



## **Obama Keystone Pipeline Decision**

**Carl Safina**

First released at Huffington Post on January 24, 2012

When President Obama decided not to let the Keystone oil pipeline proceed, I sent a message of thanks to the White House. And I sent Bill McKibben, with whom it's been my honor to have an occasional email correspondence, a message of exuberant congratulations. Obama's 'no' was the right answer. But I think he was given the wrong question. Let me explain.

First, for the record, was great to see McKibben's group, 350.org, organize protests and energize people. For too long, the country has sleepwalked through many events that should have provoked rage enough to bring massive demonstrations to D.C. and elsewhere. So, though I was frustrated by a schedule that precluded my traveling to D.C. and joining in, I reveled in the renewed awakening. And I agreed with the "rightness" of the protest: Canada is making a mess of the region containing the tar sands from which this dirty oil gets made. We need clean energy, not dirtier energy. So we should say no to it.

And of course, congressional Republicans cynically stuck the wholly unrelated rider about the oil pipeline on a bill extending benefits to people who can't find jobs, rushing the president's decision. Obama had told them that if they did that, he'd reject the pipeline. They did; he did. The pipeline warranted full review, so bravo to the president for saying, in effect, "If you won't let me do it right, the answer will be no."

But for me, an uncomfortable feeling lingered.

Even if the Keystone pipeline never gets built, it's pretty certain that Canada will still cut down those forests above the tar sands, dig the place up, pollute the rivers, and sell dirty oil -- to someone. Maybe to the U.S., maybe to China. Who knows. Either way, assuming the Canadians proceed, the environmental damage will get done. So, because I'm not sure what really got accomplished, the victory felt hollow.

But here's what's more troubling: environmentalists always seem to be saying no. As a professional environmentalist, that's a bit painful. Saying no is one reason we're frustrated with Congress. You don't lead by saying no. I don't want us to be mainly a brake on things. I remember when the environmental movement was more often an accelerator.

To lead, you need something to say 'yes' about. You need vision. And a strategy to see the vision through. Too frequently, we in the environmental community come off as having objections, but no vision. We slow things down more than we speed things up. We need a vision that provides direction.

To be fair, I think the environmental groups have had the needed vision and the solutions -- but not the needed spiritual leadership, media skills, public stature, organizing skills, and the ability to mobilize. The environmental movement needs both things: strategic sophistication and visible, positive energy. The public energy that will come out and get visible had been lacking for years before the Keystone protests (and coincidentally, Occupy Wallstreet). Strategy and sophistication have been there, in offices and board rooms -- but they've been invisible.

We need not just a vision, but also the energy and willingness to make that vision visible. We need to share it, to generate excitement, to get behind positive directions, and once again build a swelling movement that is not just against bad stuff, but overwhelmingly in favor of positive change.

We need to support positive solutions and alternatives. We need people circling the White House for policies friendly to alternative energies. If we don't want dirty energy, for instance, we need carbon pricing to reflect the damage coal, oil, and gas do. As it is now, it's financially attractive to risk the whole planet. Visible support for alternatives would make it easier to press positively for carbon pricing strategies, such as cap-and-trade, or a carbon tax, that reflect the true costs of fossil fuels and thereby strike at the root of the problem. If that happened, proposals like tar sands development would just look bad; they'd be unattractive.

As any movement matures it becomes less spiritual, less revolutionary. As the spiritual leaders pass, the effort to implement their vision goes to technocrats who understand how to work the nuts and bolts of policy. And we need them. But I'd like to see the big environmental groups also organize their millions of paying members to get out, get counted, and make a little noise. But we need to generate visible public excitement not just about what could be stopped, but about what we need to create, and what can positively be accomplished.

It's easier to say, "No." But do you remember, "Yes We Can"? It's an attractive approach, isn't it?