

# Keeping the Spirit Bear Coast Clear of Tar Sands Oil

The ancestral homeland of British Columbia's First Nations is no place for a dilbit\* disaster.  
June 22, 2016 [Clara Chaisson](#), [www.nrdc.org](http://www.nrdc.org) (NRDC = Natural Resources Defense Council)



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A spirit bear on Hunter Island, British Columbia Shutterstock

\*diluted bitumen

10 British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest is named for the rare white "spirit bears" that haunt the province's northern and central coasts. Kermode bears, as the subspecies is also known, are black bears with a recessive gene that causes one in ten cubs to be born with pale fur—a color that contrasts spectacularly with the animals' darker **kin** and verdant environment. Native tradition says the bear's ghostlike appearance is a nod to the last glaciation, 11,000 years ago, when the Pacific Northwest was blanketed by ice and snow.

15 These living legends are an apt symbol for the world's largest intact temperate rainforest, where the fantastic array of wildlife is deeply **ingrained** in indigenous culture. Spirit bears share the towering red cedars, misty fjords, and labyrinthine coastal waters of their ecosystem with wolves, grizzlies, salmon, orcas, dolphins, and humpback whales. First Nations have depended on the healthy bounty produced by these lands and waters for thousands of years. "It's the most alive place I've ever been," says Liz Barratt-Brown, a senior advisor to NRDC. "It's just such a spectacular part of our continent."

20 This primeval **wilderness**, however, became a battleground in the fight against tar sands in 2005, when the Canadian energy giant Enbridge **unveiled** a plan—the Northern Gateway Project—to send a pipeline through its heart. NRDC couldn't let that happen. The group has a long history in this part of the world, starting two decades ago, when it defended the rainforest, also known as the Spirit Bear Coast, from industrial logging. It's no coincidence that the spirit bear is a prominent feature on NRDC's logo. Standing alongside more than 130 First Nations groups, NRDC has successfully worked to keep tar sands development from despoiling this ecological treasure and ancestral home.

25 The aim of the Northern Gateway Project is to build twin pipelines connecting the Athabasca tar sands to the B.C. coast. One line would transport 525,000 barrels of tar sands crude oil daily across the 730 miles from Bruderheim, Alberta, to Kitimat, British Columbia; the other would carry imported condensate—a thinning agent

used to make viscous tar sands flow—in the opposite direction. The pipeline’s proposed route traverses multiple First Nations communities, crosses 785 rivers and streams, and bisects the Great Bear Rainforest.

30 Beyond its immediate journey from point A to point B, Northern Gateway is part of the industry’s larger goal of **ramping up** production. Tar sands extraction in the area produces three to four times more greenhouse gas emissions than conventional crude, pollutes freshwater resources, endangers communities, and destroys vast **swaths** of carbon-sequestering boreal forest. Without a network of pipelines, Canada’s tar sands region remains **landlocked**. Each individual project contributes to making this dirty fuel economically viable and less likely to be  
35 left in the ground where it belongs.

[Spills are a distinct possibility](#) wherever and however fossil fuels are transported, but [Enbridge’s track record](#) is particular cause for concern. The company is responsible for the [2010 Kalamazoo River oil spill](#), which sent more than one million gallons of crude oil into the Kalamazoo watershed, setting a record for the largest inland oil spill in U.S. history.

40 In Northern Gateway's case, there’s the added complication of topography. En route to its coastal terminus, the pipeline would cross **rugged**, seismically active terrain that’s subject to frequent landslides. Upon arrival at the Port of Kitimat, the diluted bitumen would be loaded onto supertankers, which would have to navigate the treacherous Douglas Channel before setting out for refineries elsewhere in North America. British Columbia “has a coastline that defies the ruler,” Barratt-Brown says—one that makes marine vessel accidents all too frequent.

45 Clearly, the Spirit Bear Coast is no place for tar sands. And luckily, NRDC’s work to support First Nations rights and to rally both public and political opposition has helped place a series of nearly insurmountable **hurdles** in Northern Gateway’s way.

Following the Kalamazoo disaster, NRDC and Canadian allies [Living Oceans Society](#) and the [Pembina Institute](#) exposed the unique risks of transporting tar sands oil in a [2011 report](#). Because diluted bitumen is  
50 heavier, it sinks instead of floating on top of water, where it is easier to clean up. As the people of Kalamazoo discovered—and as NRDC publicized—those properties make efforts to recover tar sands crude from a body of water practically Sisyphean.

That same year, some 60,000 NRDC members and supporters sent e-mails urging the B.C. premier to take a stand against Northern Gateway. The provincial government [formally opposed](#) the project in 2013, citing “serious concerns“ about the particular risks of a dilbit spill. A survey found that nearly two-thirds of B.C. residents share the anti-pipeline **stance**.  
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Canada’s government approved the project in 2014, but the go-ahead was **saddled with** 209 conditions that have **stalled** the project enough to make it miss its planned start date of December 2016. Even more important are the unequivocal rejections from both First Nations and British Columbia, says Anthony Swift, director of NRDC's Canada Project.  
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Finally, in November 2015, newly elected [Prime Minister Justin Trudeau](#) administered a coup de grace by ordering [a ban on oil tanker traffic](#) in B.C.’s north coastal waters. Without the use of Kitimat’s port, Northern Gateway would be dead on arrival.

65 Though Northern Gateway’s coffin is now riddled with nails, Enbridge hasn’t officially pulled the plug on the pipeline. Just last month, the company asked Canada’s National Energy Board for a three-year extension of its permit.

Whatever the energy board decides, the project is unlikely to move forward as long as First Nations opposition remains high, says [Danielle Droitsch](#), a senior policy analyst for NRDC’s Canada Project. And it’s pretty clear that it will. Last fall, a coalition of First Nations groups brought [18 legal challenges](#) against the project to  
70 Vancouver’s Federal Court of Appeal.

Should the project rear its ugly head again, NRDC will engage and continue to support First Nations in their quest to protect their ancestral homelands, Droitsch says. In a place where culture and ecology are inseparable, that means a spirited defense of those iconic bears, too.