

capture and punishment for ecosabotage, and may increasingly turn to materially effective action.

Conclusion

Like many, the Valve Turners struggle with dishearteningly conflicting beliefs: a mass movement is necessary, yet is extremely unlikely. The clearest route to resolving the tension is to accept the infinitesimal likelihood of a mass movement for the necessary radical change; then to devise a strategy suited to that reality. The final two paragraphs of the group's Action Strategy page capture the dilemma absent such resolution:

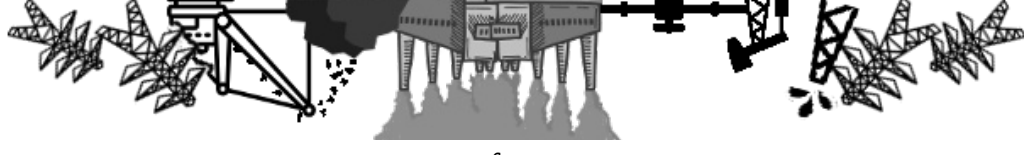
If we can convince a random jury of citizens to agree that the climate situation is sufficiently desperate that shutting off a pipeline is excusable, it will be a vindication that telling the truth of the dire situation we are in—with openness and compassion, with the personal commitment to back it up—is a winning strategy. That outcome, we know, is unlikely.

But if convicted, the valve turners will be a powerful example of the moral fortitude required in the face of this challenge.

They express pessimism and even defeatism, expecting failure but taking solace in spiritual purity. However, once activists give up hope for a mass movement, they can focus on effective actions and on recruiting additional serious activists. The Valve Turners came close; though they achieved neither significant material impact nor the symbolic impact for which they'd hoped, they did disseminate knowledge of a simple, effective tactic. Since turning valves can disrupt operational infrastructure, a small number of people could substantially hamper business as usual, and even trigger cascading failure.

Success is the strongest recruitment tool. A prolonged campaign repeatedly halting oil flows may not win support from fence-sitters, but will mobilize the core who want effective action. Employing tactics for maximum material impact will build a smaller but stronger movement. Then we can justifiably shift from defeatism to optimism.

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The Valve Turners



In October 2016, five men and women coordinated to shut down all five main pipelines bringing Alberta tar sands crude into the United States. In succession, Emily Johnston, Annette Klapstein, Leonard Foster, Michael Higgins, and then Ken Ward called pipeline companies shortly before turning safety shut-off valves on Enbridge's lines 4 & 67, TransCanada's Keystone, Spectra Energy's Express, and Kinder-Morgan's TransMountain pipelines. They then awaited arrest, submitting to months of court dates and even jail time.

The action was very simple. The group located shut-off valves, where they could affect oil flow through otherwise inaccessible buried pipelines. (In some cases, these sites expose actual piping, which Ruby Montoya and Jessica Reznick leveraged to sabotage the Dakota Access Pipeline—see our analysis of their actions for more information.) Valve sites are typically guarded by nothing more than a chain link fence. To access the shut-off valve controls, each Valve Turner cut a lock on the enclosure fence, then a lock on the valve wheel. After a few minutes of manual labor each, the actionists stopped the flow of, in total, nearly 30 barrels of oil every second.

The most difficult part of the action was stealing themselves, at ages 50 to 64, to commit felonies and face the consequences.

Strategy and Goals

The Valve Turners have given us, stating on their action strategy page that "What's needed is a strong movement, and we know that bringing that movement to life and power requires visceral and energizing acts of conscience that embody the change we seek." They tailored their action accordingly, to raise awareness of our dire situation and inspire urgently needed action.

Though prior valve closings had already received some coverage of the successful tactic, the Valve Turners hoped that their larger, coordinated action might draw more attention. They hoped to push the media and politicians to discuss climate change on a national scale. They hoped to uplift the hearts of movement participants, by demonstrating the moral duty to act "even when there is no certainty of stopping the harms of climate change."

In this spirit, the action wasn't meant to have much material impact. It isn't clear what

tangible actions the Valve Turners hoped to inspire in others, but one of their statements suggests a strategy of attrition: “We showed that it CAN and MUST be done - over and over, until the fossil fuel companies get the message that they are no longer going to profit by destroying the planet we need to live on.”

They hoped to have the opportunity to present at least one “necessity defense” in court, to “stand without fear and explain in cogent language the catastrophe before us and the necessity to act, in front of a jury of our peers.” They wanted to “set an example of personal strength and responsibility we believe is critical to winning this fight,” and to embolden others by establishing a precedent of legal clemency for climate direct action.

They also harbored a long-shot hope that President Obama would use the opportunity to declare a climate emergency and keep the tar sands valves closed.

Investments and costs

Their work can be divided into two phases: first, actually closing the valves; then leveraging media coverage and court trials to raise awareness and inspire others.

In the first phase, the group spent about five months and \$12-14,000 planning and executing the action. Between the five Valve Turners plus their support crew, perhaps they invested 35 person months.

In the second phase, they incurred “large bills” for fines, legal fees, and travel expenses to court dates. Their “Legal Defense Fund” estimated that \$50,000 would be needed for legal fees and expert witness expenses—though the Civil Liberties Defense Center provided at least some pro bono defense, and no expert witnesses wound up testifying, so perhaps the ultimate cost was less.

The Valve Turners and their arrested support crew, legal defense, and supporters presumably spent significant time preparing for, traveling to, and appearing at trials. Michael Foster received a one year prison sentence, and Ken Ward 30 days of community service. The rest of the group received deferred imprisonment (increasing risk of penalties if they engage in further civil disobedience), or no prison time at all.

Material effectiveness

Though the action wasn’t meant to have much material impact, it did halt pipeline transport of about 750,000 barrels, roughly 7.5% of daily US imports and 3.75% of daily consumption. (The backed up oil probably moved to market by rail at a higher premium.)

Although the fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline was different in many ways, it’s interesting to compare results:

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

Who	Target	Tactic	Barrels stopped	Person months	BBLS/p-m	Money	BBLS/\$
Valve Turners	Tar sands pipelines	Civil disobedience	.75 million	~35	21,400	\$12-14,000	58
#NoDAPL	DAPL	Civil disobedience	45 million	> 15,000	< 3000	> \$20 million	< 2.25
Ruby & Jess	DAPL	Ecosabotage	30 million	10	3,000,000	~\$3000	10,000



The Valve Turners were many times more efficient than #NoDAPL, largely because they employed initiative and surprise. Though they were less than 1% as efficient as Ruby and Jessica, they could easily have come closer had material impact been their goal. They could have leveraged their knowledge of the system to close valves up and down the pipelines for months, perhaps even rupturing downstream sections of pipe after shutting off the flow. By disappearing before the police arrived, they’d have been free to hit and run again and again.



Emily Johnston & Annette Klapstein

Symbolic and persuasive effectiveness

However, the Valve Turners weren’t trying to maximize pipeline disruption. They primarily aimed to raise awareness, prompt discourse, and spark further action.

The group received much media coverage, mostly from progressive and left-wing websites and media, but didn’t break into the national media cycle as they’d hoped. Clinton and Trump were not forced to discuss climate change, and President Obama did not order the valves kept closed. (But the action may have helped persuade him to reject Keystone XL.)

No ongoing campaign has yet emerged to force shutdown of pipelines through direct action such as repeatedly turning valves. But the Valve Turners inspired a Minnesota action in February 2019; perhaps a large, persistent campaign is gestating.

Not one of the defendants was able to present a necessity defense.

Ultimately, the only measure of effectiveness—that by which future generations will judge us—is whether and how fast we stop fossil fuels. Raising awareness can contribute indirectly, but so far, phase two of the Valve Turners’ plan hasn’t been as successful as the action itself. But they introduced a simple yet effective tactic to many people; their efforts may yet pay off in widespread material resistance.

Unintended effects

The CARVER matrix for target selection considers Criticality, Accessibility, Recuperability, Vulnerability, and Recognizability, along with unwanted potential side Effects of an action.

The pipeline companies accused the Valve Turners of risking pipeline ruptures, but unsurprisingly, the corporations lied. To minimize risk, the Valve Turners chose isolated control valves away from towns, and at least ten miles downstream from the nearest pumping station. Further, they called each pipeline operator fifteen minutes in advance so they could initiate safe shutdown procedures.

The actions of the Valve Turners, along with those of Standing Rock, have given states an excuse to criminalize environmental protest. Of course, such laws produce a side effect the corporations and their government supporters don’t want. Activists will weigh severe punishment for symbolic civil disobedience against the relatively minimal risk of

