

More Than a Pipe Dream

Why the Anti-Keystone Movement Was Never Just About a Pipeline.

By Bryan Farrell

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... Still, many consider the construction of the Keystone pipeline inevitable—after all, even 54 percent of Democrats support it. It's for this reason that critics such as New York Times columnist Joe Nocera have called the protests "boneheaded." They believe environmental action could be better spent on some other goal, like perhaps encouraging people to reduce their carbon footprint.

But these critics are missing something vital about the anti-Keystone movement: It was never about just a pipeline. McKibben and a handful of others had another, less talked about goal—to remake the environmental movement into something far more active, creative, and formidable for years to come. The gap that once existed between mainstream environmental groups and grass-roots activists has now largely dissolved, resulting in widespread action that has not been seen in the United States for decades—perhaps even since the first Earth Day in April 1970.

On that day, mainstream environmental groups with roots going back to the conservation movement of the early 20th century united with grass-roots activists for a day of teach-ins, influenced by the burgeoning student anti-war movement. Amid the thousands of demonstrations that took place across the nation, there was at least one major act of civil disobedience, in which 15 people were arrested for holding a mock funeral inside Boston's Logan Airport. Interestingly enough, it was a sort of proto-climate protest against a supersonic plane and its accompanying release of water vapor—a major greenhouse gas.

After that Earth Day, however, the two strands of environmentalism largely went their separate ways, with mainstream groups preferring a more professional approach that took them to courtrooms, shareholder meetings, and the halls of Congress rather than street demonstrations. And for a time, that approach succeeded wildly, earning some of the most important and long-standing environmental gains in this country's history. But according to a 2012 report by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, such efforts have yielded no "significant policy changes at the federal level in the United States since the 1980s." For perhaps no issue is that fact more clear than with climate change.

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