

# PhD Research Proposal

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“First Nations, with our constitutionally protected aboriginal and treaty rights, are Canadians’ last best hope to protect the lands, waters, plants, and animals from complete destruction – which doesn’t just benefit our children, but the children of all Canadians.”

— Pamela Palmater<sup>1</sup>

“The determination of indigenous peoples in this country and elsewhere to protect Mother Earth is indomitable and I have no doubt that in the end they will prevail.”

— Dimitri Lascaris<sup>2</sup>

This PhD research project will examine the politics of climate change in Canada and the United States, focusing on the civil society movements that have arisen in response to proposed oil pipelines originating in the bituminous sands of Alberta. Both longstanding and new (climate-focused) environmental non-governmental organizations have been a prominent part of this movement, along with faith groups and aboriginal organizations. This project will examine the origins of the movement, the objectives and strategic decisions that have been developed so far, and the relationships between the elements that comprise opposition to pipelines overall. In particular, this project will focus on the relationships between environmental groups and

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<sup>1</sup>Palmater, “We are We Idle No More?”, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup>Lascaris, *University of Toronto Divestment Lecture*.

aboriginal groups: identifying places where their objectives and strategies overlap, as well as where they differ. It will also seek to gain perspective on the effectiveness of the movement in achieving political outcomes by studying the policy-making individuals and bodies that have been the target of each campaign.

In addition to satisfying the University of Toronto's requirements for a PhD thesis, this research has an intended audience that includes academics, policy-makers, and activists.

## 1 Research question

This project will seek to understand why the movement opposing pipelines has come together, and what implications it may have for climate and energy policy in North America. In particular, it will compare the civil society movement against pipelines with relevant past movements, and will examine the relationships between the different major groups within the coalition.

For environmental groups, the principal rationale on stopping pipelines is to reduce the total quantity of Canada's bitumen sands which end up being extracted, sold, and burned. Other environmental concerns have also borne upon public discussion of both pipelines, including the danger of spills, and impacts on habitat and species. The basic argument that not all of the Earth's fossil fuels can be used without causing dangerous climate change has not yet become a serious part of the federal political conversation in Canada or the United States. No major Canadian political party supports the phase-out of activity in the oil sands, and American policy is similarly structured around continuing and expanded fossil fuel production. If avoiding dangerous climate change requires major policy changes, the objectives currently held by environmental groups will need to become politically mainstream.

The mechanism through which that could take place — and, in particular, the influence of the anti-pipelines movement — is of interest in both practical and theoretical terms. Practically, the energy decisions made in North America will influence how much total climate change occurs, including insofar as they will affect decisions made elsewhere. Theoretically, such a transition is interesting in terms of the process through which a robust *status quo* that strongly favours some individuals can be overcome. Parallels which may have some relevance for understanding this process include the women's and gay rights movements, the civil rights movement, and the abolition of

slavery.

Many of those opposed to the development of major new fossil fuel projects have identified the legal rights of aboriginal groups in Canada and the United States as a promising mechanism for resistance. This connection has also been recognized by aboriginal groups and authors. For instance, in their account of the Idle No More movement, the Kino-nda-niimi Collective identifies — as one of three main objectives of the movement — “The repeal of significant sections of the Canadian federal government’s omnibus legislation (Bills C-38 and C-45) and specifically parts relating to the exploitation of the environment, water, and First Nations territories”.<sup>3</sup> The recent Supreme Court of Canada *Tsilhqot’in* decision adds to the importance of aboriginal rights in responding to environmental issues.

While many aboriginal groups and much of the writing of aboriginal individuals highlights environmentalism and respect toward nature as long-standing values, there are also conflicts that have arisen with environmentalists. In some cases, these conflicts are essentially pragmatic: as when members of a community wish to benefit financially from resource extraction which others see as damaging. Sometimes, disagreement is more philosophical, or based on the view that the environmental movement wishes to take advantage of the rights of aboriginals to achieve outcomes that may not be in their interests. By seeking direct comment on these issues from a wide variety of individuals associated with aboriginal groups, a richer understanding of patterns of conflict and cooperation between environmentalists and aboriginals may be obtained.

Similarly, the involvement of faith groups in the anti-pipelines movement is of interest for several reasons. It will help to illuminate how coalitions in which different factions vary in their presuppositions, objectives, and favoured tactics function. It also increases the scope for historical comparison with major past social movements, which have also included major participation from faith groups.

## 2 Methodology

The principal sources of data for this project will be documentary sources and interviews.

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<sup>3</sup>The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, *The Winter We Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*, p. 22.

The former will include the published statements of environmental, faith, and aboriginal groups — as well as publications from governments and pipeline corporations. This material will be examined to identify areas of agreement and disagreement in terms of objectives, large-scale strategies, and tactical decisions. Generally-speaking, these materials should be accessible from Toronto, though there may be cases where accessing archives elsewhere would be worthwhile. This applies particularly to documents from the federal governments of Canada and the United States, and potentially to provincial government documents.

Interviews will be conducted both remotely and in person. Developing a schedule of who is to be interviewed will occur first with reference to published materials, and additionally by branching out to interview people recommended by earlier subjects. Ultimately, the project will include travel to areas where opposition to the TransCanada Keystone XL pipeline has been active, between Alberta and the Gulf of Mexico, and where opposition to the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline has been active in British Columbia, possibly including the Unist’ot’en camp. Prominent members of both movements will be contacted and hopefully interviewed from Toronto before the travel part of the research, and are expected to serve as an important mechanism for identifying who to interview during those trips.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed and used as a supplement to the documentary sources for analysis.

### 3 Sources:

## References

- Lascaris, Dimitri. *University of Toronto Divestment Lecture*. 2014. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWHPvQ16j9w>.
- Palmater, Pamela. “We are We Idle No More?” In: *The Winter We Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*. Ed. by The Kino-nda-niimi Collective. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2014.
- The Kino-nda-niimi Collective. *The Winter We Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2014.