On Earth Day: Environmental Activism is Spreading

Across America environmental activism is growing, and government and the fossil fuel industry are taking notice, say Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers.

By Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers

Tree-sits are growing in West Virginia where people are putting their bodies on the line to stop the destruction of the natural habitat that would result from building the Mountain Valley pipeline for fracked gas. In Virginia, Red Terry started a tree-sit on Easter weekend to protect her land from destruction. She remains, despite the company, with law enforcement support, denying her food and water – something illegal against prisoners or during war. As trees are felled she remains, as do protesters in Pennsylvania.

In Louisiana, a water protector locked herself into a cement-filled barrel placed in the trench of a horizontal directional drill to block construction of the Bayou Bridge Pipeline. Eleanor Goldfield reports this is part of the Battle of the Bayou, a coalition of groups and individuals standing against the destruction of a fragile environment, facing arrest and creating a future together.

Last November, Washington State activists defeated the largest oil-train terminal in the nation.

In Maryland, people blocked construction then escalated to a tractor blockade to prevent the construction of a compressor station that will bring fracked gas from the Mid-Atlantic to the Dominion export terminal in southern Maryland. People who fought the export terminal for years are now joining with neighboring counties fighting gas infrastructure and mounting a campaign against the Maryland Department of the Environment as Governor Hogan pushes $100 million in gas infrastructure.

The Message is Getting Through

Many political and economic elites want people to believe the environmental crisis doesn’t exist or is exaggerated. But these acts of civil disobedience is starting to get the message to people in high place.

Protesters are getting in their faces. They are taking the issue to corporate offices, for instance, as a busload of Lancaster, PA people did when they
brought a 12 foot stretch of pipeline to a meeting room, singing songs, chanting and asking, “How does it feel to be invaded?” In Bellevue Washington, protesters constructed a small longhouse blocking the main entrance to the corporate headquarters of an energy company.

California’s Governor Jerry Brown was protested when spoke last week at the National Press Club in Washington. Hundreds of people protested Governor Tom Wolf of Pennsylvania over his pro-fracking policies.

Those in power seek to protect profits from dirty energy rather than transition to 100 percent clean energy. They seek to protect agribusiness food, pesticides, and genetically modified foods rather than transform food to organic, locally grown foods using regenerative agriculture. They deny the reality of environmental racism rather than correct decades of racism and provide reparations. They seek to put profits ahead of the health and necessities of people as well as ahead of protecting and restoring the planet.

Despite this, a growing portion of the public understands these realities and is taking action to challenge the system. People know, for example, as activist Steven Norris writes, that they should be concerned about the impact of carbon infrastructure on their communities and the planet.

Last week, David Buckel, a nationally known advocate for gay rights and the environment, died in a self-immolation suicide in a protest against environmental degradation. He wrote in his suicide note, “Pollution ravages our planet, oozing inhabitability via air, soil, water and weather. Most humans on the planet now breathe air made unhealthy by fossil fuels, and many die early deaths as a result – my early death by fossil fuel reflects what we are doing to ourselves.”

The undertow being created by organized resistance is growing, and so is the push back against it. The industry recognizes that pipeline protesters are having an impact. Canada is having a hard time moving tar sands and fracked gas because protests are stopping pipeline investment. Oil companies are successfully being pressured to examine the risks their actions are causing to the environment and human rights.

Protests are resulting in cities divesting from banks who fund fossil fuel projects. Europe’s largest bank, HSBC just announced it will no longer fund oil or gas projects in the Arctic, tar sands projects, or most coal projects. Corporations realize they are investing in stranded assets that may not pay off and they may be held legally accountable for causing climate change.

Ligation Raises Risks
Corporations and the federal government are facing lawsuits from individuals, organizations and state and local governments over climate change and environmental degradation. Protesters are using the courts to underscore the urgent need for action by using a climate necessity defense. Courts are beginning to accept it, but protesters willingly understand they risk incarceration.

ExxonMobil is facing a raft of litigation arguing the company was aware of climate risks but continued to mislead the public and to pollute. State and local governments are seeking damages and calling for a federal criminal investigation. Litigation highlights the science of climate change and demonstrates how oil giants made immense profits while billions of dollars of cost from climate change, for example, immense storms and sea level rise, are borne by individuals and governments. Most suits were brought by coastal communities but recently Colorado communities are suing oil corporations over climate change-caused droughts and fires.

ExxonMobil tried to stop state investigations in Massachusetts, New York, and Texas by misleading investors for years about climate change risks. The judge issued a sharp rebuke with prejudice preventing an appeal and allowing the investigations to continue. Oil companies may well be behind new legislation in states to give severe penalties to people protesting “critical infrastructure.”

Future generations from Our Children’s Trust have brought eight suits against the federal government over the destruction of the environment, claiming a public trust over the atmosphere. A suit filed by 21 youth in Washington has overcome government efforts to dismiss the case and will be going to trial after both the trial court and Ninth Circuit rejected the government’s argument.

Environmental racism is also being challenged. Recently a court ruled that the Environmental Protection Agency violated the Civil Rights Act for decades of inaction over complaints filed by residents of Flint, MI. Hundreds of complaints about environmental racism have been made to the EPA. An ultimate case of racism is coming up in the Supreme Court when it considers whether the United States must abide by treaties made with Indigenous Peoples. The long history of racism from the founding of the U.S. by colonizing land inhabited by millions, followed by ethnic cleansing of the Indigenous who lived there is on trial.

Change Is Coming

Despite the government continuing to invest in dirty energy, clean energy is growing. Wind farming is creating jobs in red states like Texas. The Solar
Foundation mapped solar jobs by congressional district as solar is the fastest growing source of new energy. Research has been developed on a state-by-state basis to make the United States 100% renewable by 2050, with a national mobilization it could happen more quickly.

There are many challenges at the national level with corrupt federal agencies tied to polluting industries, but people pressure is still having an impact. The Federal Energy Regulatory System (FERC) which has been in bed with the oil, gas, and nuclear industries since its founding, indeed it is funded by those industries, has been the focus of a more than four-year pressure campaign by Beyond Extreme Energy. This June 23-25 they will be holding a Crack the FERC protest campaign to escalate pressure. The protest coincides with the Poor People’s Campaign as addressing the environmental crisis is linked to economic inequality, racism, and other issues.

The undertow of protest is having an impact. Corporations fear they will be held accountable for the damage they have done. Governments and elected officials are aware the people are angry and their careers can end with the new political culture created by popular revolt.

Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers co-direct Popular Resistance. [A version of this article originally appeared at https://popularresistance.org and is republished with author’s permission.]