

Faith and Fossil Fuels: Field Trip to the Gorge

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On July 31st, 2015, OIPL took a trip to the Columbia Gorge to learn from people with frontline experience of the impacts of fossil fuel exports. This trip was eye-opening for me in many ways. First, as a native Midwesterner, I had never been to the Gorge—it was breathtaking. As I surveyed the landscape for the first time, I was clearly seeing the many dangers it faces from fossil fuel exports and climate change, and how necessary the work to protect it is.

Coal Trains And Tribal Fishing Rights

Our first stop was at a tribal treaty fishing site along the Columbia River where we spoke with members of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission. In the short time we spent with them, two full mile-long coal trains went by. It was easy to see how catastrophic an accident would be to their livelihoods, not to mention other treaty fishing sites. CRITFC spoke of the need

for an environmental justice approach to Earth care that centers on how environmental issues disproportionately impact those already facing marginalization, especially indigenous people, people of color, and the poor.



The Dust Left Behind

We next met with community organizers from Friends of the Gorge at Drano Lake, where we were able to see how the coal trains are already disrupting their environment. In between the rocks and grass on the side of the tracks, the ground was coated with coal dust. We learned that 500 pounds to a ton of coal dust can escape from each car, which can also accumulate in between the rails and cause derailments.



The River, Fish, and Climate

We learned from Columbia Riverkeeper about the immediate danger facing the river's fish. The drought and lack of snowpack for cooling, coupled with record high temperatures this summer, has heated the river beyond what many fish can survive, forcing them to take refuge in cooler lakes rather than reach their spawning grounds. We stand to lose 80% of sockeye salmon this year, undoing years of work to strengthen the salmon runs by tribal and other communities. Climate change sometimes seems like a far-off danger, but this is a real and immediate threat to ecosystems and fishers' livelihoods.



Welcoming All to River Work

The speakers from Columbia Gorge Climate Action Network described the challenges of community opposition to climate justice efforts. They spoke about what it looks like to invite people into movements, to practice radical hospitality, and to let movements look like whatever works. These are powerful ideas, especially to involve people who feel shut out of the work because of their personal or political identities that they don't see represented as part of the movement. We all know in theory that everyone has a place in the movements we build, but when we don't actively invite and encourage others to take part, we lose out on potential allies.

What's At Stake

After arriving in Portland, without ever being here before, I was thrown directly into the conflict over fossil fuel exports for two months. I've learned pretty fast what working for environmental justice looks like in Oregon, but interacting with people who are at the forefront of these issues was especially powerful. Being physically present in the places that are under threat was a stark reminder of what's at stake, and how important those places are to protect.

