

The Land Defender's Call

Article by Tara Houska

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Protests against extractive projects, whether ridiculed or violently quashed, are critical defences of nature and wellbeing, both under attack from global corporations, oligarchs, and complicit governments. Indigenous peoples give voice to the change in vision necessary for a stronger position in challenging times.

Laughter and the buzz of conversation drift across the United States Capitol concrete steps. The sun is shining brightly as an antipipeline protest song picks up voices.

One by one, the folks with interlocked arms are walked off by a single police officer as onlookers cheer. Citations are issued, demonstrators rejoin the crowd. New friendships and connections are made. After the banners are rolled up, the crowd disperses to their evening plans.

Two thousand miles away, next to a giant steel pipe cutting through the forest, the same protest song tries to pick up steam. It is quickly replaced by confused shouting and pained voices. Indigenous protestors and allies are being maced and tackled to the ground by police in riot gear. Private security guards hired by the pipeline company surround the group and chat with officers in a waiting paddy wagon.

Those in cable ties will spend days or weeks in a cell, facing charges ranging from simple trespass to domestic terrorism. The story is in the local media, then the national news. Elected officials pick up their phones to discuss the pipeline. A state environmental justice committee is created. A proposed domestic conservation policy gains another sponsor. And the pipeline keeps barreling through the forest.

Ten thousand miles away, another land defender has been assassinated. Their grieving family calls for justice, for an end to the industrial project with its hired mercenaries and deadly toxins. A lithium mine for electric battery production is poisoning the water; the animals are all sick and so are those who still live off the land. The murder of the land defender makes a media cycle: their death is added to the total reported annually by the United Nations, by global non-profits. Another resolution calling for human rights is passed by a committee. A financial institution pledges to strengthen its human rights standards. And on the ground, the fighting intensifies. Sometimes the colonising extractors even pack up and leave.

Intentional arrest as a pressure tactic spans generations and movements. Sometimes arrest is no more than a citation. At other times, it is a calculated risk to delay the progression of an extractive project and create more pressure. In other places, arrest is a deadly risk. In every instance it is part of a movement ecosystem pushing for change.

Yet, too often in climate spaces, particularly those led by the so-called West, civil disobedience garners responses ranging from amusement to annoyance. The “real work” – climate policy, aspirational goals, electrification of the grid – is being done with little to no acknowledgment of what it takes to achieve substantive, lasting change. Consumerism and decolonisation are almost entirely absent concepts. Indigenous land stewardship is largely relegated to romanticised imagery and phrases.

Civil rights are not and have never been comfortably won. It defies logic that oligarchs and corporations destroying the natural world for profit would be any less violent to change than oppressive regimes benefitting the few. It defies logic to trivialise human beings responding with immediacy and urgency to report after report speaking of climate boiling, tipping points affecting billions of creatures, species extinctions. It is almost as if those with the macro solutions can envisage no other way of being than that which has brought humankind to this point, that we are utterly incapable of reclaiming our collectivity, our purpose beyond extractivism and creature comforts.

After decades of learning from my people's knowledge keepers, from the web of life and the Indigenous values that have kept eighty per cent of the world's biodiversity alive, I understand the risks I take defending the physical Earth with acts of love for a relative. To me, the Earth is not a summation of resources to be consumed. It is a living, breathing relative who we must be in mutuality with for our own survival.

Our foolish, short-sighted, arrogant beliefs that we have dominion over nature got us here. It is no less foolish, shortsighted, and arrogant to believe we can solve the climate crisis we are waging from the mindset of dominion. Survival means necessary, radical repair of our relationship with nature, which can and must take numerous pathways, including personal risk for the benefit of all.

These direct acts are neither cutesy nor extreme. Neither are they a silver bullet in this fight that is both intergenerational and existential.

In my experience as a land defender calling out from some of the last beautiful, healthy places under siege by endless greed, I've found bravery and selflessness to be a source of inspiration for people all over the world living through the bleakness of climate science and overwhelming existentialism. I've found standing collectively and physically with the Earth to be a pathway to directly reframing the narrative of the world we can envisage while providing a glimpse of reconnection through an act of love. Some direct actions lay bare the weakness of destroyers, bound by the same physicalities as we all are. I cannot adequately convey the eyes of a person who has stopped a multi-national industry from its planet-killing for a few hours, for a few days, for a few months or even years. It is power. It is empowerment. It is reclamation. Our Mother needs us, with all our empathy and rejection of the disconnection killing us all. I hope more of us realise our hearts and our humility are just as critical as our minds when we choose to stay or go.



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