Environmental Justice Coalition Building in Virginia: The Fight Against the ACP

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ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COALITION BUILDING IN VIRGINIA: THE FIGHT AGAINST THE ACP

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Anthropology)

The Honors College
University of Maine
August 2022

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study utilized snowball sampling and semi-structured interviews in order to understand environmental coalition building in Virginia during 2014-2020, a critical time during which activists came together to resist the Atlantic Coast Pipeline (ACP). Grass-roots activism has proven to be one of the most important elements in efforts to resist fossil fuel infrastructure such as the ACP. Understanding how activists with different perspectives can come together in common cause to form a successful environmental justice coalition will help future movements advance policies to limit the effects of climate change and promote the cause of environmental justice.
This thesis is dedicated to my family and to my committee. First, I want to thank my parents, Katie and Lee, for your unending support, advice and knowledge throughout the whole writing process. Without you I would have been without a topic to research and without a plethora of sources to consult. Next, I want to thank my girlfriend, Ashwini, for supporting me and seeing me through to the end of this. I don’t think I could have finished this without your encouragement. I especially want to thank my godparents, Tim and John for your last-minute support. Without your help I would not have been able to finish this. Finally, I want to thank my advisor Dr. Ranco, and my entire thesis committee, Dr. Beitl, Prof. Ellis, Dr. Isenhour, and Dr. Neuman, for your immense patience and understanding. I am forever grateful to you for standing with me through this.
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INTRODUCTION

Environmental Justice is a re-evaluation of, and extension to, environmentalism that incorporates a concern for social justice and reconsiders the environment as inclusive of the built environments occupied by humans. Today, grassroots coalitions are a vital part of both the scholarship on, and advocacy for environmental justice.

This study aims to illuminate the reasons why activists and activist organizations would seek out a coalition, along with the protocols and strategies that allowed the coalition to hold together despite hosting a diverse array of constituents from a wide range of racial, economic, and political backgrounds, across a large area. It focuses on an environmental justice coalition that formed to oppose the construction of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline (ACP), which was planned to transport natural gas from West Virginia to export terminals in North Carolina and Virginia.

Previous research, particularly that performed on other grassroots environmental justice coalitions opposing similar pipeline projects in other parts of North America, has shown that despite the potential for these coalitions to be effective movements for change, they are often sites of friction between and within constituent groups, which require active and persistent effort to maintain. Lessons learned from both the successes and failures of other coalitions have begun to inform the opposition to fossil fuel infrastructure which continues to be constructed across the continent. As the opposition to the Atlantic Coast Pipeline (ACP) was particularly successful in both coalition building and fighting the pipeline, there is the potential for valuable information to be
brought forward from the stories of the people who took part in it. 2

I conducted semi-structured interviews to record and analyze the experiences of key activists and organizers involved in this work. The activists highlighted three key parts of their strategy, (1) Using the expertise and resources of existing activist networks and large interest groups to quickly construct a skilled opposition to the ACP, (2) a commitment to fostering a diverse and robust array of local interest groups to advocate for communities on a local level that were capable of approaching the larger problem of the ACP from a wide range of different angles, and (3) maintaining strong information networks and regular forums to coordinate actions across larger geographical areas.
The Atlantic Coast pipeline (ACP) was a natural gas pipeline that was originally planned to transport gas from the Marcellus and Utica Shale deposits in West Virginia to

Figure 1. (N.C. Protests Target Atlantic Coast Pipeline, 2016)
end terminals in North Carolina and Virginia where it could then be exported abroad (Foley et al., 2021, p. 3). The problem with the pipeline is that it would have cut right through the heart of both states, impacting thousands of communities along the way. It also would have passed through several environmentally protected areas, including national forests and the Shenandoah National Park (3 N.C. Protests Target Atlantic Coast Pipeline, 2016).

The ACP was a project of Dominion Energy, one of the largest utility companies in the United States and suffered from all of the problems that are typical of such pipelines (Finley-Brook et al., 2018, p. 176). Like similar pipelines, the ACP stood to bring little economic benefit to the communities along its route, forcing them to assume the majority of the negative impacts of the pipeline. Furthermore, a disproportionately large number of African Americans and indigenous peoples lived in the path of the pipeline. Over 30,000 indigenous people lived within a single mile of the pipeline’s route in North Carolina alone (Phillips et al., 2016 & Finley-Brook et al., 2018, p. 185).

None of these issues are unique to the ACP. Natural gas and oil pipelines like the ACP are some of the most economically important, environmentally damaging, and publicly controversial pieces of public infrastructure in North America. There has been a surge in the construction of pipelines like the ACP as a way of modernizing American energy infrastructure. They are designed to meet an increased demand for energy while replacing coal as the primary source of fossil energy (Foley et al., 2021, p. 1-2). The pipeline system can broadly be thought of in two categories. First is the network of pipelines that cross international borders, like the Dakota Access and Keystone XL
pipelines, which are high profile and have achieved some level of infamy over the past ten years. And second is the domestic pipeline system, of which the ACP was supposed to be a part.

The literature is clear on the dangers that come with oil and gas pipelines, leading to habitat fragmentation and spills of toxic chemicals (Caretta & McHenry, 2020, p. 2). Habitat fragmentation and spills of toxic chemicals are just two of the impacts that pipelines have on the environment, and yet in West Virginia alone an estimated 2246 stream sections and 860 wetlands have been affected by pipelines which cross them (Caretta & McHenry, 2020, p. 2). For the communities pipelines pass through, people report much higher rates of eye and skin irritation, respiratory illnesses and cancer than is normal (Finley-Brook et al., 2018, p. 180-181). This is especially true for vulnerable, rural, and marginalized communities, who face the worst of the negative effects from exposure to pipelines, because dangerous infrastructure like pipelines are disproportionately sited in or near their lands and communities (Caretta & McHenry, 2020, p. 4; Emanuel, 2017, p. 260; Finley-Brook et al., 2018, p. 185). Furthermore, affected communities only rarely gain any significant benefits from the presence of pipelines that might offset the harms they experience. Many rural people who live along the path of the pipelines do not have access to natural gas to use in their homes, and the economic value of the pipelines accrue almost entirely to out of state interests (Caretta & McHenry, 2020, p. 3). The anti-ACP movement was ultimately successful, however. After several years of organizing and protest from activists, Dominion Energy formally announced the projects’ cancellation in 2019 (Penn, 2020).
For more than twenty years, much of the scholarship on these coalitions conceptualizes grassroots coalitions as operating under a new pluralist paradigm (Schlosberg, 1999). That is, these coalitions embody pluralist ideals, in that they bring together a plurality of different groups to work towards a common good based on shared experiences, dangers, or concerns (Schlosberg, 1999). This is distinct from the more classic pluralist activism of the late twentieth century, which was dominated by singular, large, interest groups that represented a broad constituency. Examples of this include Greenpeace, WWF, and the Sierra Club. The large size of these organizations often prevents them from adequately representing all of their many members, and minority constituencies have often been ignored or taken advantage of. The diversity of grassroots coalitions allows them to sidestep many of the ways in which the large pluralist interest groups of the twentieth century failed to adequately advocate for their many constituents, or even contributed to their continued marginalization (Schlosberg, 1999).

Over the past two decades a number of influential grassroots environmental justice coalitions have provided valuable case studies on how grassroots coalitions operate in practice. In particular, the alliance of rural white communities with indigenous groups has become a model for Environmental Coalitions (Derman, 2020, pp. 151–182; Grossman & LaDuke, 2017).

However, it should be noted that maintaining an effective and cohesive coalition is often a challenging prospect, especially when political, racial, or cultural differences
exist between different constituent groups (Cole, 2008). These differences require activists to carefully maintain the health of their coalition over the course of months or years (Grossman & LaDuke, 2017). A good understanding of what motivates the various constituents of environmental justice coalitions is an important factor in these considerations, and is necessary for ensuring healthy cooperation within and between groups. This study intends to contribute to an understanding of how coalition EJ movements are built and maintained.
METHODOLOGY

Study Design

Seven individual, semi-structured interviews with key activist organizers formed the basis of the study. This allowed for a wider lens of enquiry during this critical discovery phase of the research, while ensuring that all interviews share a common structure. This was done in the hopes of revealing unexpected experiences and themes which could not be revealed by a more rigidly structured interview. The Interviews all lasted between approximately 45 and 60 minutes in length and were conducted using Zoom. Audio transcriptions were then produced and coded using the Otter.ai analysis software. After the initial findings were produced they were shared with participants to allow them to voice any concerns or make suggestions, and help shape the final conclusions of the research.

This study used purposeful sampling in order to build on the collaborative networks established during the active period of pipeline resistance, which lasted for approximately six years, between 2014 and 2020. Beginning by approaching a small number of key activists and organizers, I asked if they were able to recommend any additional people with whom I should speak. By the end of the research period, I had interviewed seven individuals drawn from a wide variety of geographic locations across Virginia, as well as a diverse array of activist organizations. This was done to ensure that a sufficient diversity of voices were present and able to represent key constituencies in the anti-ACP movement (Maxwell, 2013, p. 235). This diversity also helped gain a greater
depth of understanding of the dynamics in play within a wider range of individual activist organizations as well as broader coalition.

The individuals who took part in this research were all drawn from the area around the Atlantic Coast Pipeline’s route from West Virginia to the coastal port of Norfolk, Virginia. The bulk of this region is in central Virginia, in the area made up of Albemarle, Augusta, Buckingham, Highland and Nelson counties. These counties were at the heart of resistance efforts and span the eastern Alleghenies, the Blue Ridge Mountains, and the central lowlands of the state.

However the small sample size and the lack of access to certain key communities due to research fatigue among the interviewees limits the applicability and generalizability of the information in this study. Many of the activists I interviewed, along with the rest of their communities, had received a great deal of attention from both other researchers and journalists as a result of their activism. Speaking to a student researcher years after the ACP was canceled was not an enticing prospect for many people. In addition, the lack of validity checks in this research calls into question the reliability of the data that was gathered. A focus group among the interviewees was planned, but a combination of logistical issues and the aforementioned research fatigue made this impractical at the current time. Overall, it is difficult to say that the activists I spoke to were able to give a complete picture of the anti-ACP movement.

Positionality

Beyond the interviews I conducted and the literature I reviewed, this study also
draws on a great deal of personal experience. Central Virginia was my home for several years during the fight against the ACP, which myself and my family were deeply involved with. For almost four years our family attended events and meetings, took part in protests, spoke at hearings, lobbied the state legislature, and were involved in almost every other aspect of the movement. Many of the people I interviewed for this study I had met previously during this activism experience, the rest I knew second hand. As a result, the process of researching the events surrounding the ACP, and speaking to the people who defeated it, has also been a process of self reflection, of rediscovering and rethinking events, experiences, and memories that I remember well.

It is inevitable that my implication and involvement in my research subject will color my analysis and conclusions. However, it also allows me a degree of insight that may be valuable. My status as an “insider” to the movement certainly granted me access to information and perspectives that are not easily available. One activist said outright that my history as a participant in the anti-ACP movement was the only reason she agreed to speak to me at all.

Ultimately however, this work is not intended to focus on myself as a subject of analysis. Rather, it is intended to discuss how the activists who lived with and struggled against the Atlantic Coast Pipeline organized and acted with each other, as they saw it. The experiences of these activists form the core of the study, and the stories they told are used to draw conclusions regarding both the particular environment they acted within as well as the processes by which they built and maintained a successful coalition for environmental justice (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13, Maxwell, 2012, p. 221).
The anti-ACP movement in Virginia was, from its inception, very decentralized. Different activist groups emerged in different parts of the state largely independent of each other. Most such groups emerged from a particular community that was impacted by the pipeline in some way, particularly in rural parts of the state. Parallel to these community groups, activists from the same communities sometimes formed their own, separate, advocacy groups in the same area. These ranged from small collectives of landowners to student activist groups. The size and activities of a given group varied widely, but they typically acted independently to advocate for their communities’ specific interests.

The first major activist organizations that were formed with the specific goal of opposing the ACP were founded before the ACP had even been given its name. They grew out of older environmental activist networks that had been operating for decades focused on issues surrounding resource extraction, habitat preservation, and environmental protection. In particular, the anti-fracking activist movement that emerged in West Virginia during the fracking boom that immediately preceded the planning of the ACP was very influential on the early formations of the anti-ACP movement. The legal justifications that allowed for mountaintop removal in West Virginia were very similar to those that allow for the construction of pipelines like the ACP. One activist that was interviewed explained how Wild Virginia, one of the earliest groups to oppose the ACP, organized “field trips” to West Virginia so that anti-pipeline activists could learn from the more established anti-fracking activists. Given both how similar the two legal
environments were, as well as the close geographic proximity, it was a natural partnership.

This was one of the closest connections between the anti-ACP movement and other environmental activists. Even connections with the broader anti-pipeline movement were more sporadic and tenuous. Activists fighting different pipelines would occasionally meet and swap stories or strategies, or else travel to events and rallies as shows of solidarity. One example of this that multiple participants in this study pointed to was when a number of activists from Bold Nebraska spoke at an event in Virginia.

In these early days of the movement, it was both smaller, without the degree of support from local communities it would benefit from later on, and closely followed in the ideological traditions of traditional American environmentalism. The membership of the anti-ACP movement was, at this time, made up solely of those with connections to pre-existing environmental activist networks, or who were members of national organizations like the Sierra Club. The ACP was not widely known at this point in time, and these were the people who had the connections to hear about it, and the experience and knowledge to understand both the importance of fighting it as well as how to actually do so.

The anti-ACP movement did not remain so small for long. One of the early activists that participated in this study who had been an environmental activist for almost forty years, explained how the outreach and publicization efforts of the campaign against the ACP were much more successful than any of the other environmental causes he had worked on before. In his words,
“When you're working on national forest issues, it's really hard to get an audience, but because of Dominion, and because of their reach, and because of fracking, and because of eminent domain, and because there were so many issues in this, the audience was extremely broad. And people were coming to us to find out. And so as much as we were trying to get the word out, publicize it, get into magazines, periodicals, online, whatever it was to let people know what was going on. People were finding out and wondering what was going on and getting a hold of us. So it made the networking and the organizing - not an insurmountable task, as it had been for many of the stuff that I've been involved with previously”.

As this activist stated, this large number of people who were interested in getting involved in fighting the ACP, even beyond what established activists had experienced before, was because of the wide range of issues the ACP touched on. It brought together traditional environmentalists, investigative journalists interested in corporate or government corruption, local newspapers, people working in a variety of industries reliant on natural resources, land owners directly impacted by the Pipeline, racial justice activists, and more. This broad spectrum of people together formed the basis for the environmental justice coalition that made up the anti-ACP movement. They were concerned both with the damages the ACP would cause to the more-than-human world, in the traditional environmentalist sense, as well as the harms that it would cause to the humans and the places they lived, worked, and played.

Organized Groups

One grassroots community activist group that formed very early in the anti-ACP movement was Friends of Nelson, which was one of the first grassroots groups to be founded, and set out a basic model for similar groups from the beginning. Friends of Nelson was a grassroots organization in the sparsely populated Nelson County, which the ACP cut directly through, and was founded by a group of Nelson County residents which included both experienced environmental activists as well as people who had never been
involved in any activism before. Over the course of the fight against the ACP groups representing a county or town, many of whom borrowed Friends of Nelson’s name scheme, appeared. This was intentional, Friends of Nelson had strong connections to other counties and made a concerted effort to assist activists in those communities in building their own activist groups to focus on the unique issues they faced.

Friends of Nelson was well funded through community donations, the personal finances of members, and assistance from established professional organizations like the Sierra Club, and invested a large amount of funds early on, in order to hire economic consultants to assess the economic impacts that the pipeline would have had on Nelson County. Shortly after, they did the same in Highland, Augusta, and Buckingham counties, which were all along the ACP’s route. At the same time, they invested in a database to “disseminate information, get donations, [and] log things”. In the process, they became closely connected to a large number of people from across the state who were interested in opposing the ACP. By engaging with, and providing support to the people in those communities, Friends of Nelson helped other activist groups form that advocated for those counties in the same way Friends of Nelson was doing in Nelson county.

While this was happening, a collection of the first anti-ACP activist groups, Friends of Nelson among them, founded an umbrella organization. Called the Allegheny Blue Ridge Alliance (ABRA), it was intended to coordinate actions on a larger scale and enable more efficient sharing of resources and information. ABRA played an important role in the anti-ACP movement, and boasted almost a hundred constituent member
groups spread throughout Virginia, but mostly concentrated in Nelson, Buckingham, Augusta, and Highland counties.

Both ABRA and the county groups that nucleated around Friends of Nelson emerged from two key understandings. One activist who spoke to me articulated this as, “there was always this idea at the very beginning that we needed to have one organization... that would fight this and nothing else and totally focus on it... But the diversity of opponents with a diversity of interests and a diversity of strategies and a diversity of opportunities and audiences was something that was going to be important too.” A commitment to both a diverse coalition and to a unified, closely coordinated, and highly organized movement might seem contradictory but it was a key strategy that was employed by the anti-ACP coalition. It allowed local people to independently organize in their own communities without interference, and to mobilize around the particular problems they faced, while also maintaining the ability to organize on a larger scale by binding these disparate groups together with sophisticated information networks and forums like ABRA. The monofocus that ABRA had on the pipeline was also vital. While local interest groups may be concerned with any number of issues affecting their communities, which may not even be related to the ACP, ABRA ensured that there was always forward momentum opposing the pipeline.

The diverse array of organizations that made up the anti-ACP coalition organized themselves in a number of different ways. There were dozens, if not hundreds, of different activist organizations that worked to oppose the ACP at different times and places, and the precise details of their organizational structures had an almost endless
number of permutations. These organizational styles varied dramatically, from the relatively rigid hierarchies of large NGOs, to loose associations of concerned individuals. Out of these different organizational structures, certain models did emerge.

Particularly influential groups which inspired others to follow in their footsteps, and models for both professional environmental interest groups and community action organizations have been well established for many years now. National or international organizations like the Sierra Club and the Southern Environmental Law Center have well established organizational hierarchies and a large, paid, staff.

Grassroots community action organizations also have a long history, and the early activist groups in Virginia drew on the expertise of veteran environmentalists from both within the state and across the country to build effective organizations. One particularly early model for these organizations was Friends of Nelson. Friends of Nelson’s active participation in building other grassroots organizations in other parts of the state, as well as their position as perhaps the best funded and most active grassroots organization to oppose the ACP, quickly made them a model for others to follow.

**Friends of Augusta**

There are other ways of structuring an advocacy group however, and many activists across the state built organizations that functioned very differently, often to better serve their local conditions. One particularly notable example of this was Friends of Augusta, which grew out of a single Facebook page that was made by a concerned resident of Augusta County. The small organizational overhead allowed the group to maintain an extremely small staff, with the majority of the activities mentioned above
being performed by one part-time activist. Especially in comparison to other groups active in the anti-ACP movement, which often had paid staff, sometimes in large numbers, Friends of Augusta was remarkably small. This facebook page became the main hub of anti-ACP organizing in the area. There was no membership list, no formal hierarchy, and little to no funding of any kind. Meetings of the group were posted ahead of time on the facebook page, and anyone with the time, ability, and inclination could attend if they wanted. Meetings occurred regularly, at least once a week, and typically involved some kind of public protest. The organizer of the facebook page also persistently sought out media attention for the group’s activities, in order to increase their exposure to the general public, with good effect. Reporters quickly became a reliable fixture at most public meetings of Friends of Augusta.

More than just the practical limits of what can be done with limited time and few resources, the free-flowing style of activist organizing Friends of Augusta used became a deliberate strategy, as well as an ideological statement. It allowed people to give what they could to the cause, within the limits of what they were able given their jobs, family lives, disabilities, etc. As one activist put it, “if you've got somebody that has a different ability and might not be able to walk or get themselves to a protest and stand for hours. They might be more apt to be at home on the computer doing research on writing letters to the editor.”

Along with being an accessibility feature, the flexibility and casualness also allowed Friends of Augusta to incorporate people who did not want to be known as activists, but who still cared about the ACP. In the communities in which Friends of
Augusta was active, “activist is a bad word to some people.” This was true of many who participated in the activist work themselves, as well as others in the community who weren’t involved in the anti-ACP movement. In particular, the potential for retaliation from employers, who may have seen activists as liabilities or troublemakers was a concern that prevented some people from joining the movement. So the ability to participate at a polite distance, without being labeled as an activist, was key to building a local coalition. Friends of Augusta met people who felt this way where they were. Rather than trying to change their perceptions of activism and activists, they framed participating in the anti-ACP movement in other terms, focusing on the specific issues at hand, rather than more general, ideological concerns.

This allowed Friends of Augusta to incorporate people who would otherwise have been unlikely to take action against the ACP, and both membership and attendance were very high, and quite diverse in terms of both class and political affiliation. Their first major rally attracted a crowd in the hundreds. Lots of publicity brought in people who may not have heard about the issue or about the group, while both the low barrier to entry for people looking to participate, as well as the regular, frequent events made it relatively easy for people to fit activist work into their schedule and allowed Friends of Augusta to bring people into the movement who may have practically or physically been excluded otherwise. At the same time, Friends of Augusta’s singular focus on the ACP, without veering off into any other political issues, and the opportunities they arranged to participate without ‘participating’ enabled them to bring in people who would have been excluded for political reasons.
The group’s success was not just because of these strategies. One organizer explained that the pipeline issue was one many people in the area already felt passionate about, and the same organizing techniques might not have had the same impact if they had organized around a different issue. “On the pipeline issue, people just were banging down the doors to show up to do something. So it really wasn't that hard to organize people. People were really looking for someone to just kind of lead the charge.”

The organizers behind Friends of Augusta aimed to bring as many people as possible into the movement. In order to achieve this they made bringing a socially and politically diverse constituency into the movement a key goal. All of the noteworthy strategies and structures (or lack thereof) that set Friends of Augusta apart from more conventional groups were implemented with this strategy in mind. The careful adjustments they made to the presentation of their language and messaging to avoid alienating possible allies show this principle in action. Moreover, the success of these strategies speaks to the ability of activist coalitions to adapt their methods to local conditions. The structures of groups like Friends of Nelson were also successful in their own right, but the constituencies they represented, largely rural, white, landowners, were very different from the more diverse group of rural and urban communities in Augusta County.

**Group Organization**

Like the ways activist groups organized themselves, the methods they used also
varied across the state. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the decentralized nature of the anti-ACP coalition. Different activist groups tended to prefer different methods than others based on their particular circumstances, locations, and the expertise of their members. Professional groups with better access to funding and highly educated, experienced, and skilled personnel were much more likely to focus on legal challenges or attempts to influence state politics, for example, while grassroots organizations might prefer public demonstrations, citizen science, letter campaigns, direct action, or other strategies that don’t require undue amounts of resources or technical expertise.

There were differences in methods even between grassroots however. Furthermore individual groups would vary their tactics to fit the time and place. One activist emphasized that their particular group would change the tone of their demonstrations depending on which community they were in at the time. Their demonstrations were often somewhat flamboyant, with large, colorful displays. But they found that the culture of certain areas responded better to that exuberance than others, so they made an effort to appear more sober in those areas.

Cross-group Collaboration

Cross-group collaborations occurred regularly throughout the duration of the fight against the ACP. This ranged from multiple groups attending the same protest to one group providing financial support to another, to a large-scale water quality testing initiative across much of Virginia. Activists across the state communicated closely, while different activist groups would organize collectively on major events that impacted or were influenced by multiple different communities. In particular, any state-wide event,
such as hearings or lawsuits at the state or federal levels would draw people from around
the state to participate. These statewide collaborations were sometimes ad-hoc, but were
often organized through either formal or informal networks. Umbrella organizations like
ABRA were a common forum for these types of cross-collaborations.

**Demographics**

Despite the fact that a disproportionate amount of the ACP’s negative impacts fell
on poor and non-white communities, the activists I spoke to reported that most of the
activists who organized to oppose the pipeline were not from those communities. Rather,
the activists who made up the anti-ACP coalition were largely wealthy, or middle-class,
and white. The activists I spoke to all agreed that this was a natural consequence of
activism requiring a large investment of time, sometimes money, alongside outside
pressure from other people.

People who have jobs, children, are economically disadvantaged, or who have any
other important responsibilities just have fewer opportunities to get involved in activism.
Perhaps just as importantly, Dominion, the company behind the ACP in Virginia, has a
lot of influence in the state, as both a large employer and the sole energy provider. A
number of participants in the study reported that many people were reluctant to join the
movement because of the potential of retaliation at work, or backlash in their social lives.
Accessibility was another limiting factor on participation, as one activist said “we have
lots of activists in our community that have various abilities... I've got a friend who has
CP, and there's definitely no way I'm going to ask her to stand for five hours on the side
of the road and protest.”. Although exceptions to these trends did exist, the poor and marginalized people who were the most affected by the pipeline were often not able to engage with the movement as frequently or as intensively as their wealthier neighbors.

**Race and Community**

While the majority of activists who were part of the broader anti-ACP movement were from relatively wealthy, white areas, one area in Virginia was an exception to the rule. Buckingham County, in central Virginia, hosts a large black population - one of the highest in the State. The residents of Buckingham were more harshly impacted by the ACP than perhaps any other constituency. The ACP was planned to run right through rural Buckingham County, and a compressor station was scheduled to be built there. The compressor station would have been sited within the town of Union Hill and only eight miles away from Yogaville, or Satchidananda Ashram (Janée Petersen, 2020, pp. 63-64).

Yogaville is a small community with approximately 150 permanent residences, but which hosts more than 2000 guests annually who travel there to visit the three shrines at the center of the community, attend retreats and receive certifications in yoga. Union Hill is an historic black community. More than a third of the town’s population are the descendants of the slaves who used to work that land, and the area is home to a number of notable historic sites related to that history (Fjord, 2018, pp. 7-8). The compressor station that was planned to be built there would have been one of the largest in the country, and questions about the risks of contaminating the air and water of Union Hill were both important concerns for residents, as well as key battlegrounds for activists. The residents of both Union Hill and Yogaville organized to oppose the compressor station,
and became the only activist organization in the movement that represented any black community.

Because of this distinction, Friends of Buckingham brought a unique perspective to the movement, and faced some unique challenges. As an activist who had worked as an organizer for Friends of Buckingham explained, getting black voices and black concerns heard was difficult both within and without Buckingham County. On top of racial prejudice from both ordinary people and state and county officials, racial justice was simply not on the radar for many other activist groups before Friends of Buckingham began to bring it to the forefront of the movement. It was a problem that the majority white members of the broader movement were not able to anticipate themselves.

Despite this, racial justice would go on to become a vital part of the rest of the struggle against the ACP. It formed the basis for critical legal challenges to the pipeline, perhaps most notably when the Virginia Fourth Circuit Court ruled in favor of Friends of Buckingham in a suit over the Compressor Stations air permits (Fredette, 2020). Union Hill’s racial injustice problem also served to generate a great deal of media coverage, and drew the attention of numerous national and international newspapers along with prominent public figures ranging from Al Gore and Rev. William Barber II, to NBC News and the Guardian (Ortiz, 2020 & Paviour, 2021). Even activists from other parts of the state weren’t able to understate the importance of incorporating racial justice into the anti-ACP movement's environmentalist programme. As one activist from Nelson County said, “God bless Buckingham County and Union Hill... [they] brought the whole thing home.”
Activists from both poor white and non-white communities expressed that the unique concerns and problems their communities faced sometimes went unnoticed by the broader movement. Key issues that many landowners organized around were the impact the ACP would have on recreational and tourist industry land uses, as well as the loss of land through eminent domain, which was something many felt was a violation of their property rights. Poorer communities often shared these concerns, but placed an emphasis on the ways in which the ACP would affect their livelihoods. Many of the people who opposed the pipeline did so because of the direct dangers that the ACP would have on them. And this was particularly true for both rural communities too far away from emergency services to receive help in case of a disaster such as a gas leak or explosion, as well as more urban communities that were at risk from dangers like water and air pollution. The distribution of these dangers would become a key issue for many as well, particularly in regard to the siting of both the ACP itself and supporting infrastructure in and around majority black communities.

These concerns often came together in unanticipated ways that motivated people to take part in activism work who would otherwise have never considered it. One activist I spoke to related a story of a local organic farmer whose farm was right next to the planned site of a contractor yard, which would have been used for the construction of the ACP. This farmer was informed that he was at risk of having his organic certification taken away because the pollution from the contractor yard would drift onto his crops, and
the large numbers of pipeline workers suddenly tramping around the edges of his property made him worry for the safety of his family. These concerns were what motivated this farmer to oppose the ACP - he became an activist to oppose that construction yard, more than the pipeline itself. The farmers' concerns were heard, the construction yard was moved to a different location while the pipeline was still under construction. With his immediate concerns dealt with, the farmer fell out of activism, and went back home.

The End of the ACP

Without much warning or fanfare, the ACP was officially canceled in July of 2020. This came as a shock to almost everyone following recent news regarding the pipeline. It certainly caught most activists by surprise. In the months immediately before the announcement a number of important legal challenges had been decided in favor of the pipeline. Under the Trump administration the federal government had removed important legal barriers to the pipeline's construction, particularly in regards to the requirements to pass environmental impact assessments, which had previously delayed the permitting process for the construction of the Union Hill compressor station. Up until the last moment Dominion had maintained that the project would go ahead regardless of opposition, saying in May of that year that the pipeline would be operational by 2022 (Freeman, 2022, pp. 164-168).

Since then, the coalition of activists who fought against the pipeline have moved on. Many are no longer activists at all, but many found other causes to champion. This was easy to do for many of them. The ACP was not the only natural gas pipeline being
built in Virginia; and construction of the Mountain Valley Pipeline is still ongoing. Many of the activists I spoke to are working against the MVP, and they certainly aren’t alone. The MVP poses all of the same risks and dangers to people and the environment, and it will impact many of the same areas. It was purportedly fairly easy to transition the infrastructure and networks that were built to oppose the ACP to the MVP.

Beyond just pipelines, other damaging infrastructure projects have also gained attention from activists. In September of 2021 Aston Bay Holdings, a Canadian mineral exploration company began exploratory drilling for gold in Buckingham County (SNN Network, 2021). Since then Friends of Buckingham have refocused their attention on this new issue and have continued to use many of the same strategies and resources that they utilized to oppose the ACP.

Limitations

This project was limited in two key ways. First, the sample size was small which invariably leads to concerns for reliability. Second, the use of snowball sampling made the selection of participants dependent on referrals from previous participants. Notably, one participant from Buckingham County conceived of herself as the “point of contact” for the rest of the community and would not suggest additional participants, particularly Black members of the community.

Suggestions for Future Research

There is significant scope for additional research following on from this project. First, a larger and more diverse sample size would be beneficial. There were many activist groups with whom I did not speak and from whom additional insights might be
gleaned. A larger sample size would also address concerns of reliability in this study given the limitations noted above. In addition to a larger and more diverse sample size, additional research exploring the racial tensions in environmental coalition building would be beneficial.

Another opportunity would be a phenomenological study exploring the lived experiences of Black and Indigenous people involved in resisting the ACP would provide significant insight in how coalition building can be sustained once the initial cause for the coalition is resolved. Specifically, does this kind of coalition building create long-term activists as well as facilitate community cohesion and promote racial justice and reconciliation? There are other pipeline resistance movements which center Indigenous perspectives and a study similar to this in another geographic location exploring similar racial and cultural tensions would be useful.

Finally, this research was targeted as a specific geographic location. Additional research focused on other communities along the ACP could explore the themes which emerged from this research and lead to a better understanding of why coalitions form in one area, like Virginia, but not in others, like North Carolina.
CONCLUSION

The Anti-ACP coalition represents a successful model of what a modern pluralist activist movement can look like. Its decentralized structure allowed it to remain flexible and responsive to the needs of its constituents and communities, while avoiding the frictions between community advocacy groups that can hamper the effectiveness of their cause. The grassroots activist groups that took part in the anti-ACP movement were firmly grounded in their local communities and operated differently depending on their unique context. Economic, social, and cultural differences between communities played a large role in causing the differences between groups, as activists were influenced by, and tailored their approach to, their own specific locations (Jenn 22:45). This was both a natural consequence of different social environments, but also a strategic decision for many activists. Multiple activists explained to me that they would change their methods and approaches to their work depending on their audience, and identified class and racial divides within their communities as important reasons for making these shifts.

How activists interpreted these differences varied, with class and race playing an important role once again. Perhaps the biggest distinction to be made here is between those who saw themselves as activists and those who did not. In any of the communities of those who took part in the anti-ACP movement, activism, particularly environmental activism, is typically associated with left-wing political values. As a result, many people who played large parts in the anti-ACP movement nevertheless did not consider themselves activists, and did not wish to be considered such by others either. Rather, they articulated their activist work as ‘merely’ protecting themselves, their families, their livelihoods, their hunting grounds, or any number of other things. Self-defense, standing
up for ones’ self, these were seen as more value neutral and framing opposition to the ACP in these terms allowed organizers to appeal to constituencies that they otherwise would not have been able to.

However, lacking significant reasons to oppose the pipeline beyond the immediate personal threat, many people fell away from the movement once that personal motivation was resolved. A good example of this was the story of the organic farmer who stopped protesting once his farm was no longer under threat. Those who became permanent fixtures of an activist group did so for a wide variety of reasons. Those who worked for professional advocacy organizations like the Sierra Club or the Southern Environmental Law Center remained involved in the anti-ACP movement as part of their job requirements. Many activists were motivated by ideological reasons; a concern for the environment, or a sincere belief that the ACP should not affect anyone at all.

But while decentralization may work to reduce friction between groups, it wasn’t able to solve the divisions within groups. Friends of Buckingham, for example, struggled with the racial divide within their community, and the economic incentives Dominion offered to their constituents to support the pipeline, both of which caused their support base to splinter. Similar issues of class and race appeared elsewhere in the state as well, particularly the larger groups that operated in more populated, more diverse areas.

In addition, decentralization contributes to the need to coordinate across large areas. There were almost a hundred different activist organizations that operated at various times around the state that were, for the most part, very independent. Each maintained different levels of connectedness to the broader movement that suited their
specific goals and levels of commitment. The anti-ACP movement solved this problem through the existence of umbrella organizations like ABRA, alongside more informal communication networks that bound the disparate groups together to share information and resources when it was necessary. Both were key to bridging the gaps between groups.

Beyond just institutions and networks though, all of the activists I spoke to pointed to certain intangible qualities of the anti-pipeline struggle that were absolutely vital. One activist, who was a veteran environmentalist of several decades and who had helped found several of the earliest anti-ACP groups, described how passionate people were about the issue. How ordinary people off the street were more aware of the pipeline problem than he had ever expected, and how anti-pipeline groups were never short on support from their communities. Most of the activists I spoke to acknowledged the existence of divisions between groups, but explained how the common cause and common struggle against the pipeline fostered solidarity. This was bolstered by the narrow focus on the ACP to the exclusion of any other issue, which many early and influential anti-ACP activists had made a key part of their strategy, to avoid diluting people’s focus and fracturing the movement. Even if different activists disagreed on other issues, these disagreements were deliberately put aside to focus on the one thing that mattered - the ACP.
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Civil rights leader, former vice president take aim at Northam, Dominion during visit to Buckingham County. Virginia Mercury. https://www.virginiamercury.com/2019/02/20/civil-rights-leader-former-vice-pres-ident-take-aim-at-northam-dominion-during-visit-to-buckingham-county/


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

APPLICATION COVER PAGE

KEEP THIS PAGE AS ONE PAGE – DO NOT CHANGE MARGINS/FONTS!!!!!!!!!

PLEASE SUBMIT THIS PAGE AS WORD DOCUMENT

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH WITH HUMAN SUBJECTS

Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, 311 Alumni Hall

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: William White
william.j.white@maine.edu

FACULTY SPONSOR: Dr. Darren Ranço
Darren.ranço@maine.edu

EMAIL: [Required if PI is a student]:

TITLE OF PROJECT: Environmental Justice Coalition Building in Virginia: The Fight Against the ACP

START DATE: PI DEPARTMENT:

Anthropology

STATUS OF PI: FACULTY/STAFF/GRADUATE/UNDERGRADUATE

(F,S,G,U)

If PI is a student, is this research to be performed:

for an honors thesis/senior thesis/capstone? Yes for a master’s thesis?
for a doctoral dissertation? for a course project?
other (specify)

Submitting the application indicates the principal investigator’s agreement to abide by the responsibilities outlined in Section I.E. of the Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects.

Faculty Sponsors are responsible for oversight of research conducted by their students. The Faculty Sponsor ensures that he/she has read the application and that the conduct of such research will be in accordance with the University of Maine’s Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. REMINDER: if the principal investigator is an undergraduate student, the Faculty Sponsor MUST submit the application to the IRB.
Email this cover page and complete application to umric@maine.edu.

FOR IRB USE ONLY

Application #
2021-12-03                          Review (F/E): E                           Expedited Category:

ACTION TAKEN:

XXJudged Exempt; category 2    Modifications required? Yes
Accepted (date) 12/20/2021 Approved as submitted. Date of next
review: by                  Degree of Risk:

Approved pending modifications. Date of next
review: by

Degree of Risk: Modifications accepted (date):

Not approved (see
attached
statement) Judged
not research with
human subjects

FINAL APPROVAL TO BEGIN  12/20/2021
Figure 1. (N.C. Protests Target Atlantic Coast Pipeline, 2016)
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

William White was born and raised in Stoke-on-Trent, England where his family has lived for generations. In 2014 he relocated to Charlottesville, Virginia where he was first introduced to social justice movements through the Atlantic Coast Pipeline environmental justice movement. In 2020 William graduated from Southern Maine Community College with an associate's degree in Liberal Arts and in 2022 graduated from the University of Maine with a bachelor's degree in Anthropology with a minor in Human Dimensions of Climate Change. Outside of his academics William enjoys reading poetry, being outdoors, and watching English football. When he's not on campus he lives in Brunswick, Maine with his family and a number of pets.