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The Figure of Bitu-Man

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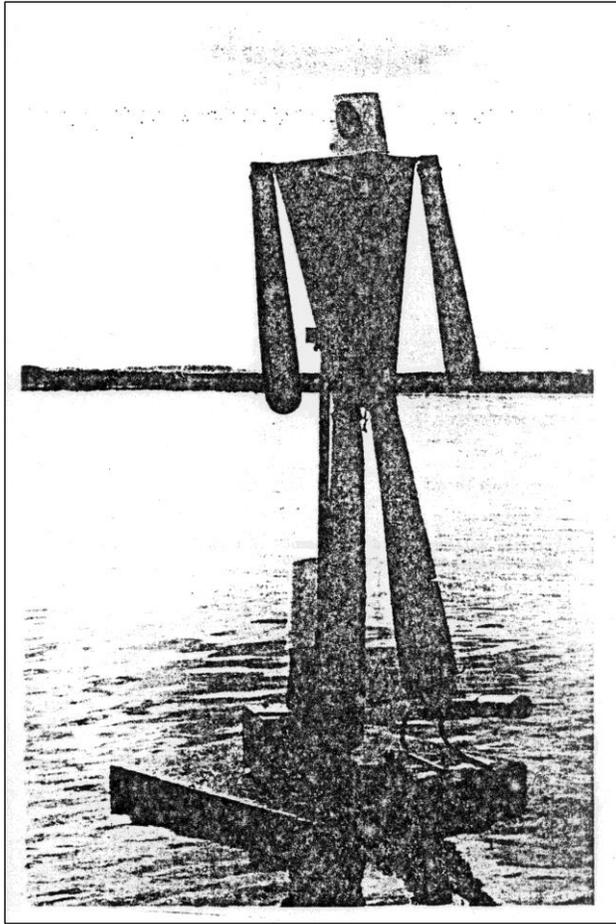
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The Figure of Bitu-Man

The ominously imposing figure in the above illustration is “the Syncrude bird deterrent device, locally known as ‘Bitu-man’.”

He stands (or stood—the original image was from the late 1970s) in the tailings pond of the Syncrude Canada Ltd. oil sands mining operation along the Athabasca River near Fort McMurray in northeastern Alberta. That operation surface mines (i.e., strip mines) bitumen-impregnated sand, processes it with hot water and steam, and discharges the liquid effluent or “tailings” into a pond covering roughly 3000 hectares (11 square miles). (Google Map coordinates: 56.9°N, -111.3° W). Residue bitumen collects on the surface and poses a serious threat to wildlife, especially migratory waterfowl. The danger is greatest in early spring, when sur-

rounding natural lakes are still frozen, and the tailings pond offers the only open water for arriving birds. The oil sands operation sits in the heart of the breeding ranges of many North American bird species; ornithologist Paul Johnsgard calls the region the “duck factory”. It also lies along the migratory routes of many species that breed farther north.

Bitu-man’s function was to scare birds away from landing and becoming oiled:

“The deterrent device, which mimics a hunter, consists of a floating raft which supports a propane birdscare cannon (t.m. Zon Mark II, D.M. Lawrence and Co., California) and a conspicuous mobile scarecrow. The kite-like scarecrow is 2 metres high, is bright orange in color, and moves erratically in wind.”

What might appear to be a large stick or pole held in his two “hands” is actually (I believe) the shoreline in the background. The image is taken from photocopy of an internal report, by Keith Younge of Syncrude, describing the development of the bird protection strategy by Syncrude as approved by government and environmental authorities in Alberta. This work was presented at the 8th Bird Control Seminar in Bowling Green, Ohio, in October of 1979—but not published in the Proceedings of that conference. The report was released separately by Syncrude in 1981 in their Professional Paper series, and that version refers to the Bird Control Seminar presentation, leading some researchers to seek it (unsuccessfully) from our archive of the BCS Proceedings (<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/icwdmbirdcontrol/>), and sending me off on a mission to track down the “ghost.” Ultimately, I acquired a copy of the Syncrude Professional Paper version via Interlibrary Loan from the University of Calgary—one of two copies listed in WorldCat. My request to Mr. Yonge to allow us to post the entire report is so far unanswered (assuming my web-stalking produced the correct person and his current address after a 33-year interval), so I can only share this stark and eerie figure presiding over black water somewhere in the Far North.

Syncrude’s efforts to mitigate the environmental damage of its oil mining operations, or at least to minimize its effects on migratory birds, are praise-worthy, I suppose. But the overall picture of the devastation of a landscape is ultimately appalling.

Nor have those efforts been altogether successful. In April of 2008, more than 1600 ducks landed and were killed following a rash of mishaps, including a late snow-fall, a 3-day weekend, and a lack of available boats, batteries, and ID cards.

(See *Edmonton Journal*, 20 June 2010;

<http://www2.canada.com/edmontonjournal/news/story.html?id=3c18c50b-e3c8-4523-85e1-d95c51e24eb8&p=1>)

Syncrude paid a \$3 million fine (roughly equivalent to one day's net profit), which some environmental advocates felt was too lenient. (See *Edmonton Globe and Mail*, 22 Oct 2010; <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/industry-news/energy-and-resources/syncrude-to-pay-3m-for-duck-deaths/article4085700/>)

Now the effort is underway to secure approval for a pipeline to bring the tar sands oil through Nebraska, barely skirting the environmentally fragile Sandhills and the Ogallala Aquifer. Concern among landowners and environmentally conscious citizens has mostly focused on the potential for disruptive spills and accidents along the route. But the figure of Bitu-Man should remind us of the man-made disaster currently ongoing in the normal everyday operations of the tar sands mining at the source. Square miles of fragile ecosystems are being processed, and the toxic residues pose threats to nearby and migratory wildlife and pollute the drainage downstream via the Athabasca, Slave, and Mackenzie Rivers, all the way to the Arctic Ocean.

Fort McMurray is a comparatively out-of-the-way place; it lies 250 miles northeast of Edmonton. Its population has grown from 15,000 in 1976 to more than 60,000 today. But the price of its growth and prosperity has been more than a few hundred dead ducks. It is a permanent scar on the landscape—a black, sticky tar pit, presided over by an orange scarecrow with a bucket for a head.

Approval of the Keystone XL pipeline route would aid and abet this deplorable abuse of the land.

Paul Royster

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