If you were to look at a road map of Alberta, with its vast, empty green chunks, you would probably assume that much of the province is still wilderness. You’d be wrong.

In fact, outside the national parks, Alberta is basically one big industrial zone. Take the case of Highway 40 between Hinton and Grande Prairie, where these photos were taken. The road map shows one main highway running through what looks like thousands of square kilometres of wild and undisturbed country. The reality is quite different. Clear-cuts, gas wells, coal mines, pipelines and roads scar every valley and hillside; “sign forests” point to gas facilities too numerous to count; and the once quiet forest echoes with the hiss and rumble of enormous diesel trucks.

And the problem is getting worse. Throughout the province, industry is rapidly moving into our last wild places, with the encouragement of the provincial government. It’s like a modern day gold rush—get rich quick, and hope no one notices the mess, or counts the cost, until it’s too late.

How did we go from frontier to industrial landscape so quickly? Consider the following:

- A quarter of a million oil and gas wells have been drilled in Alberta
- More than 14,000 new wells were drilled in 2001 alone
- By 2000, there were approximately 170,000 pipelines in the province with a total length of almost 294,000 kilometres
- By 1995, 94 per cent of the province’s coniferous forest and 73 per cent of its deciduous forest had been allocated for harvest
- By 1999, 83 per cent of Alberta’s forest had been accessed
- Approximately 600 square kilometres of forest is harvested each year

A Photo Essay by Gordon Petersen
As a province, it’s taken us less than 100 years to reach the point where oil and gas wells outnumber grizzly bears by 200 to 1 and where, every year, we clear-cut a forested area larger than Waterton Lakes National Park. In this headlong rush to turn wilderness into cash, have we forgotten to consider the damage? Or have we deliberately looked the other way? Either way, Alberta’s wilderness is quickly disappearing.