

# Putting Nature First:

## Land Keepers and the Economy

Sustainable development comes with a price. That price continues to rise as we entertain conflicting interpretations of what *sustainable* development entails. Difficulties are exacerbated by the way in which the current climate crisis forces a distinctly complicated question of how we ought to balance the economy and ecology. Thus, this ‘price’ is beyond mere economics. Despite the scientific consensus regarding climate change and the need for ecological concerns to guide our investments, governments continue to prioritize economic interests. Such discrepancies impede our ability for decisive action and increase the damages wrought by climate change. For these reasons, we stand by the Wet’suwet’en landkeepers and promote the need for guardians of nature.

### A History of Neglect

Though we have been grappling with the climate crisis long before the 70’s, alarms were officially raised on the global stage in 1987, in the Brundtland Report “Our Common Future.” This report put forth a robust analysis of sustainable development, which entails “the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, sustainability means developing in a way that balances inter-generational concerns.

Indeed, inter-generational issues are now prominent in economic fora, which aim at combating the imbalance of economic power. As we know, these issues were raised when three thousand leaders from across the globe met at this year’s World Economic Forum in Davos to discuss sustainability. But in terms of the environment, they resolved little. The language and approach that was used further entrenched the challenges we face in securing a balance between the economy and the environment. It’s clear that nature remains in the backseat, as a mere resource or asset for the economy. The devastation of nature remains mere externalities. As a result, serious harm continues in the name of profit.

### Nature and the Economy

We need not look beyond Canada. We find ourselves on the frontlines of this conflict, where protests across the country—spearheaded by the hereditary chiefs of the Wet’suwet’en people—face off against the interests of a multi-billion dollar pipeline.

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<sup>1</sup> Commission, United Nations. “Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future.” 1987. Online: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>

It's easy to understand why. Supposing for a moment that the economy ought to be privileged, there remain alarming contradictions. An analysis of the Trans Mountain pipeline shows that a single spill puts at risk 200,000 jobs in the lower mainland of Vancouver alone. It's estimated that a single spill could result in a 43% loss of employment among coastal industries. This is not to mention tourism, port trade, and agricultural industries across the greater area of BC. Overall, a spill means an estimated 300,000 jobs are at risk for every 50 jobs created by the pipeline. For all this, BC might earn an extra 0.7% in corporate tax revenues and \$9.86 million per year. Then there is the cost of a clean up, which, based on past spills, can range from \$725 million to over \$41.6 billion. However, since cleanups are still ongoing it's impossible to tell the exact amount. Alarmingly, there has yet to be a guarantee regarding how much Kinder Morgan would cover such costs.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the risks associated with Coastal GasLink are different because they are meant to carry natural gas. Nonetheless, there remain risks of fires, explosions, and leaks, as well as threats to bird, mammal, and fish species. Most importantly, many argue that such risks are insufficiently studied, and that too much is at stake to take the chance for short term economic benefit.

However, we do know for sure that investing in the Coastal GasLink pipeline will increase the rate of human-induced climate change, which increases costs. Building the pipeline could increase our annual carbon pollution by up to four million tonnes.<sup>3</sup> It's estimated that the pipeline would transport up to five billion cubic feet of liquefied natural gas per day. If burned, this would result in 585.5 million pounds of CO<sub>2</sub> per day,<sup>4</sup> which would make it increasingly difficult for Canada to meet its climate agreements.

This will have significant costs. Antarctica recently reached its warmest temperature ever recorded, which means glaciers melting at higher speeds, and the threat of flooding is increased. This puts coastal regions, including major cities, at risk. Conservative flood maps strongly suggest that Richmond, Delta and parts of rural Abbotsford and Coquitlam will be permanently underwater by 2100. This puts *at least* 250,000 people at risk of becoming climate refugees in

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<sup>2</sup> Assessing the risks of Kinder Morgan's proposed new Trans Mountain pipeline. February 2013. Conversations for Responsible Economic Development. Online: <http://credbc.ca/assessing-the-risks/>

<sup>3</sup> Spriggs, Alastair. "B.C.'s emissions rising, figures show, as activists point finger at LNG." January 2019. Online: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/british-columbia/article-bcs-emissions-rising-figures-show-as-activists-point-finger-at/>.

<sup>4</sup> Hollarsmith, Jordan. "B.C. cannot afford the Coastal GasLink pipeline." January 2020. Online: <https://theprovince.com/opinion/jordan-hollarsmith-b-c-cannot-afford-the-coastal-gaslink-pipeline>.

the Vancouver area alone. The Tantramar Marsh in New Brunswick faces a similar fate, through which \$45 billion of trade passes each year.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, rising temperatures have caused the great lakes to reach their highest levels in over 100 years. Areas surrounding the great lakes will face the economic burden of mitigating the risks that come with.<sup>6</sup>

Flooding is only one of the threats, and the list is quite long. But it already seems like our attempts at balancing nature and the economy will prevent many from ever exercising their right, even their ability, to enjoy similar opportunity.

Thus, the Wet'suwet'en movement to protect nature is part of the greater conflict between economy and nature, and it further reveals the irrationality of privileging short term economic projects over the protection of nature. There is no doubt that the greatest asset to the economy is a healthy and stable environment. The cost of neglecting nature is clear, and the longer we wait to invest in sustainable energy, the higher the risks become.

### **Self-Determination**

But for the Wet'suwet'en, and for many, the pipeline threatens more than a balance between economy and nature. For them, nature is fundamental to their bicultural rights. Bulldozing a pipeline through the heart of their lands is synonymous with piercing through the heart of their culture. They understand not only their right, but their duty, as 'landkeepers'. This is why the issue is more than a matter of protesting the environmental risks of an economic project, it's more than a balance between economy and nature. It is an existential threat. It threatens their way of being and their right for self-determination. This is because the land, environment, and fellow species are sacred, and cannot be compared to other sorts of interests—they have value in their own right.

Importantly, their right to self-determination and duties as land keepers are recognized by the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP). Canada endorsed this declaration in 2010, and since then the BC legislature has adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act. Although BC's bill 41 doesn't necessarily grant the right to sue or to veto projects, it does suggest that building a pipeline without the hereditary chiefs' consent contradicts our Canadian values. Nonetheless, experts say that such bills reinforce the rights granted by Section 35 of the Canadian constitution, which guarantees treaty rights. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, many argue that colonial regulation carries no weight

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<sup>5</sup> Cain, Patrick. "Two Canadian places that could be under water in 100 years — or sooner." November 2017. Online: <https://globalnews.ca/news/3845545/how-climate-change-affects-canada/>.

<sup>6</sup> Radio-Canada. "Grands Lacs : le niveau des eaux le plus élevé depuis 100 ans." February 2020. Online: <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1511572/lac-huron-lac-ontario-precipitations-eau-douce>

on unceded territory.<sup>7</sup>

### **Where do we go from here?**

Our history of ineffective political posturing has failed to realize concrete solutions. It's not enough to hope that world leaders, who are torn between ecological and economic interests, will do the right thing. Climate predictions show that there is no time to be wavering between the two poles of ecology and economy.

Since climate change is a manifestation of the way in which we treat nature as a mere economical asset, a fundamental paradigm shift is needed. We need to replace the broken paradigm that maintains humans at the centre of the universe. In solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en, we need to recognize nature, rivers, forests, mountains, and species as living entities, as living environments, as subjects with rights beyond our own interests. This does not entail granting the entire scope of human rights to nature, but at least the rights to be protected, preserved, and represented before courts so that nature may be compensated for anthropogenic destruction on its own terms.

As a subject of rights, nature needs guardians to protect its existence and ensure that its needs are heard in light of risky projects such as pipelines. Such projects threaten the health of other species and the balance of nature as a whole. Furthermore, such projects jeopardize indigenous values by imposing on them the colonial ideals of an ever-growing economy. Moreover, they threaten our very ability to live in harmony with nature.

The Wet'suwet'en community already seems to act as guardians of nature, invoking not only nature's right to be preserved, but their own biocultural rights that should be protected, rights that are inextricably linked to the right to self-determination.

For these reasons, we support the Wet'suwet'en in their fight as 'Landkeepers'. As such, we insist that the best solution is to recognize the rights of nature and implement guardians with power, decisive voices, and budgets that enable them to protect such rights. This is a powerful way to establish a safe balance between ecology and economy. Guardians would ensure that "Sustainable development" harmonizes with our natural surroundings and respects the dignity and political structure of indigenous communities and the interests of future generations.

As the UN Environment Program Executive Director Inger Andersen said, "2020 is a year for urgency, ambition, and action to address the crisis facing nature; it is also an opportunity to more fully incorporate nature-based solutions into global climate action."<sup>8</sup> But in order to balance ecology and economy we must value nature more than the fantasy of an ever-growing

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<sup>7</sup> Last, John. "What does 'implementing UNDRIP' actually mean?" November 2019. Online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/implementing-undrip-bc-nwt-1.5344825>

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, Inger. "Colombia to host 2020 World Environment Day on biodiversity." January 2020. Online: <https://www.unenvironment.org/cep/news/editorial/colombia-host-2020-world-environment-day-biodiversity>.

economy, and we can secure such value through the power of legal guardians. Guardians would ensure that we follow the lead of the Convention on Biological Diversity as stated in their comprehensive vision of “Living in Harmony with Nature.” They would enforce the recognition of nature as a subject with rights—and not merely as an asset of the Economy. Enforcing the rights of nature will empower nature as a partner, as an equal, and as a stakeholder. Only then will there be a decisive voice among the faltering world leaders. Only then will we see a real change around the world and secure a healthy future for all.