

UVic Sustainability Scholars Program

Final Report

**SURVEYING RESISTANCE TO EXTRACTIVISM IN SO-CALLED CANADA**

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## Disclaimer

This report is a product of the UVic Sustainability Scholars Program, a partnership between UVic and various on- and off-campus organizations offering internship opportunities to graduate students working on sustainability-focused research projects that advance sustainability in the region. This project was conducted under the mentorship of Research for the Frontlines staff.

## Territorial Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge that the work for this project took place on the unceded ancestral lands of the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples and land that the W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples have historical and ongoing relationships with. I moved to these territories in September 2023, having spent several years on Algonquin Anishinaabe territory in so-called Ottawa, Ontario, and I have been very grateful to get to learn, work and play on these lands for almost a year.

Undertaking this project on these lands felt very meaningful to me for several reasons. First, so-called Victoria has been a site of struggle where countless pipelines and extractive projects have been protested (Boynnton, 2019; Patterson, 2016), including when Indigenous youth occupied the BC Legislature in 2020 in solidarity with Wet’suwet’en Hereditary Chiefs and land defenders opposing the Coastal GasLink (CGL) pipeline (Bidal, 2020). Near the end of my internship, I felt grateful to catch a screening of “[Yintah](#)” that included a discussion with Jennifer documentary director and producer Jennifer Wickham and wing chief of the Cas Yikh people of the Gidimt’en clan, Molly Wickham (Sleydo’), who spoke about the documentary film and the ongoing struggle against CGL. Living on Lekwungen lands is the closest I’ve ever been to this massive struggle and it helped me renew my commitment to try to support struggles like this in whatever way I can.

Through this project, I have reflected not only on the colonial violence wrought by “Canada”’s economy, but also Indigenous people’s economic systems that pre-date colonization. I found it helpful throughout the project to reflect on the important work being done by Indigenous peoples to revive their economic practices and systems. As just one example, the Songhees Marine Team (SMT) revived a historic practice central to their economic system this past spring: they write:

“Coast Salish people have maintained a deep connection to herring since time immemorial. Across the western coast of North America, Indigenous communities have practiced the art of harvesting herring roe directly from the waters by strategically placing trees or branches to entice herring to spawn upon them. This traditional

technique, steeped in ancestral knowledge, reflects a harmonious relationship between the Coast Salish people and the marine ecosystem they call home.

Drawing inspiration from these traditional practices, the Songhees Marine Team (SMT) endeavors to honor this legacy while embracing modern scientific methods. By integrating Western science with Indigenous knowledge, the SMT aims to foster a welcoming environment for the return of the herring to their ancestral spawning grounds” (Songhees Nation, 2024).

Examples like this remind me that while it is important to consider the continuing harms of colonialism, but it is equally if not more important to learn about and support the incredible work being done by Indigenous peoples to resist it through the resurgence of cultural and economic practices and struggles for sovereignty.

## Introduction

Many communities across so-called Canada are on the front lines of opposing extractive industries. These industries worsen the ecological crises and create pollution harmful to communities. Research for the Frontlines (R4FL) supports communities at the front lines of these environmental and climate justice struggles across the country. R4FL is working to level the playing field by supporting communities and movements opposing extractivism in so-called Canada with research support that is community-led. R4FL staff are busy supporting community and movement-led research and don’t often have time to identify and contact communities and movements that could use support. But in 2024 R4FL would like to start doing targeted outreach to front line folks engaged in resisting specific key extractive projects, to increase the network’s impacts in keeping fossil fuels in the ground.

The purpose of this project will be to identify environmental justice struggles occurring across the country (with a focus on instances of communities resisting extractive industries), then conduct an analysis to recommend which struggles R4FL should prioritize. This executive summary provides some background information on the broad issue and the scope of the project, then provides some information on the process, as well as some reflections.

## Background

The Canadian economy has relied heavily upon extractive sectors since the country’s inception, and these sectors have depended on the alienation of Indigenous peoples from their land. As the vast majority of land in so-called Canada was designated “crown land” for the use of the

British crown, then the settler Canadian state, this land was opened up to resource extraction (Pasternak & King, 2019). This fueled the growth of the Canadian economy and the country. As Pasternak and colleagues write in the Yellowhead Institute's "Cash Back" report, "From Canada's perspective, the value of Indigenous lands rests on what can be extracted and commodified. The economy has been built on the transformation of Indigenous lands and waterways into corporate profit and national power" (2021, p.5).

Indigenous people have been on the front lines of opposing extractive industries since so-called Canada's founding (Pasternak & King, 2019). As the ecological and climate crises worsen, major shifts are required in extractive and polluting industries worldwide, and yet these industries show no signs of slowing down. Indigenous people remain steadfast in their stewardship of land and waters and in their leadership in opposing extractive projects. A report from the Indigenous Environmental Network and Oil Change International quantified the metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO<sub>2</sub>e) emissions that have been stopped or delayed by Indigenous land defenders over the last 10 years. They found that Indigenous resistance "stopped or delayed greenhouse gas pollution equivalent to at least one-quarter of annual U.S. and Canadian emissions" (Goldtooth et al., 2021, p.1).

At the same time, it is well established that Indigenous and racialized communities bear the brunt of pollution from extractive and polluting industries in so-called Canada (MacDonald, 2020).

Extractive industries are very well resourced, while the communities that resist them are not. R4FL is working to level the playing field by supporting frontline communities in their struggles through research support.

### **Research objectives and questions:**

The purpose of this research project was to identify front line communities facing environmental justice struggles across so-called Canada, then to identify communities from this selection that R4FL should consider prioritizing contacting to offer research support.

### **Research objectives:**

Objective 1: Identify front line communities opposing extractive/ polluting projects that are at the proposal stage.

Objective 2: Identify prioritization criteria and refine a selection of communities for R4FL to contact inquiring about research needs and offering research support.

### **Research questions:**

Research question 1: What proposed projects in extractive/ polluting industries are being opposed by front line communities across so-called Canada? How are they resisting projects? What communities are building alternatives/ solutions at the same time?

Research question 2: Which of these environmental justice struggles would be strategic for R4FL to prioritize in their outreach to offer research support in the short-medium term, considering R4FL's mission and goals?

I also contributed to a second project that R4FL was undertaking, doing research on the concept of Land Back to demystify the concept and movement for settlers. This second project was highly related to the first, as it allowed me to learn more about some legal concepts related to how Indigenous people have been disposed from land and how they have been able to secure more sovereignty over it, as well as examples of Indigenous communities undertaking actions to reclaim their land.

## Research Approach

Important definitions that guided the project:

**Front-line communities:** Front-line communities include Indigenous, Black, racialized, and economically marginalized people who are directly and disproportionately impacted by climate change and/or the systems and industries causing it. Other groups of people are also disproportionately impacted by environmental burdens, such as women, youth, LGBTQAI+ people, differently abled folks, migrants and refugees, and people from the Global South.

**Climate justice:** Climate justice makes clear the links between climate change, racism, colonialism, capitalism, hetero-patriarchy, and other intersecting forms of oppression. It means centering Indigenous and other front-line communities who are most impacted by climate change (and impacted by the industries and governments driving the crisis) and heeding their leadership, voices, demands, needs, and approaches to addressing the social and ecological challenges faced to achieve just outcomes.

### **Data sources/ methods:**

This project was conducted through online investigative research methods, using secondary sources. I conducted online and news searches of environmental struggles.

**Scope of environmental justice struggles:** We considered three levels of extractive/ polluting projects in this research project:

- Fossil fuel projects: including the extraction of oil and gas through oil sands, mining, fracking, etc., pipelines, processing, refinery and export facilities

- Natural resource extraction projects: including mining, hydroelectric and other energy projects, forestry projects
- broader environmental justice struggles: including factories, waste management, and struggles around other industrial projects

The project was split into three phases:

### **Stage 1: exploring method phase**

- Test various methods of finding data (environmental impact assessment websites, news and online searches), search for databases, talk to experts for guidance (where applicable).

### **Stage 2: Data collection**

- Focus on gathering information on resistance struggles by province/ territory through news searches.

### **Stage 3: Formulate prioritization criteria**

- Based on data gathered, reflect on possible prioritization criteria, create potential scoring/ ranking system.
- Present data to R4FL and deliberate on prioritization.
- Score projects based on scoring system and put into matrix.

### **Stage 4: Finalize data gathering based on prioritized list**

- Based on prioritization phase, collect final data (e.g. contact information).

### **Stage 5: Wrap up project deliverables**

- Write recommendations list on prioritized cases.
- Write document on methodology and reflections on the project process/ findings.

Regarding the Land Back project, I performed online searches to identify examples of Land Back occurring across so-called Canada, then wrote short descriptions of these examples. I also researched some legal concepts related to Land Back, aiming to focus on Indigenous authors.

## Summary

While the findings from this project must remain confidential, I can share a summary of the research process as well as some of the observations I made and reflections I had while doing this work.

While we had a sense of the research approach for the project before beginning, I spent a few weeks testing different methods of finding information on communities/ movements opposing extractive projects. This included examining Environmental Assessment Agency sites and searching news sites. I spent a significant amount of time testing different keywords and open-source methods for searching the internet. Ultimately, we settled on searching for news articles showing signs of opposition to extractive projects/ polluting industries.

First, this project has also shown me the variety of promises that extractive companies will make to First Nations in order to secure consent, going beyond payments through Impact and Benefit Agreements. For instance, First Cobalt Corp, a Canadian mining company, is collaborating with Timiskaming First Nation on a joint study “of regional medicinal plants and mushrooms to assess the historic effects of settlement, logging, mining and industrial practices on the ecosystem in the past-producing Cobalt Camp mining district. Results from the study will support the Wild Basket initiative started by Ni Dakinan from the Timiskaming First Nation (“TFN”). First Cobalt is providing financial support and expertise regarding metals and remediation while TFN is providing their traditional ecological knowledge and environmental monitoring expertise” (Junior Mining Network, 2021).

On a similar note, I witnessed several examples of extractive projects where First Nations have a greater level of involvement and in some cases ownership. These projects are being heralded for this fact and some being called examples of “economic reconciliation”. For instance the “Nechalacho mine, roughly 100 km southeast of Yellowknife [which] aims to produce end-products for tech manufacturing” that is “the first in Canada to contract an Indigenous business to extract materials on their own territory. Det'on Cho Nahanni Construction, partially owned by the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, signed the agreement early last year” (CBC, 2021). Another example is Ksi Lisims, a proposed floating natural gas liquefaction facility that is being co-developed with the Nisga’a Nation and hosted on land owned by the Nisga’a Lisims Government. The project is framed as “economic reconciliation in action” (Ksi Lisims, 2023).

I found a recent article in The Breach by Janelle Lapointe (2024) useful in thinking about economic reconciliation. She argues that “economic reconciliation” “masks a deeper perpetuation of exploitative practices on Indigenous lands under the guise of progress and mutual benefit” and points out the ways in which continued fossil fuel projects (even “natural” gas) are environmentally and economically unsound (Lapointe, 2024). Lapointe writes that “[t]rue reconciliation and economic justice require a fundamental shift in power dynamics and an acknowledgment that corporations have profited unjustly from the land and resources that rightfully belong to Indigenous Nations” (2024).

Further, through this research I was able to see firsthand the ways in which permitting processes for extractive projects prioritize private companies over communities that are set to be affected by these projects. Despite saying they support Indigenous rights and promising to work in a collaborative manner, I saw many examples of provincial and federal governments

taking the side industry over community concerns. This took the form of refusing to conduct judicial reviews or more extensive environmental assessments upon request by communities, and ultimately choosing to approve projects despite opposition from communities.

Reflections:

One obstacle during this project is that throughout the whole duration, I felt as though I should be finding more cases of opposition, and that I must have been missing something big in my methods/ keywords. I feel that a big part of this is a personal bias- where I know that there are many communities opposed to extractivism and facing environmental justice struggles across so-called Canada, and so I was expecting to find a wealth of news articles about these struggles. This led me to spend a great deal of time using different combinations of keywords and coming up with the same results. I think there are a few reasons as to why I didn't find as many examples as I was expecting to: I think one is due to a limitation of the methods- I imagine there are many struggles that have not received news coverage and publicity, and some cases where communities resisting projects do not want publicity now. I also think that opposition can take different forms, including engaging in environmental assessment processes, participating in environmental committees organized by industry, as well as advocacy in opposition.

Broadly speaking, it was very inspiring to learn of communities resisting large corporations, and to see a variety of actions, from different ways of educating community members and the broader public about impacts of extractive industries, to occupying land and building community structures through occupations. Similarly, through the Land Back Project it was inspiring to see varied examples of Indigenous folks taking land back and various examples of settlers supporting the movement, from setting up land back tax mechanisms to donating land to Indigenous owned land trusts. This demonstrated a range of creative challenges to and small ways of changing so-called Canada's current economic model.

## Recommendations

Through this project, I provided a recommendation list of the top 20 environmental justice struggles for R4FL to prioritize supporting. I also provided a sheet of potential struggles to monitor over the next year.

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