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## How one young activist is challenging the oil industry over Great Bear Rainforest pipeline

Eric Keen

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**A remarkable young environmentalist is standing in the way of a controversial Canadian oil pipeline which campaigners fear could become the next Exxon-Valdez or Deepwater Horizon disaster. Eric Keen reports**

Alone in his shack, tucked deep within a maze of British Columbian fjords, one young naturalist is waging war against a consortium of the world's largest oil companies. His arsenal: gum boots, binoculars, and data – lots of it.

Enbridge, Canada's largest pipeline corporation, has submitted a federal proposal that could establish twin lines between the Albertan oil sands and the B.C. port town of Kitimat. From there, supertankers measuring three by one football fields in size would take the oil through the coast's winding channels and onwards to its chief clients: to the south, the United States, and China overseas. But first they have to get past James Pilkington.

For the last three summers, this 27-year old Ontarian has lived among ravens and orcas on a rock overlooking Caamano Sound, a fjord-wreathed body of water in the rugged upper reaches of British Columbia. Being a day's boat ride from the nearest store, James sleeps under a tarp, goes weeks without seeing another soul, and protects his food from the coastal wolves and bears using barrels suspended from the trees by a system of ropes.

What is it that drives this man to such ascetic, empiricist extremes? Is his love for whales so perverse? Well, yes, but there's more to it than that. There's Enbridge. He repeats the name and sighs, 'It's one of my biggest motivations.'

### Pipeline politics

The Northern Gateway Pipeline issue has by now escalated far beyond that of a mere oil duct. The Federal Joint Review Panel will not only rule on whether the pipeline and its environmental impacts are ultimately within 'public interest', it will also determine the tone of Canada's domestic and foreign relations for decades to come. First Nations have certainly been more than clear: over 80 potentially affected nations have opposed the proposal with adamancy and political tact. Failing to recognise their unanimous refusal would surely establish a grim precedent for diplomatic relations in the decades following peak oil – but so would be a pass on tapping into Asia's booming demand for oil. A tricky predicament, indeed.

In the still-fresh wake of Exxon-Valdez (just north of the proposed tanker route), BP's Deep Horizon disaster, and the rupture of an Enbridge pipeline on the Kalamazoo River last year, the environmental implications seem obvious. The route Enbridge hopes to squeeze tankers through is notorious both for its navigational difficulty and its remarkable densities of endangered whales – in the eyes of the concerned citizens, a disastrous combination. It's an ironic prospect: parading oil from Canada's most desolate and exploited region, the oil sands, through its most pristine, the Great Bear Rainforest.



Environmentalists claim the habitat of much wildlife, including humpback whales, is under threat from the proposed oil project

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Being the largest intact temperate rainforest in the world, it is difficult to overstate the value of the Great Bear. It teems – boils over – with heart-wrenching wildlife. In addition to the whales that rely on its pristine and sheltered waters, it is a critical habitat for all five Pacific salmon species, coastal wolves, bears, and a vast interdependent ecosystem -- not to mention vibrant coastal First Nation cultures, as well as the combined multi-billion dollar commercial fishing and ecotourism sectors.

One of the Great Bear's most remote corners, Caamano Sound has enjoyed the stewardship of the Gitga'at First Nation, whose people depend on the territory for food and cultural vitality. More recently, the North Coast Cetacean Society (NCCS) has also become a companion voice in the Sound. Both groups are deeply passionate about the conservation and celebration of this cultural and biological gem, and James' research would be impossible without either's friendship or yearly support, both financial and supervisory.

#### **Gambling with nature**

If Enbridge has its way, however, the Sound's spectacular diversity would surely be chased out by industrial runoff and vessel traffic. We're not talking about oil spills – although such things tend to be matters of time. This is just if all goes according to plan. With tankers that size, and the desolation that surfs in on their bow waves, the dilution of the Great Bear's fjord-lands is not a risk – it's a promise. 'And people need to know what is at stake,' James explains. 'I would like everyone to know the scale of the treasure we are gambling with.'

This is why James is out there, watching from the gale-beaten rocks of Caamano's lonely shore. This is also why two Gitga'at researchers were out with him last season, conducting boat surveys to coincide with James' land-based work.

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What exactly is James doing all day? For the most part, he simply looks. More precisely, he looks hard. Every half hour, James does a 15-minute dedicated scan of Caamano Sound, no distractions, with binoculars and a tripod-mounted high-power scope. During which, he records every single marine mammal, vessel, and environmental condition that his eagle eyes can detect. That's 15 minutes on, 15 minutes off, all day, 14 hours per day. (But in truth there is no 'off'. He's always looking, only sometimes less intensely.) Seven hours per diem, minimum, peering through magnified lenses.

His pile of data notebooks tell the rest of the story: in addition to the binder of scans, there are the sighting sheets, a page of scribbled detail devoted to every single whale seen. There's the hydrophone log, which contains all acoustic activity – be it whales or motorboats - picked up by the underwater microphone anchored just off his rock. There are even logs devoted to everything that might happen outside of the scans, the so-called 'opportunistic logs.'

In one he narrates the movements of every marine mammal, down to the otter, that enters the Sound. In another is a meticulous record of all the vessel traffic. Another for rare or migratory birds. A separate notebook contains the formal bird surveys that James conducts during his 15-minute 'off' periods. Such thorough ornithological surveys have never been completed in the Sound, ever.

So, all day, every day, James looks, and James writes. Ad nauseum. The result: a fluid, intimate portrayal of a typical Caamano Sound summer, an absurdly high-resolution insight into what might become mere memory should Enbridge have its way.

#### **Widespread opposition**

James is not the only one fighting, of course. The Gitga'at have been gathering data on the region for decades, and the NCCS for years, and both remain earnest voices in the Fight for the Great Bear. In fact, almost 80 per cent of British Columbians are reportedly in opposition to any and all coastal tanker traffic. Legislation for a permanent moratorium along the northern coast will be debated and voted upon sometime in 2011. 'If passed,' James says, 'this would stop Enbridge and any other northern crude-oil transportation projects in their tracks...but the likelihood of it passing is a different story.'

Throughout my days of research last summer at NCCS's headquarters, James's voice would drift in over our VHF, seeming to catch me at my least attentive moments. His shack was some 16 miles from ours, an outcamp of our outcamp, on an island called Rennison. Alone out there, his only connection to the outside world was us at Whale Point.

Then in late July, I found myself out there too, an unwitting Rennison volunteer. Before the Gitga'at Spirit had pulled away from the rocks, James was already briefing me entirely too fast on his vast system of data collection. He walked me through his 1,301st scan. I whimpered. He moved on. In showing me the rest of the camp, his words and actions bore a hard efficiency, an economy streamlined by the months of solitude and the demands of 'the project.'

### **The educator**

This understandable lack of social patience was most obvious when data was on the line; he wanted things done right. 'I'm an educator,' he explained. He would mention that a few more times during my stay. He's been a sea kayak guide, instructor at the Bamfield Marine Sciences Center, and student of Outdoor Education. Common denominator: teacher. He would not cook, repair anything, or analyze data without showing me how in the process.

He showed me how to work the stove, how to store our food, where the first aid kit was, and how to clean dishes with ocean water down on the intertidal rocks. He explained the bathroom: you take a roll of TP, a lighter, and hand sanitizer out to the beach, and you find a nice flat rock. Go on it. Wipe, set the paper atop your deposit, and light it on fire. Then, with pomp and ceremony, you march it out to the water and chuck it as far as you can. 'I call it "Shit-put:,"' says James with a big grin. Don't forget the hand sanitizer.

This might sound like an island getaway to some or an internment camp to others, but there is no arguing the daunting scale of his Herculean, self-imposed tasks. This was the reason I was sent to Rennison, to relieve James of some of the work load. But he simply wouldn't have it. Instead, he used me as an opportunity to do two-person scans. He preferred doubling the chances of seeing something over giving his eyes a rest.

'But can't you use statistics to adjust for effort in your results?' I asked. 'As long as we do the right math, we can take turns on shifts and still get robust outcomes, right?' James gave a pause before his axiomatic response: 'Observation speaks louder than extrapolation. Ready to start the scan?'

He had a point: a seen whale has much more oomf than a predicted one. Nowhere else had I seen the Naturalist's Code seem more ominous. The more data, the better – and if it can be done better, it hasn't been done well enough. Not when the region he loves is on the line. The Code. Obvious, perhaps, but its implications are grave.

The result, of course, is that James is burying himself under a paralyzing amount of data. Each time our conversation turned to the task of data analysis, James glanced at his piles of notebooks, let out a soft whimper and fell quiet. Where to begin? It may take months simply to enter the data into a computer.

### **Photography and passion**

If it were not for his photography, James might seem robotic, in desperate need of a vacation from spreadsheets. But over three lonely seasons, he has compiled a stunning visual anthology of Caamano Sound, one that portrays both its truly immaculate value – as no one else ever could – as well as his bandwidth of ability as an educator and naturalist. Photography, after all, is just another way of looking, of seeing, of showing.

His images also betray the deep passion underlying his ascetic devotion to 'the project.' Enbridge's threat may be the reason he goes to such extremes, but his summers of exile from those he loves are doubtlessly a labor of love in their own right. How refreshing it is to see the artistic aspects of a mind so obviously adroit at scientific rigidity. It is a true teacher who understands the interdependence of data and inspiration. The working title for his book: A Place Worth More Than Oil.

Who knows if James' bird counts, whale sightings or photography will make the splash he hopes they will. Perhaps Enbridge will step right over his labour of love. But this is why his story becomes so important. His three summers of dedication, perhaps more so than his data, leave the rest of us without any excuses. If this man can challenge an issue as daunting as the Northern Gateway Pipeline simply by looking, surely each of us can find a way to make our own difference for the places we value.

After only a week, it was time for me to switch with another researcher. At sunset, the Gitga'at Spirit pulled up and my replacement hopped onto the rocks. James immediately began briefing him on the Rennison Rules. He explained his system of data notebooks, and the new guy's eyes glazed over. He explained the kitchen and how to poop on a rock. I made sure he mentioned 'Shit-put'.

As I was shouldering my bag, James held up the canister of bear spray. The recruit's eyebrows shot up. 'Do you really need to use that here?' 'Oh, I always carry this with me,' James rebutted. 'Every time I leave my post. I wouldn't want anything to happen to the project.'

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