Jock Talk, Goldfish, Horse Logging, and Star Wars

Debunking Industry's Green PR

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[The media] may not always mold opinion, but they do not always have to. It is enough that they create opinion visibility, giving legitimacy to certain views and illegitimacy to others. (Michael Parenti from Inventing Reality) ¹

Over the past ten years a new generation of industrial forestry has emerged across the globe.² In Alberta the new pulp mills--greenfield mills--embrace leading-edge technology, capital intensive equipment, and computer controlled systems that reduce pollution, increase production, and assist company specialists to design logging plans and develop hybrid trees for restocking. To inoculate against the environmental criticism levelled at pulping and logging practices, communications experts fashion a "green" public image for the mill of the 90s.³ Our work in Friends of the Athabasca Environmental Association to expose the image making by one new pulp mill in its newsletter Forest Landscape should be relevant to others confronting the green PR depiction of sustainable development.

Communicating the Image: Forest Landscape
Foremost among the greenfield mills in Alberta is Japanese-owned Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries (Alpac), the world's largest single-line bleached kraft pulp mill. Approved by the provincial cabinet of Alberta, despite environmental concern from the public and scientific community, Alpac captured the imagination of politicians and small town boosters alike with its rhetoric of leading-edge technology, and its carefully fashioned claims to be an example of sustainable development for the Athabasca region. Since approval of the mill in 1990, every local dignitary wearing a hard hat to inspect a construction site, or cutting a ribbon to open a machine shop specializing in logging equipment, or stabbing a shovel into farm sod to prepare pilings for Alpac becomes a front page photo opportunity for the local press. Years later, Alpac continues to make page one news in our small town newspaper, the Athabasca Advocate, an important source of information and an essential part of the local culture.

Alpac does not rely simply on the Athabasca weekly to carry out its public relations. During mill construction in 1992, Alpac began publishing its own newsletter, Forest Landscape. Stacks of Forest Landscape are regularly available in convenience stores, truckstops, grocery stores, drug stores, and cafes in communities throughout and bordering Alpac's 64,000 square kilometre forest management area. In rural Alberta, Forest Landscape is like a second local newspaper. Another 650 newsletters are mailed to subscribers across Canada. Throughout 1993 Forest Landscape adopted a green look, printed on cream tinted paper in an effort to resemble unbleached and recycled stock, when it was neither. In 1994, recognising the inconsistency because its mill pulps and bleaches virgin fibre, Alpac announced that Forest Landscape would be printed on white paper--``a new look ... new paper stock to more closely reflect our product--the best and the brightest.''

Alpac further modified Forest Landscape by replacing its first logo of clip-art oak trees with trees that more resemble those logged and pulped from the mixed-wood boreal forest of northern Alberta.

In the first issue of Forest Landscape, Alpac stated its commitment ``to environmentally sound practices in all aspects of its business'' and explained that ``Forest Landscape is intended to provide factual information on plans and activities in Alberta-Pacific's woodlands operations.''

Articles published since reveal patterns of image management in Landscape's factual information. If it was just an in-house corporate newsletter, perhaps such image making, damage control, and propaganda techniques would not matter. But Forest Landscape is much more than a trade paper. Its stories and photos are reprinted nationally in high circulation urban dailies like the Vancouver Sun, Edmonton Journal, and Montreal Gazette. Provincially, Landscape articles appear regularly in local weeklies or the Native press. When reprinted as news items unattributed to Alpac, the company's environmental communications transform partial, interested points of view into objective information. Moreover, Forest
Landscapes's subtle inferences, phrase twisting, justifications, images, vocabularies, and explanations permeate local talk about the pulp mill and Forest Landscape appears to be winning acceptance across the province for Alpac's version of sustainable development.

1. Jock-talk headlines and Japanese pulp mills: Conquering the imaginary

The Alpac mill started up in a farming district--with no history of pulp mills--where residents were divided over acceptance of the megaproject. That the government transferred de facto control of 64,000 sq. km. of Crown forest to a Japanese firm to export raw pulp had been a lightning rod for protest across Canada. Understandably, mill owners and employees might feel uncomfortable moving into such a situation. Yet controversy is avoided by Forest Landscape's technique of emphasizing the challenges in production, safety, and reforestation that must be overcome, downplaying Alpac's ownership. Even if employees and local residents only glance at Landscape headlines at the gas station or grocery store, the upbeat wording, images of competition, jock vocabulary, and team spirit might influence perceptions of the company. Parenti explains, ``not only can headlines mislead anyone who skims a page without reading the story, they can create the dominant slant on the story, establishing a mind-set that influences how we do read the story's text."

Forest Landscape headlines nurture the mind-set of outperforming:

- Alberta-Pacific--on budget, and on time 2/94
- Alberta-Pacific people setting new standards 4/94
- Records shattered, product piles 3/95
- Renown paper maker gives Alberta-Pacific pulp thumbs up 5/95
- Fire protection is tops in Alberta 7/92
- Safest mill in Canada? 1/94
- 1995 Resource Man of the Year--Al-Pac's Jerry Fenner 2/96

Such headings are meant to make employees, suppliers, contractors, and neighbours feel good about their association with the pulp mill. To reinforce self-esteem and solidarity among workers, sports language used in Forest Landscape emphasizes that Alpac's success is built upon teamwork:

- Kudos to team members for terrific rebound (new world record) 7/95
- Power team puts the pressure on 2/93
- That's Team Work! (photo of pancake breakfast) 11/94
- Woodyard team shoulders chips 5/93
- The woodyard team reach yet another production milestone 2/95

Equally, Forest Landscape suggests that this pulp mill is not deserving of the environmental criticism being levelled at the industry in general:

- Alpac committed to ecosystem management 2/94
- Alberta-Pacific earns an ``A'' in first external audit 10/95
- Better than the best: Alberta-Pacific outperforms design specifications 3/95
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Regrowing forests the natural way 10/93
One million trees begin planting program 5/94
Media reports raise false alarms 7/93

Finally, group morale and community acceptance are fortified with tough, jock-talk headlines about the struggle to make the mill work to its full performance potential and to conquer nature, tapping into the frontier ideology of homesteaders who cleared the land decades earlier:

Teams test mill's mettle and set world pulp production records 9/94
Pumping up the log haul 11/94
War waged on plastic 10/93
Changing the face of forestry 11/95
Man makes Nature: Forget medieval European forestry 6/95
Women in Timber 5/93
Alberta-Pacific payroll packs major punch 4/95
Alberta-Pacific ate smoke but lost little timber in Mariana Lake forest fire 6/95

The initial public concern about Japanese ownership and exploitation of Alberta's forests is defused by Landscape's tactic of celebrating technical challenges through athletic metaphors, battle cries, and record setting. Moreover, images of success, teamwork, eco-commitment and struggles against nature reassure a wary local community that the mill is a responsible citizen and neighbour, to be welcomed to the family, regardless of Alpac's ownership. Forest Landscape does not tell the public what to think, rather it focuses attention upon what it wants its readers to think about—conquering the imaginary.

2. Domesticating Dioxins in A Goldfish Bowl: The False Test

Forest Landscape's articles present and frame controversial issues in particular ways. Parenti describes how framing counters criticism and works on public perception: "By bending the truth rather than breaking it, using emphasis, nuance, innuendo, and peripheral embellishments, communicators can create a desired impression without resorting to explicit advocacy and without departing too far from the appearance of objectivity." For example, Forest Landscape's coverage of the pollutant dioxin (often attributed to chlorine use in the pulp bleaching process) suggests that it is no longer a controversial issue:

Is chlorine the evil element? 3/94
Chlorine dioxide becoming the preferred bleaching agent 9/94
Pulp and paper industry winning war against dioxins 12/94
Scientists refocus research on dioxin 12/94

A reader of Alpac's newsletter might think that the articles on dioxin represent the broad range of scientific research on the subject, but in fact the articles, taken from pulp and paper association

magazines, give high visibility only to the industry point of view. What is absent is any report on the scientific debate about dioxin presented at international conferences and in scientific journals, or studies by the US EPA. Moreover, Forest Landscape's emphasis on dioxin alone directs the reader's gaze away from the large volume of other toxic organochlorines found in pulp-mill effluent flushed into rivers, and the controversy over the health of Alberta's northern rivers. Dramatizing the innocuous quality of its mill effluent, and taking a cue from street theatre, Forest Landscape ran a photo story about its new aquarium located in the lobby of Alpac's administration building. The caption (strategically placed above the headline ``Safest mill in Canada?'') reads ``A perspective on the pulp industry," and features two Alpac environmental specialists `checking out the newest environment team members: a school of goldfish, currently thriving in an aquarium filled with raw, untreated effluent from Alberta-Pacific." The camera never lies.

Using a familiar image--a child's pet in an aquarium--Landscape domesticates and trivializes the LC 50, a test used by regulators to determine the toxicity of pulp-mill effluent by measuring the survival rate of fish exposed to full strength effluent for 96 hours. In the LC 50, if less than 50 per cent of the test fish are killed, the effluent passes the test. Trout, a game fish, are normally used in the LC 50. Alpac's science project is a false test. It disregards that goldfish are tough, a poor indicator species, and not native to the Athabasca river basin. Moreover, using death as an end-point indicator of environmental harm ignores that ``an animal may be debilitated and essentially ecologically dead by conditions far below those which kill it in four days.''

As well, the aquarium stunt draws attention away from the river where a complex set of natural conditions such as low flow, ice cover and depleted oxygen exacerbate the effect of pollution on fish; it preempts consideration of the long term and intergenerational effects of organochlorines on the health of fish; and it ignores the cumulative impact of effluent from all the mills on the river system.

3. Horse logging: Capitalizing on tradition

To soften the image of feller bunchers slicing swaths through the forest, Alpac turned back the clock in 1993 to rediscover horse logging as ``a valuable method of acquiring remote stands
of poplar which would be otherwise inaccessible." Photos of Percherons Bill and Prince pulling logs out of the bush for Alpac appeared in *Forest Landscape* and were picked up by the press in Alberta and nationally. Juxtapose machines with horses, hard and soft, noise and quiet, metallic and warm blooded, modern and traditional and consider the impression created in the mind of the viewer.

Alpac's forest ecologist concedes that there are economic reasons for logging in the old manner--"horses can get into delicate environmental areas that machines can't,"--but he admits that the real benefit is company image: horse logging promotes "increased acceptance by the public of harvesting forested land." Identifying logging with the softer, gentler word "harvesting," *Landscape* suggests stewardship of the forest. Yet, while the horse logger in Alpac's pilot project hauled up to 15 tonnes of logs a day, it's "a mere tooth pick under the truck loads--6000 tonnes a day--that Alpac uses." In fact, more than 100 logging trucks will haul over two million tonnes of fibre to Alpac annually from about 450 harvesting sites. Capitalizing on tradition by establishing "continuity with a suitable historical past," the pleasant old-time image of horses working out in the woods creates an unrepresentative distortion and shifts attention from the enormous scale of logging that this mill conducts, the comparatively minuscule amount of logging done with horses, and that delicate environmental areas should not be logged at all, whether by machine or by horse.

4. The expanding definition of employment preference: Inflating local job numbers

In an environmental controversy over resource extraction, the struggle for acceptance often hinges on the public's perception of the number of jobs that will flow to the local area. Alpac won this debate with its critics by issuing proclamations that half of the mill's 440 employees would come from the local community. Skeptical, and unable to verify local employment numbers at the mill, Friends of the Athabasca Environmental Association (FOTA) bought a full-page ad in a January 1993 issue of the Athabasca newspaper. Turning the power of the media back against the company, FOTA asked "Where are the PERMANENT jobs for LOCAL people at ALPAC?" and reproduced Alpac's statement on local hiring, taken from its environmental impact assessment (EIA) three years earlier: "a policy has been adopted of giving employment preference to individuals within a fifty mile (80 km) radius of the mill site provided these individuals have the required
knowledge, skills, and abilities or are prepared to obtain them." 24 Within two months of FOTA's ad, *Forest Landscape* ran a "Questions and Answers" column devoted to jobs that skirted disclosing the actual number of local people hired. In keeping with its intent "to provide factual information," *Forest Landscape* reported that Alpac would meet its "commitment of hiring at least a third of our employees in the FMA [forest management area]." 25

Alpac fudged its EIA commitment, inflating job numbers by reducing the local jobs promised from one half to one third and expanding the meaning of "local" from 80 kilometres to include the entire FMA, an area about the size of New Brunswick. To embellish local employment claims, subsequent issues of *Forest Landscape* ran photo essays of some of these locals, or people returning to the area, now working at Alpac. However, a review of seventy-five Canadian megaprojects concludes that "existing residents and communities receive limited benefits when a natural resource megaproject is undertaken in their region ... most of the economic benefits ... appear to 'leak' out of the regional economy." 26 Capital intensive mills such as Alpac produce more pulp than older mills yet require fewer workers, local or otherwise. According to CEO Stu Lang, Alpac has "all of the economies of scale" and the lowest ratio of employee hours per tonne of pulp produced, half that of other Canadian mills. 27

5. Star Wars and high-tech hype: Computers know best

A truck loaded to the top of its bunks with logs is a difficult public image for a pulp company to manage. The size and number of trucks hauling delimbed trees through town centres such as Athabasca trigger questions about environmental and community impacts. To shift public concern away from roads cut through the forest, truck rollovers, denuded landscapes, and school buses sharing roads with double-trailer logging trucks hauling 62-tonnes of logs, *Forest Landscape* emphasizes the leading-edge technology of its transport system. Associating logging operations with the complexity of air traffic control, Alpac first announced "Satellite technology tracks trucks" in *Forest Landscape* in July 1992. Alpac's communication system allows a central dispatcher to monitor the location of trucks and the other electronic subsystems on the truck such as bunk scales, computerized tire inflation, 28 electronic engine, and geographic positioning systems. Articles promoting these high-tech systems appear with regularity and are intended to suggest that any danger from logging trucks is overcome by the presence of a computer:

Log haulers roll on information highway 11/94
Constant promotion of the computerized tracking and communication system tended to conceal that it was never fully in place during the first four years of logging. Piercing through the hype, one truck operator revealed a different actuality:

The way it was supposed to work originally was just like Star Wars—computers and satellites—boy, you know when I looked at it, it sounded like ... I'll own a truck and the computer will take care of it for me. But, as it turns out, none of their dispatching equipment works.... In some of the trucks I operated the computer was rolling around on the floor of the cab.  

Even though the communication system is apparently now in place, most outsiders assumed it had been operational all along. As Parenti explains, the media "can effectively direct our perceptions when we have little information to the contrary and when the message seems congruent with earlier notions about events—notions that themselves may be partly media created. In this way the new information is a reinforcement of earlier perceptions."  

The computers know best media technique also reinforced the impression that the drivers of the computerized trucks were themselves highly trained, extremely competent, and leading edge like their equipment. But as one log truck driver explains, that was not always the case:

Everyone uses Alberta-Pacific as a training ground, like anyone can get a job with "XX Trucking" and drive a log truck. As long as, you know, put a mirror under your nose, if it fogs up, you're in. So, people come here and they either smash a few trucks up and get out, or they actually learn how to do it and scare everyone else [in the process].

6. Narrow, extremist, and going banana: Labelling the critics

The forest industry is reeling from criticisms about its environmental impacts. The word "clearcut" is taboo. Outcries to protect habitat for fish or Woodland Caribou or to settle the land claim of the Lubicon Cree can affect a company's market share.  

Reworking image is fundamental to managing under crisis. One technique is to clear the field of competing points of view, using articles from right-wing think tanks and business interests that attack the facts and figures of critics and portray environmentalists as being against other strong values in society:

Environment and Environmentalists (C.D. Howe Institute) 5/93  
Need a million? Create a crisis. (Forbes on Greenpeace) 5/93  
Genuine environmental commitment meansdumping narrow political agendas (The Globe
Labelling environmentalists as extremist, anti-capitalist, and self-interested individuals, who challenge "our basic political and economic systems," without mentioning the establishment and corporate interests of those doing the branding, Forest Landscape whittles away at the community credibility of local environmentalists, influences its readers to ignore environmentalists' issues, and may convince local citizens, who fear being stigmatized, to refrain from asking any questions. Moreover, labelling long-time residents and neighbours who pose questions makes them appear as outsiders, lacking authority, and easy to marginalize.

Conclusion

"Landscape is a slippery word" and many of the images, captions, and promotional photographs and phrases employed by Forest Landscape are slippery, intended to draw the public and the press into thinking in its terms, clearing the field of competitive points of view, planting new concepts, tests, numbers, challenges, labels, and images that could change the entire terrain and yet still seem natural. Moreover, the impact of Forest Landscape is not just on the mainstream press, or community perceptions, but on democracy at the local level. The least visible impact of the company newsletter is that in Athabasca, the old source of community information and democratic debate, the local newspaper, is less free. Staff at the local paper are notified by Alpac when it is unhappy with coverage of Alpac-related articles. News items have been reduced to little more than non-controversial human interest stories or reprints from Forest Landscape. Even segments in letters to the editor critical of Alpac and its media techniques are treated as allegations rather than legitimate perspectives and are seldom printed because staff appear paranoid about ending up in court. Consequently a key local forum for public debate, in which power was within people's reach, has been stifled.

In Athabasca, our environmental group has been working to counter industry's "understandings" of the ecosystem and sustainable development and to chronicle in books and articles like this one the way cultural images hide changes in the material reality of ownership, land use, logging, job creation, and social power occurring in our region since the coming of this mill. We encourage you to do the same.

Notes

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5. Mary Richardson, Joan Sherman, and Michael Gismondi, Winning Back the Words: Confronting Experts in an Environmental Public Hearing (Toronto: Garamond, 1993), Chapter 3.

6. Forest Landscape is published by Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries Inc., P.O. Box 8000, Boyle, AB, T0A 0M0.

7. Forest Landscape (January 1994).


10. For transferring ideological values, see Norman Fairclough, Language and Power (Essex: Longman Group, 1989), chapter 8.


17. Richardson, Sherman, and Gismondi, p. 81.

18. Forest Landscape (November 11, 1993).


24. See footnote 23.

25. Alpac screened 18,000 applicants to identify ``those with the mechanical skills, interpersonal behaviour and motivation required to succeed in the Alpac work environment.'' Forest Landscape (March 1993), p. 3.


27. Alpac chairman Stu Lang reports ``We will be at 1.2 man hours per tonne [of pulp produced]. Finland is at 2.1 and Canada is probably around 2.3 man hours per tonne.'' From Robert D. Forrest, ``Building Up: New mills increase Canadian kraft pulp capacity by 2,000 tpd,'' Papermaker (August 1993), p. 21. See also M. Patricia Marchak, p. 63.
28. Logging truck rhetoric promotes the company's central tire inflation system as developed by the US military during Desert Storm. Alpac pulp mill tour brochure. March 1996.

29. Authors' interview with a driver who operated several logging trucks contracted to Alpac. Athabasca, August 1995.

30. Parenti, p. 23.

31. See footnote 29.


