

Pipeline will degrade land that we love



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The proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline route raises some deep concerns past, present, and future. I worry that digging around those roots will dig up my roots.

My grandfather was long pastor at the Hebron Presbyterian Church, just outside Staunton. The proposed pipeline will pass near that church. My grandfather was pastor when the present sanctuary was built, and a plaque there recalls him. My father was born in the Hebron manse. I was born at Rockbridge Baths, and I have already my tombstone in the Hebron cemetery, happily as yet unused. On it is written: "Philosopher gone wild."

I now reside in Colorado, where I have taught environmental ethics for 40 years at Colorado State University. I consider environmental issues one of the top four in national and global priority: peace and war, escalating population, escalating consumption and environmental degradation. All are interconnected. When asked how I became so interested in saving nature, I often reply that it helps to have good ancestors.

My Scottish Presbyterian ancestors loved gospel and landscape, and were not always sure which came first. From my cradle I could see Appalachian Mountains on my skyline, and hear the Maury River. I have in my

lifetime traveled on all seven continents, and judge the Shenandoah and Valley of Virginia landscapes unsurpassed as a landscape on which to reside, especially in its blending of both wild and rural dimensions. That includes the Colorado landscape which I have also come to love, but come April and October I would just as soon be on my native home landscape as any place on Earth.

The proposed pipeline would during construction cut a swath officially 125 feet wide, but effectively much wider, across this landscape we love. This runs the full width of Augusta County, as well as Highland and Nelson Counties, across both the farmlands and the George Washington National Forest, some 550 miles from West Virginia to the Carolina coast.

True, it is a buried line. They say now you see it, now you don't. The line itself is a large one, 42 inches, but though buried, maintenance will require forever a 75-foot right-of-way—again considering access, effectively wider. This strip, which you do see, is a permanent scar on the landscape, disruptive to hundreds of farmers and landowners. This is not, of course, for any benefit to Augusta County, but so that North Carolinians have cheaper heating bills.

State and federal regulators are often too quick to approve new projects that come with real risks. Gas pipelines are highly pressurized, generating concerns about leaks, even explosions. Leaks might lower air quality above ground, leaks into the Augusta County limestone landscape, filled with caves and sinkholes, can

pollute water supplies, even produce explosions. In his college years at Washington and Lee, my father and his brother were once lost in such a cave and barely got out.

Putting rigid steel pipe on terrain prone to subsiding is an invitation to trouble. The federal Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration tallied 623 leaks and accidents along oil and natural gas pipelines in the U.S. in 2013. Ten deaths and about 50 injuries were logged. More than 1.5 million miles of natural gas pipeline pass beneath city streets, highways, parkland, and waterways — and more than 100,000 miles of that was added just between 2002 and 2012, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation. Building more only increases our addiction to fossil fuels.

So there are practical reasons for concern. We may be told by the experts that they will make the pipeline safe. Trust the experts. Sometimes we must do that. Also we need to remember that the experts built the Titanic. Both my grandfather and my father knew that tragedy. Everybody my age recalls too many times when the experts were wrong.

But the deeper reason is that the Dominion Resources plans will degrade the Old Dominion. The Shenandoah Valley doesn't need the pipeline to enrich our living well on this landscape we all love. Rather it would spoil our natural, historical, and cultural heritage. Surely we have the right to our most valued resource: our treasured land.

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