

Engineering and Science Experts Needed to Assist Young People

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There is a request from Lansing, Michigan for expert assistance in trials of young protestors who blocked reconstruction of a pipeline that caused a major oil spill. They want to use the necessity defense, their actions being required to protect the environment and their own future. Expertise needed: (1) engineers with knowledge about pipeline risk and reliability, (2) scientists with knowledge of climate change that could be caused by tar sands development.

I am willing to help in the climate science aspect of such cases, but more local experts could be effective. Our [recent paper](#) and the IPCC reports provide a rationale for why unconventional fossil fuels should not be developed and likely will harm the future of young people. An [amicus brief](#) that several colleagues and I submitted in another case is an example of testimony.

If you are in Michigan and have relevant expertise the contact is Kathy Murphy murphyklh05@yahoo.com

I do not claim to know the best tactics, legal and otherwise, for protecting the rights of young people, and ultimately they must make their own decisions. However, I have a few comments.

(1) It seems better to be on offense than defense. Young people can sue governments, industry or individuals for violating their rights. The “trust doctrine” described in Mary Wood’s new book “Nature’s Trust” is the basis of suits filed by Our Children’s Trust; the above amicus brief is in support of the case filed against the federal government. I believe guarantees of “equal rights” and “due process” in the Constitution apply to young people as a class and are relevant to human-made climate change, which has become a clear case of intergenerational injustice; these fundamental rights could be the basis for forcing government actions. Another possibility is suggested by the fact that it is a crime in many states for one to wittingly take action that one knew or should have known may harm other people. Thus young people could inform fossil fuel industry CEOs that their activities will have devastating effects. The resulting threat that the CEOs could be subject to criminal prosecution might have a beneficial effect. CEOs who allocated funds to discredit climate science would seem particularly vulnerable to prosecution.

(2) I do not advise young people to get arrested, even though I have been arrested in protests against activities such as mountaintop removal and tar sands development. My aim, as an older person willing to accept the consequences, is to draw attention to an unjust situation or policy. Our government has shown that it is ready to heavily punish illegal acts, even if those acts are justified on moral grounds, as shown by the Tim DeChristopher case. It seems that this situation will not change much as long as the number of young people standing up remains small.

(3) Young people and others need to understand that actions to stop a specific activity, such as mountaintop removal or tar sands development, even if successful, will be stopgap successes. These fossil fuels will be developed eventually if they seem to be the cheapest energy source. Our principal objective should be to make fossil fuels pay their costs to society. Therefore a specific recommendation to young people is to use the democratic process, e.g., by joining Citizens Climate Lobby (citizensclimatelobby.org), which has the objective of informing the public and politicians of the need for a rising carbon fee with the funds distributed to the public on a per capita basis. You can start your own chapter. The democratic process, flawed as it has become, can still work, and should at least be the first approach. CCL members write op-eds, letters-to-the-editor, visit lawmakers. Marshall Saunders, the founder of CCL, uses pretty much the Gandhi approach, nonviolence, respect and love of the opposition, but tough-minded determination. It is encouraging that CCL is growing rapidly. I have written about CCL in prior communications and will do so more, but I must also complete a long-overdue science paper and “Sophie’s Planet”, which I hope will help make these matters clear to more people.

I’m not sure I want to be a coordinator finding scientific assistance for legal cases, but we must support young people when they stand up for their rights and for the other life on our planet. While our governments continue to allow and even subsidize accelerating fossil fuel emissions, we cannot ignore young people who have had the courage to protest. If you are in the Michigan area and willing to testify, let me know or contact Kathy Murphy murphyklh05@yahoo.com.