that fact that environmental issues are economics and all of them have a capital expenditure attached to them. Each environmental issue that you need to address has an economic cost attached to it that is put into a business case, so it is all – it is all three. It costs ... there is still a costs attributed to addressing a social issue, or social justice issue, there is a cost with stakeholder engagement and putting in place the solution that will create harmony within a community to further develop an oil sands project. (Government 3)

Examples of statements regarding the respect for nature category include the following:

I think the oil sands are an important resource, for Alberta and for the rest of Canada, but in terms of sustainability I think there has to be, you know, if we are going to exploit that resource we also have to be really careful in terms of, obviously, environmental consequences. (Media 3)

The environmental piece is critical because it is an environmental activity; we are out there using land, using water, using the resources to do development work and to produce those resources. (Government 3)

The prevalence of these sorts of common values is an important finding as it provides valuable insight into the areas of conversations that stakeholders are beginning to see eye to eye on, and could provide a stable starting point for further discourse on the topic of sustainability.

The framework deployed in this project, as well as showing what's present in stakeholder discourse, is also beneficial in showing the areas of conversation that are absent. In this case very few of the definitions within the data set represented discussion of either indicators and/or goals. Goals can be long, medium or short term (Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz, 2005). What this data revealed when goals were identified rarely were they given a temporal dimension with only one respondent pinpointing a long-term goal: Aside from the university, all the entities I have worked for, their main goal is to make money. That is the only reason they are in the business, right? To make money. So for them, sustainability means the ability to make long-term profit. (Industry 4)

Indicators are a way to define sustainability through initiatives, policies, commissions etc. set out by industry or government stakeholders. In this case very few specific plans or programs were mentioned by any of the respondents except the following: Our Common Future/also known as the Brundtland Report (Government 1; Industry 1).

V. Implications and Conclusion

In sum, 13 professionals from 4 different stakeholder groups (industry, government, media and NGO) were interviewed using the same set of questions focused around the opportunities and challenges of creating a dialogue about sustainability as it relates to the Alberta oil sands. Once interviews were completed, they were transcribed in full and then coded according to the framework adapted from Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz (2005). These codes

revealed several important findings. Firstly, vague language pervaded many of the discussion including references to 'responsible development,' 'corporate social responsibility,' or 'triple bottom line.' These were vague because very little detail was provided about what these looked like in practice. Secondly, the sample illustrated a continuum of positions regarding both the notion of sustainability writ large and within the context of the oil sands specifically including: (a) optimists, those who challenged the term of sustainability but still believed it could be used in the context of the oil sands, this position was typically found in industry; (b) the pragmatists or fence sitters, mostly found in media and government, who questioned the notion of the term sustainability, but were not prepared to call the oil sands unsustainable; (c) and, the nonbelievers/rejecters/or pessimists, who not only problematized the term itself but do not feel that the oil sands are sustainable at all (this was the typical NGO position). Finally, the largest concentration of discussion about sustainability surrounded practices (42) and values (32), with goals (10) and indicators (7) figuring much less prominently. In terms of specific practices there were references in industry to balance and in terms of values those most often talked about included shared responsibility and respect for nature.

These findings are important as they relate back to the observations made earlier on during the literature review conducted for this project. For example, the interviews did in fact reveal that there are some challenges with defining 'sustainability' (Berry, 2015; Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz, 2005; Slawinski & Bansai, 2015) and that different stakeholders are in fact struggling with both the term itself and its overall relevance to the extraction of this resource (Paskey, Steward & Williams, 2013). There was also significant use of the metaphor "sustainability as a scale/balance" by industry as well as instances of the "sustainability as a journey metaphor" although no specific time frames were given for said journey as was noted by Berry (2015). These interviews also revealed that stakeholders preferred to discuss sustainability in terms of values and practices more so than in terms of indicator or goal oriented perspectives. This desire to link sustainability to discussions of values could be connected to language that is more promotional in nature (Paskey, Steward & Williams, 2013).

While the media and its role as a communicator about these issues to the public has been analyzed before (Murphy, 2015; Nelson, Krogman, Johnston & St. Claire, 2015; Paskey, Steward & Williams,

2013; Tran, 2014), the data also showed that the stakeholders themselves difference in opinion when it came to the ways that the media influence public perceptions when it comes to sustainability and the Alberta oil sands. Industry stakeholders suggested that the media is primarily in opposition to their efforts in the oil sands:

I think the term is, "If it bleeds, it leads," right? So bad news sells papers; it gets you an audience. And maybe that is because it is kind of emotional, and bad news usually causes an emotional response, whereas good news, when it comes to the oil sands, say Syncrude, for example, over the last few years we have invested three billion dollars in tailings technologies to better manage our tailings. We spent one point six million dollars to reduce air emissions, which are now the lowest in our history and we communicate that but it doesn't seem to resonate. It is one of those questions, we spent all this money to address these environmental issues, and, you know, have we come up with the final solution? No, but this is a demonstration of our commitment, you know, four and a half, almost five million dollars of technologies and you hardly hear 'boo' about it. (Industry 2)

In contrast while media stakeholders maintained that the mass media, particularly in Alberta, often favour the oil sands more than other outlets across the country:

Industry feels that they are being picked on all the time because of... from the environmental kind of point of view. You know, I guess I can understand why they might feel that way, but if you look at the way that the oil sands are covered in media and newspapers in Canada, most of the information is coming out of industry and it is not coming out of environmental groups...Really, the record just shows that for the most part media coverage is usually from the point of view of industry, or from the point of view of certainly government, which certainly in this province, have supported it. (Media 3)

This diversity of opinion illustrates why bringing together these different groups and hoping for a collaborative discussion on this issue can be challenging.

Clearly, as the aforementioned findings show there is still a large level of disagreement about whether the terms sustainability is useful, and if it can be applied to the oil sands at all. The stakeholders do not use it lightly and were aware of some its limitations. Perhaps most importantly, the interviews showed us that despite the tension existing between stakeholder groups when it comes to outlining precisely what sustainability is and what we want from it, there are

some places of agreement. The values of respect for nature and shared responsibility (especially in terms of balancing economic, social and environmental needs) are perhaps a useful departure point for collaboration. In addition, some efforts could be made to think about how best to include indicators and goals in future partnerships and ensuring that these indicators and goals are shared, and if they are not, an attempt to determine where and how stakeholder groups differ in communicating these possibilities are identified.

The limitations of this paper include lack of a key voice: indigenous voices. This is clearly an important gap and ought to be addressed in future research on this topic (Paskey, Steward & Williams, 2013). Moreover, the sample is small and is by no means a definitive representation of all the positions implicit within a particular discourse community. This paper nevertheless provides a useful platform for identifying both the areas where stakeholders are still struggling to agree and those places where there in fact some overlap. It is hoped it will thus inspire for thought into the specificities associated with the values of shared responsibility (for example, do all stakeholders play and equal role in this process and should they? can an equal balance between the economic, environmental, and social demands occur in the context of the oil sands? is this balance understood consistently?) and respect for nature (i.e. does this look the same for industry, the government, the public and non governmental organizations?). And in doing so it can make the dialogue about this controversial resource and its future more productive from the vantage point of those most invested with its development.

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