

'Keep it in the ground': What we can learn from anti-fossil fuel campaigns

November 15 2018, by Fergus Green



Divestment protesters at UNSW in Sydney. Credit: DANNY CASEY

From the [fossil fuel divestment movement](#) to the [Stop Adani campaign](#), in recent years we've seen a wave of climate activism that [directly targets fossil fuels](#)—both the infrastructure used to produce, transport and

consume them, and the corporations that finance, own and operate that infrastructure.

What makes targeting fossil fuels so attractive for activists, and can we learn anything from them?

Failure to launch

Climate change became a topic of mainstream international concern in the early 1990s. For the first two decades of international climate cooperation, until the failed Copenhagen climate conference in 2009, the international environment [movement](#) embraced a more "[technocratic approach](#)". Professionally-staffed environment groups made technical arguments aimed at persuading politicians and the public to adopt global climate treaties, national greenhouse gas emission reduction targets, and complex market-based policy mechanisms such as emissions trading schemes.

All of these things, if sufficiently stringent, would have been great if they were politically possible. But the groups advocating them were politically weak; they had few [political resources](#). Consequently, in the competition to influence policy they were systematically outgunned by the fossil [fuel](#) industry.

Not only did the environment movement lack money and power over the economy, they lacked public support for their policy agenda. While public concern for climate change throughout this period was widespread, it was shallow. It was a political priority for [few people](#), and [fewer still](#) were willing to take to the streets to demand strong, urgent action.

Why fossil fuels resonate

Compared with such ineffective climate activism, the present wave of anti-fossil fuel politics has an important advantage: it resonates better with ordinary people.

First, fossil fuels and associated infrastructure are readily understood by lay audiences. In contrast, concepts such as greenhouse gases, "2°C average warming", and "350 ppm" are abstract, technical constructions not readily grasped by laypersons.

Second, whereas the harms caused by climate change are hard to understand and (perceived to be) remote from their cause in time and space, the production, transport and consumption of fossil fuels cause and are popularly associated with a range of other harms on top of climate change.

These include: local environmental, health and other socio-economic impacts, as well as corruption, repression, human rights abuses and other injustices along the supply chain. Most of these affect people living or working close to fossil fuel infrastructure such as mines, pipelines and coal-fired power stations.

Surveys about energy sources in the US and Australia, for example, support the claim that fossil fuels are unpopular. In China, local air pollution caused by fossil fuels is one of the biggest public concerns. And case studies from various countries indicate the potential for proposed fossil fuel infrastructure to generate strong local opposition, social conflict, and wider media attention.

Third, targeting fossil fuels helps to personalize the causes of climate change. One of the reasons climate change is not psychologically salient to most people is that it is typically perceived to be an unintentional side-effect of the everyday actions of billions of people. This makes it hard for us to attribute blame.

But the fossil fuel industry is [disproportionately responsible](#) for our dependence on emissions-intensive energy. Targeting the industry helps to [concentrate moral pressure](#) on these more culpable agents and [stokes](#) the [indignation](#) that fuels climate activism.

Among anti-fossil fuel campaigns, the fossil fuel divestment movement aims most [directly and explicitly](#) to delegitimise the fossil fuel industry. [Studies show that the divestment movement has](#), in a very short time, had a revitalising effect on climate activism through the mobilisation of young people, and improved wider public discourse toward [climate change](#) action, among other beneficial effects.

Targeting [fossil fuels](#) also has advantages when it comes to the [other elements of successful social movement activism](#)—resource accumulation, alliance-building, and sustaining participants' enthusiasm over time.

A necessary part of climate politics

Targeting [fossil fuels](#) is not the only way to build more successful movements around climate action. Campaigns providing a more positive vision around renewable energy, for example, have also been successful in mobilising grassroots support, and are a crucial component in contemporary climate activism. And successful grassroots mobilisation is not everything: elite politics and international relations also greatly affect climate policy.

But building wide and deep social movements committed to urgent [climate](#) action is a necessary element of the political task before us. As the rising tide of anti-fossil fuel activism shows, if campaigners work with the grain of ordinary human motivation, drawing on what we know about the psychology and sociology of social movements, then they are in with a fighting political chance.

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