

**“TODAY THE TAR SANDS OF
FORT MCMURRAY
HAVE POISONED
THE LAND AND WATER.
THE FISH AND FOUR-LEGGEDS
ARE FULL OF POISON.”**

—Vivian Seegers

By Vivian Seegers
GUEST COLUMNIST

ANGLICAN VOICES: LIVING AS ECOLOGICAL REFUGEES

WHEN THE LAND IS POISONED, WHAT HAPPENS TO THE PEOPLE OF THE LAND?

In 1962, at three years old, I was allowed to go with my mom to town. We lived in the bush all year round. My dad had usually been the only one who went with other men to sell furs and buy supplies. But the men had decided to take their families and move near the mining town of Uranium City that year, hoping to get work in the Eldorado mines.

Lots of changes came with that move. The first time I had sugar I was four years old: Wrigley's Spearmint Gum and Orange Crush. Before that, us kids would climb the spruce trees for the sap and chew that. We lived in tents and had moccasins and jackets made out of caribou and moose hide. Blankets made from bear hide kept us warm. Moving into town was a cold decision in my experience. My dad built a little house made of board

and tar paper on the side of a hill, and it was cold. I have no memory of cold or hunger when we lived in the bush.

My dad died in a drowning accident shortly after we moved into the outskirts of town. My mother couldn't hunt, fish or chop wood for five little ones, so she rented a house right in the town itself. Then we knew cold and hunger too often. The thought was we would be able to live the life the white mining families did. But not so.

My mind always went back to the comfort and warmth and plenty of food we had in the bush. Fish, moose, caribou, beaver, ptarmigans, ducks and rabbits—the bush was full of food. And the snow, packed tight all around our tents, kept the cold out and the heat in, even if the fire went out. I saw the snow as a protector from the cold. And the summers burst the bush into abundance.



PHOTO: RUSS HEINL

Processing of oilsands in Alberta

We would eat the buds off the trees and the rose petals, pick roots and leaves and make teas, and there were berries of every kind: saskatoons, choke cherries, blueberries, strawberries and raspberries were picked all summer long.

Living in town, we now had to venture out into the bushes to pick these berries and for hunting and fishing. But the adults turned their hopes toward living like the Whiteman; they didn't realize how much the racism was going to affect their striving. We were in constant hunger and poverty, with my mom cleaning houses for those mining families and trying to feed us on very little income. I saw the bush, the place that most Europeans see as the "wild dark forest," as a place of abundance, safety and comfort. I knew that no matter where I went



PHOTO: CHRIS KOLACZAN

Oilsands development: slash-and-burn forest clearing

into the bush, I would find everything I needed to make our lives content—because Mother Earth was full of generosity and abundance. We knew how to live in reciprocity with all creation. We never harvested too much of anything. We knew to never kill a female for meat. We knew to leave the berry bushes in a way that they would still grow the next year.

But those days are gone now, unavailable to us. That way of life is dead now. Today the tar sands of Fort McMurray have poisoned the land and water. The fish and four-leggeds are full of poison. The uranium mining and the gold mining also added to the poisoning of our waters and the lichen. Water and lichen are two very important, life-giving gifts from our Creator. The water provides a place for the fish to thrive and live and



PHOTO: M. LEONARD PHOTOGRAPHY

A young black bear shows his curiosity.



PHOTO: PUFFIN'S PICTURES

A ptarmigan catches the last rays of the setting sun.

move and have their being in abundance. The lichens are eaten up by the moose, and they thrive and live in abundance. And we too lived in abundance because of their abundance. But not anymore.

Because of the oil and mining corporations, our land and water are now full of mercury and arsenic in abundance, which results in cancers of various kinds and, ultimately, death. Ecological refugees, we now live in communities that have no place for us and don't understand who we are. We are a people of the land scattered upon cement and asphalt, living in a different kind of place—a place where they don't even have a clue what "people of the land" really means.

This is what it means: We come from a place where we were taught to walk through the bush without turning

over a leaf in consideration of the bears, whose living room we were walking through. A place where we were taught to leave no sign that we were there—to clean up our campsite and leave it as natural as possible, as if we hadn't been there at all, in gratitude, respect and consideration of the animals who would come through there later.

They would see our respect and gratitude to them by how natural we left the places we had occupied for the winter or the summer. ■

The Rev. Vivian Seegers coordinates the Urban Aboriginal Ministry at St. Mary Magdalene Anglican Church, Vancouver. She is the first Indigenous woman to be ordained in the diocese of New Westminster.