

# GOOD

*A magazine for the global citizen*

---

## The Battle to Save the Arctic from Drilling is Heating Up



Photo © Vincenzo Floramo  
Greenpeace via Twitter user @zoevirginia

by Shelby Kinney-Lang  
April 14, 2014

If you happened to be drifting in the Pacific Ocean last Monday, 750 miles northwest of Hawaii, you might have seen what looked like the opening sequence of an action movie—a rigid-hulled, inflatable boat skipped along the high seas. Briny wind and ocean spray whipped across the occupants of the craft as they sped towards their target: an Arctic-bound oil rig being hauled toward a Seattle port. When they reached the steep side of the rig, the climbers mounted it using ropes and climbing gear.

But this was no movie; the boat was stamped with a Greenpeace logo, and the rig, the Polar Pioneer, is the property of Royal Dutch Shell. It was, in fact, the opening of a six-day protest by a half-dozen multinational Greenpeace activists, looking to shine a revealing light on Shell's impending drilling activities in the Chukchi Sea, off Alaska's northwest coast. The double-edged threat of Arctic drilling involves both short- and long-term risks. In the short run, developing this part of the planet for resource extraction makes an oil spill extremely likely; in the long run, extracting all those hydrocarbons will increasingly cascade the effects of climate change. The Chukchi Sea is also a pristine ecosystem swirling with unblemished wildlife. The stakes here are high.

"We don't have any way to deal with an oil spill in the arctic," the Alaska director at the Center for Biological Diversity, Rebecca Noblin, tells me. "We don't have the infrastructure, we don't have the technology, we don't have the human power. We couldn't deal with the oil spill, even in the Gulf of Mexico."

The rig-climbing protestors actively tweeted their lives on the edge. They unfurled banners and fielded interviews

with journalists and writers like Naomi Klein on satellite phones. They camped along the handrail platforms studding the rig's exterior, and wore thick, weather-resistant gear to stay warm in the harsh ocean wind. They joked about wanting coffee and the dilemma of not having an adequate toilet. But after nearly a week—and a successful injunction filed by Shell in a federal court in Alaska—the climbers rappelled down the rig on Saturday and headed back to their support boat, citing stormy seas that could put their lives at risk.

Zoe Buckley Lennox, one of the Greenpeace activists aboard the rig who spoke with Naomi Klein, described Shell's ambitions as "psychopathic even, I'd say, just to go [to the Arctic] and dig for something that's going to make it so much worse."

A Shell spokesperson told The Guardian they would not "condone the illegal tactics employed by Greenpeace," although they claim to have met face-to-face with groups opposed to Arctic drilling: "We respect their views and value the dialogue."

When the activists first boarded the rig, it had been just days since the Obama administration upheld a 2008 Arctic lease sale to the company, which Shell bought at \$2.1 billion. A lawsuit led until recently by the Native Village of Point Hope challenged the soundness of the environmental impact assessment underlying the lease sale. That legal challenge was only resolved at the end of March. Noblin tells me that battling the new approval in another legal challenge is a likely option. The next step for Shell to proceed will require the Department of the Interior to approve Shell's revised plans for exploratory drilling. The government announced Friday that it's formally reviewing the documents, a process

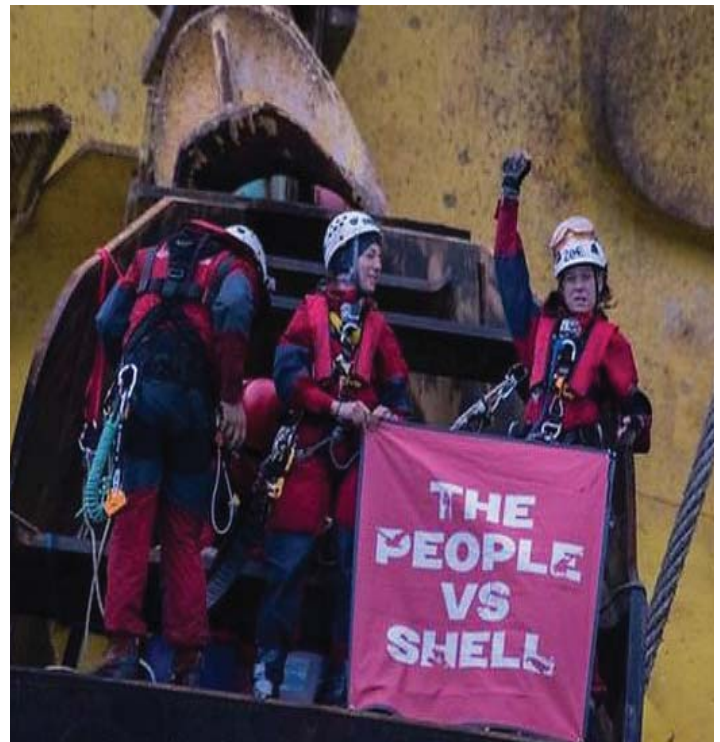


Photo © Vincenzo Floramo / Greenpeace via Twitter user @zoevirginia

that could take 30 days and is open to public comment. They'll also have to get permits from the Fish and Wildlife Service to harass local polar bears and walruses. Unfortunately, whether by continued loss of habitat or the looming hazard of a spill, all of the region's fauna are likely to suffer one way or another if drilling commences.

The Arctic is a special place in terms of biodiversity. The Chukchi and Beaufort seas are shallow, home to eight kinds of whales, thousands of seals, bears, walruses, seabirds, and other tiny, less photo-friendly sea creatures that help the whole ecosystem run. Half of the polar bears in the United States live out on the Chukchi ice, which has so far remained more or less unindustrialized. This sensitive ecosystem and unique aquatic life have environmentalists on edge about the possibility of an oil spill, should plans to develop the region go forward. The federal government admits

there's a 75 percent chance one or more large oil spills will spoil the frigid waters during the projected 77-year extraction process. And a government report commissioned last year demonstrates the problems—and, depending the weather, near impossibility—of cleaning up an oil spill should it ever happen in the Arctic.

Though just because Shell is allowed to drill, doesn't mean they'll actually be capable of doing so. If this row over Arctic drilling feels familiar, that's because it is: In 2012, Shell ironed out the right paperwork and even partially began drilling wells in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas. But fate wasn't on their side—ice melted later than expected, and their arctic oil-spill containment dome was “crushed like a beer can” during safety tests (it's been upgraded since). The subcontractor responsible for operating the drill ships was charged with multiple felonies that included environmental and maritime safety violations. Most infamously, Shell grounded a rig on the tow out of Alaska at the end of December, one of the stormiest months and riskiest times to lug a rig. They risked the dangerous journey in part to avoid state taxes in the new year. The wrecked rig was totally scrapped by Shell.

“There are a lot of problems with Shell's plans to drill, and in an ideal world, the government wouldn't allow it,” Noblin says. “We don't live in an ideal world. Even if they're allowed to move forward, we'll see if Shell is prepared this time or not.”

Noblin sees the current moment, including the Greenpeace protests, as something of a critical chokepoint in the Arctic drilling debate. “We're at a crossroads right now. We have a lot of resources we could develop, but we shouldn't. Are we going to develop these

resources that are going to push us over the edge, or do we take a wiser approach?”

Greenpeace's protest can be understood as a response to Noblin's question. The dilemma also explains other increasingly urgent recent protests against Shell. When the port authority of Seattle approved the Shell contract to house Shell's boat at the port, the city saw protests in the form of a kayaker's flotilla protesting the rig's port arrival. And while the efficiency and overall effect of these protests can be debated, Greenpeace did gather nearly 7 million signatures for their Save the Arctic campaign.

There's also a sense that over time, Greenpeace has managed to weaken the corporate response to their in-your-face tactics. As the Vancouver Sun points out, whereas in the past the climbers may have been met by high-powered hoses to prevent them from boarding the rig, there was no resistance this time around. Corporations want to eschew ready-made photo-ops that are likely to make them look bad.

Da Bears.





That concession alone might not mean a lot, but in their court documents, Shell claimed Greenpeace's actions might actually cause them to miss the summer window to get their rigs in drilling position. The protest, in other words, could push drilling off for another year. The Obama administration, aware of the sentiment against spoiling the pristine Arctic, recently proposed new rules to make drilling there "safer." But for the many environmentalists who will continue to protest, occupy, and raise awareness of the issue, "safe" and "Arctic drilling" are as fundamentally at odds as oil and water.