

### **Oil and Activists Don't Mix: How Five Individuals Shut Down Five Pipelines**

Fenced by the Cascade and Olympic mountain ranges, Puget Sound, evergreen forests, and a handful of lakes and rivers, most Seattleites value the outdoors. They value hiking, biking, skiing, kayaking, climbing. But few Seattleites value Washington's environment, and Earth's environment, enough to take direct action to protect it. Climate activists Michael Foster, Emily Johnston, Annette Klapstein, Leonard Higgins, and Ken Ward are an exception. Foster, Johnston, and Klapstein all live in the Seattle area and joined Higgins and Ward to turn off five oil pipelines carrying crude oil from Canada to the United States on Oct. 11, 2016 (Nijhuis).

All five activists choose to cut through fences and padlocks, and face the legal consequences of doing so, to cut off 15 percent of the United States' oil supply from entering the United States for one day (Ward). While the oil is flowing again, their actions and subsequent pride for their actions brought attention to the danger our climate faces from fossil fuels and other carbon dioxide sources.

Foster began his year in a county jail in North Dakota on Feb. 6, 2018. Convicted of two felonies (criminal mischief and conspiracy to commit criminal mischief) and one misdemeanor (criminal trespass) Foster was sentenced to three years of prison for shutting off the Keystone pipeline, two of which he could suspend and serve under supervised probation (Nijhuis). Johnston and Klapstein are still awaiting trial (Norimine).

Before his sentencing, Foster faced the potential of over 20 years in jail. None of the climate activists knew what the personal consequences of their actions would be, but they valued the chance to directly impact climate change more than the risk of doing so. They all agreed before turning off the pipes to not run from or fight the authorities. Indeed, Sam Jessup, who

drove Foster to the pipeline, and another supporter called the pipeline owner, TransCanada, and explained what Foster was doing (Nijhuis). By turning themselves over to the authorities, Foster and his fellow activists showed that they broke the law purposefully and were willing to accept the responsibility of that disobedience. They could not make meaningful environmental change inside the bounds of the law and so they had to step outside the law. They sacrificed to make change, which is the essence of civic courage. It took courage for Foster to get in the back of a sheriff's car and sacrifice the surety of what would happen to him, it took courage to stand in front of a judge and not know how many nights or years he'd have to spend in jail, it took courage for him to sit in his jail cell that first night and know that he was sacrificing a year of his life.

Not only were the climate activists unsure of the consequences of turning off those five pipes, they were unsure of the results. Ken Ward, who turned off the TransCanada pipeline in Burlington, Washington, wrote in *Earth Island Journal* "I took action without expectations of the long-term impact, in the understanding that my personal intervention in the flow of tar sands oil was worth the risk, even if no one ever knew about it, even if no one was inspired to take action, even if all we did was stop the flow for a day" (Ward). As Ward expresses, there are no guarantees in civic action. That's part of what makes it hard to step out and try to make a change, there's no certainty. Ward and the other four activists pushed passed this fear of the unknown, the fear of acting without result, and acted for their own conscience. They knew something was wrong with the world and they were going to try and change it. It's still too soon after the event to know the full impact of those five individuals turning off pipelines for a day, and quite possibly they didn't make a huge change in the spiral of climate change, but there wouldn't be even a possibility of change if they hadn't taken the risk and acted.

Back in 2008, scientist James Hansen spoke on the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, concluding that a habitable and life-conducive atmosphere needed less than 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the air. This data helped inspire the activists to turn off the pipelines. Today there is over 400 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the air (Nijhuis). To the five valve turners, these drastic levels of carbon dioxide justified their actions as a necessity. All five tried to plead the necessity clause in court, but only Johnston and Klapstein convinced their judge in Minnesota to allow the defense, letting them use climate data as evidence in court (Karnowski). Considering the slowing of climate change as a necessity serves generations of humans and other species. Monitoring and controlling carbon dioxide is about saving hundreds of species and human lives, it's about survival. By turning off the valves, the five activists were putting these millions or billions of organisms before their own livelihoods. Civic action is powerful when it serves a broad population, when the change being promoted is not for oneself but for one's neighbors and community and neighboring communities. Acting to slow climate change is acting for the global community. And for the next generation of the global community. Ward acknowledged that he was acting for future generations, writing "If at some point my son asks me, Dad, what did you do to stop this? I'll be able to tell him that I did everything I could think of to try" (Ward).

While valve turning is the most drastic example, the climate activists have tried other measures to aid the environment as well. Foster and Johnston both kayaked from Seattle to form a chain with other activists to prevent the departure of a Shell oil rig for the Arctic back in 2015. Foster participated in a similar boat protest near Portland that same year. All of the valve turners have also participated in marches and tried to inspect their own carbon footprints. "Everything I do and don't do today, to pollute or stop polluting, changes what lives and dies on the planet for

the next 300 years — in a very specific, particular way," Foster told the New York Times Magazine. "I can't let myself off the hook" (Nijhuis). While Foster's ambition to lower his carbon footprint estranged him from his family—he was against getting a cat, a christmas tree, going on family vacations, and this loyalty to the environment created a lot of gaps with his ex-wife and kids (Nijhuis)—his dedication to shrinking his own carbon emissions sets a bar for climate activists to practice what they preach. It is important to shout out to others the danger planet Earth faces, but it is also important to set an example of acting on that danger in one's own life. Foster and his accomplices went beyond the civic action of standing in a street with a sign that reads "Save the Planet" and took the courageous step to show how we can directly impact the planet. Humans don't de-carbonize the atmosphere with signs and protests but with stopping fuel consumption—whether that means keeping oil riggers from extracting the oil in the first place, keeping the oil from flowing to the factories where it'll be combusted, or just not using fossil fuels in one's own life.

There are different kinds of civic courage. Foster, Johnston, Klapstein, Higgins, and Ward did not lay down in front of a tank or continue to walk across a bridge under police attack. Their courage was not confrontational. But their courage still defied a humongous corporation and stood up for the livelihood of every living organism on this globe. For the seven hours Foster shut down the Keystone pipeline, TransCanada lost an alleged \$50,000 in oil transport revenue. Their courage proved it's possible to defy big business, and billion dollar corporations. They proved the basic privilege of breathing clean air is worth more than the oil industry. That a sustainable environment cannot be disregarded just because the money is with the opposition. And if nothing else, they reminded the country that we live on Earth, and what we do to the planet we do to ourselves. As Foster told the *Seattle Met* "Living in this system of

overconsumption, beside this concrete river of CO2 that is always flowing on I-5—everywhere I go in this town that I love feels like prison. So the idea of living in prison? It doesn't bother me the way it should" (Norimine).

It was an attempt to break humans out of the atmosphere prison we're building that inspired these climate activists to shut off pipelines. Now other individuals, communities, and nations must continue that courage and change that these activists started and lower the carbon dioxide jail bars. It takes courage to illegally turn off a valve and it will take courage to turn off carbon consumption.

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