Pipeline Activism & Principles of Strategy (How → Principles of Strategy)

Ruby & Jessica: DAPL Ecosaboteurs

“We went to these places with knowledge self-garnered within a matter of weeks and were effectively halting the construction for weeks on end just via one fire or one valve.”

DAPL Ecosaboteurs
Ruby Montoya & Jessica Reznicek

“We need to move past simple, aboveground actions in order to achieve meaningful decomposition of the pipeline. We believe the more difficult it is for the company and its protectors to put out our fires, the more people will be inspired to engage in more meaningful and disruptive ways.”

Jessie Reznick

Stop Fossil Fuels: Why We Must, How We Can

Ruby Montoya & Jessica Reznicek

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used at site after site, often without advance planning. Jessica described much of their work as “sloppy,” and they wrote in their press release:

“In our particular circumstances, we learned that scouting often hindered our ability to act in windows of opportunity. So, we went with our torches and protective gear on, and found numerous sites, feeling out the “vibe” of each situation, and deciding to act then and there, often in broad daylight.”

In May, upon discovering flowing oil while attempting another piercing, they ended their campaign. The pipeline began commercial operation in June.

**Strategy**

Jessica and Ruby employed a strategy of attrition, hoping their actions would help wear down pipeline owner Energy Transfer Partners (ETP) and its investors to force abandonment of the project. Jessica stated in an interview, “We need to delay construction not just for days, but for weeks and months for the ultimate purpose of shutting this pipeline down and having investors pull out.”

Unfortunately, it’s very difficult to stop a huge industrial project via attrition. In their press release, Ruby and Jessica asserted that “every action is a thorn in their side”—but even hundreds of thorns are unlikely to bring down a giant. The dozen or more known acts of sabotage and arson inflicted about six million dollars in damages. That’s less than one sixth of one percent of the $3.78 billion pipeline budget—amounting to a rounding error, and likely reimbursed by insurance. When pricking major industrial infrastructure, thorns splinter and their wielders grow exhausted long before they can win victory.

**Material effectiveness**

Attrition failed to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline, but a less binary measurement of success is for how long it delayed completion.

The #NoDAPL campaign, centered on Standing Rock, delayed pipeline completion by at least two, perhaps even three months—mostly because the movement’s visibility pressured the Obama administration to temporarily suspend construction. One month after the Trump administration permitted resumption, ETP had drilled under the Missouri River and expected oil to flow by March 22. Ruby and Jessica began their campaign in mid-March, and oil didn’t actually flow until mid-May, with commercial operation delayed until June 1st. Jessica’s claim in their Democracy Now interview seems credible: “We halted construction up and down the line for several weeks, turning into months.”

In terms of material impact, Ruby and Jessica’s ecosabotage was 1000 times more efficient than the aboveground campaigns. At least 15,000 person-months and $20 million poured into Standing Rock and #NoDAPL, setting back pipeline completion three months at most. Ruby and Jessica, with a total investment of 10 person months and probably a few thousand dollars (oxy-acetylene torch kits cost about $400), delayed it a further two months by employing initiative and surprise.

**Return on investment:** barrels of oil stopped per person month, and barrels stopped per dollar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Barrels stopped</th>
<th>Person months</th>
<th>BBLs/ p-m</th>
<th>Money</th>
<th>BBLs/$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valve Turners</td>
<td>Tar sands pipelines</td>
<td>Civil disobedience</td>
<td>.75 million</td>
<td>~35</td>
<td>21,400</td>
<td>$12-$14,000</td>
<td>58</td>
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<tr>
<td>#NoDAPL</td>
<td>DAPL</td>
<td>Civil disobedience</td>
<td>45 million</td>
<td>&gt; 15,000</td>
<td>&lt; 3000</td>
<td>&gt; $20 million</td>
<td>&lt; 2.25</td>
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<td>Ruby &amp; Jess</td>
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<td>Ecosabotage</td>
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<td>3,000,000</td>
<td>~$3000</td>
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Jessica speculated that “If Ruby and I had had a crew that had doubled or tripled or quadrupled our numbers, we really could have stopped this thing […] just via actions like we did.” We can’t know for sure whether that’s true; with the pipeline so close to bringing in millions of dollars per month in operational revenue, extra security to attempt to thwart sabotage would have been a minor expense. Nor is safely forming an underground crew trivial; screening, recruiting, and organizing compartmentalized cells while minimizing risk takes careful planning and execution.

But perhaps it’s true that larger numbers, or escalation of tactics, could have stopped DAPL. Ruby and Jessica ceased action once they discovered oil in the pipeline. They might instead have decided the risk of small, localized spills was reasonable compared to the certainty of 500,000 barrels of oil driving global pollution and destruction and burdening the atmosphere with 175,000 tons of CO₂ every single day. Though using oxy-acetylene torches on a pipeline with oil would literally have blown up in their faces, perhaps they could have used a different tactic from a safe distance. Perhaps additional direct actionists would have joined them. Perhaps together they could have permanently disabled the pipeline, joining resisters in the Niger Delta as truly successful environmental activists.

It’s a beautiful vision. Ruby and Jessica came forward to inspire action, so perhaps this hypothesis will be tested on the Dakota Access Pipeline, and on others. It would only take a handful of people.

**Security Culture**

Ruby, new to the environmental activist scene, found that people immediately shut down conversation when she speculated about directly halting construction. “Can’t we just stop the machine—break it?” Many assumed she was a cop; Jessica was warned not to work with her.

Infiltrators have targeted the environmental movement for years. Caution is necessary, but fear based, knee-jerk reaction to any mention of ecosabotage crosses into paranoia. Security culture should facilitate success. Not getting arrested is an important part of being effective, but so is discussing what tactics might actually work.

Most of the activists protesting and engaging in civil disobedience against DAPL risked