

# Earth Day: Conflict over the Future of the Planet

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[Police State & Civil Rights](#)

*Featured image: Photograph from climate march in Washington, DC, Union of Concerned Scientists.*

*On this Earth Day, it is difficult to look at the state of the planet and the current political leadership and see much hope. In "[Junk Planet](#)", Robert Burrowes writes a comprehensive description of the degradation of the atmosphere, oceans, waterways, groundwater, and soil as well as the modern pollution of antibiotic waste, genetic engineering, nanowaste, space junk, military waste and nuclear, a description of a planet degraded by pollution impacting our bodies and health as well as the planet's future.*

Burrowes includes another form of waste, junk information, that denies reality, e.g. climate change, the dangers of extreme energy extraction and food polluted by genetic engineering, pesticides, and depleted soils. This false reporting results in policies that create a [risk of ecosystem collapse](#).

Political and economic elites want people to believe these problems do not exist. 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](#) as a wake-up call to save the planet. He wrote in a 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. In order for this conflict to be resolved, the conflict must be heightened as is occurring now.



Tree-Sit Protest Of Mountain Valley Pipeline from West Virginia (Metro News)

## People Power Escalates

As we write this, [tree-sits are growing](#) in West Virginia where people are [putting their bodies on the line](#) to prevent the destruction of trees and habitat to build 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, [who are also doing tree-sits](#). Their stubborn courageous should encourage each of us.

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.

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.

People are [taking protests to corporate offices](#) as a busload of Lancaster, PA people did when they brought a 12 foot stretch of pipeline to a meeting room, singing songs and chanting, 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 he came to speak at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. [Hundreds of people protested Governor Tom Wolf](#) of

Pennsylvania over his pro-fracking policies. More politicians will be held accountable in this election year by angry constituents.

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 to the environment and human rights from their actions. [Washington activists defeated the largest oil-train terminal](#) in the nation.

Protests are successfully 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.



Exxon Knew protest. Photo by Johnny Silvercloud.

### Litigation 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 necessity 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, e.g. 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 over 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 are no doubt 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.

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 US by colonizing land inhabited by millions, followed by ethnic cleansing of the Indigenous who lived there is on trial. If treaties are law, as they should be, this will empower Indigenous People more.

### Change Is Being Created, Transformation Is Coming

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 people power.

The beginning of [change always begins with education and changing ourselves](#). While we know, systemic change is necessary, people are also educating themselves about their own own lifestyles. Thirty-six-year-old Daniel Webb was conscious of the dangers of plastic and [decided to keep all of his plastic for a year](#) gathering 4,490 items, 93% were single-use plastic, and just 8 were biodegradable. He made a mural of his plastic to educate others.

The US uses 500 million plastic straws every day. Whenever we order a drink, we request no straws and share this fact. This consciousness has permeated the culture, now many restaurants only bring straws when asked, and people are organizing “[Don’t Suck](#)” and “[Be Straw Free](#)” [campaigns to eliminate plastic straws](#).

More people spend their money consciously using it to buy organic and local, eating less meat and [boycotting factory farm foods](#). We have more power with our dollar than [with our vote](#) in a [manipulated “democracy”](#) disguised as [an oligarchy](#).

People are also making changes at the community level. [Edmonston, a working-class town with a median income of \\$19,000 in Maryland took small steps to going green](#). In the early 2000s to ameliorate stormwater flooding, they gradually remade their town into a green town, empty lots turned into community gardens and rain barrels were added. Now they have permeable pavement, solar panels, fruit trees for food and native plant landscapes with leaves collected by the city and composted.

In Brooklyn, people began reclaiming land with a vacant lot turned into a nearly 2-acre community space with garden beds, an outdoor movie screening area, a pumpkin patch, and an educational production and research farm. They then got data on vacant lots in the city and put bi-lingual signs on them that said: “This land is your land” and told people how

to get control of the area, [linking them to a website](#) to help. Since 2011, communities have transformed over 200 sites. Municipalization, or [fearless cities](#), may be a key for creating change toward [socializing energy into a public service](#) resulting in [transformative cities](#). These changes are not only about the environment and climate justice but are also about economic, racial and social justice.

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 environmental crisis and the mishandling of climate change are issues that are going to [make the 2020s a decade of transformational change](#). In order for people to create transformative changes, we need a well-educated activist community.

[The Popular Resistance School](#) will begin on May 1 and will be an eight-week course on how movements grow, build power and succeed as well as examine the role you can play in the movement. [Sign up to be part of this school](#) so you can participate in small group discussions about how to build a powerful, transformational movement.

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*Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers are co-directors of Popular Resistance where this article was originally published.*

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