Q&A with Emily Satterwhite

Emily Satterwhite, an associate professor of Appalachian studies at Virginia Tech, was arrested in June 2018 after locking herself to equipment related to the construction of the Mountain Valley Pipeline, a controversial natural gas pipeline project planned for West Virginia, Virginia, and North Carolina. Yale Climate Connections spoke with Satterwhite in September 2019 about the history of resistance to fossil fuels in Appalachia, the consequences she faced for her actions, and universities' role in addressing climate change. This Q&A has been lightly edited and condensed.

Yale Climate Connections: Tell me why you were motivated to be involved with the pipeline.

Satterwhite: For 15 years, I've been teaching undergraduates about the role of the fossil fuel industry in Appalachia and the ways that it has corrupted democracy, damaged people's environments, livelihoods, health. And so when I heard in 2014 that the fossil fuel industry was planning to expand into more Appalachian counties, I had a very visceral gut reaction against that. And the next layer of course is climate change and the fact that we know that we need to reduce carbon emissions by 45% in the next 11 years. There is absolutely no reason to continue to degrade the climate in order to put this project online. And we don't intend to ever let it go online.

YCC: Tell me about what you personally have been doing about the pipeline.

Satterwhite: When construction began in February 2018, I began to join with others to bear witness and hike up supplies and support the people who were doing direct action. Those direct actions inspired more. There were pretty soon four blockades in the Jefferson National Forest and then two more on private land in Roanoke County, as well as four tree sitters down in Franklin County, Virginia. And when all of those came down in May 2018 due to law enforcement tactics, I decided that I needed to block that pipeline myself.

I'm not fighting it as a NIMBY. I'm not fighting it because I don't want it in my backyard. I don't want it in anyone's backyard, because I know that the repercussions will be felt far, far, far from here with the rising sea levels and the extreme weather events and the droughts and the political instability that comes with all that.

YCC: Tell me a little bit about making that decision because it seems like it must have come at some risk to you.
Satterwhite: It does come at a risk, but because I am a scholar of Appalachia, I know that there are many before me who have taken that risk — from the Widow Combs stopping strip mining on her own land to mountaintop removal activists. I had been too busy with getting a PhD and starting a family to join them in those efforts, but I have always honored them and believed that they were doing the right thing. And so it was a hard decision. But my daughter is 10 now and she’s in a place where she could understand a little bit. And my husband was very supportive as long as it didn’t involve trees.

YCC: Why not trees?

Satterwhite: Well, we’ve been a little bit surprised at how successful our tree sits have been. They tend to last a long time. So he thought maybe four to six hours would be a good length of time for me to be out of pocket.

YCC: Tell me about the day when you did your action.

Satterwhite: Well, it lasted a little bit more than four to six hours. I was on the mountain for 14. That day, I climbed up an excavator and wrapped my wrists in chains and locked them inside a metal encasing onto the hydraulics of the equipment and waited for Mountain Valley Pipeline to show up. And got to watch the dawn and the view from the top of Brush Mountain and had the most amazing day. Former students came and visited. Volunteers brought water. Someone was playing a viola while the equipment was sort of raging around me trying to reconfigure and see if they could access me to cut me out. Even though I couldn’t hear the music, I could just see all these supporters there who were all cheering me on and bearing witness.

Q. What were you thinking while you were up there?

Satterwhite: (laughs) I was thinking, "I sure hope somebody shows up. What am I going to do if they don’t?"

YCC: To cut you down, you mean?

Satterwhite: Well, yeah, but also just like for it to not be totally pointless to be there, just hanging out on some equipment for days. But I’ve heard several other people who’ve done similar kinds of things talk about the kind of peace that comes over you when you’re in that place, because there’s nothing else that you could be doing that’s more important or more effective at stopping the destruction of the planet, and that’s how I felt. It felt beautiful. I was very happy.

YCC: What happened next?

Satterwhite: Let’s see. They rented some cherry pickers that ran off the road a couple times and I thought were going to slide down the mountain, but eventually they positioned them so
that they could use saws to cut through the metal and take me down from the equipment and to the magistrate's office for the paperwork to be filed for the arrest and to be released.

Luckily, I was home when my daughter woke up the next morning, which is pretty amazing – and something that's very different for people of privilege who do these kinds of actions – compared to people who don't have the same kind of credentials or status that I have, who spend the night or many nights in jail or have exorbitant bail set. Or get charged with bogus, ridiculous charges like terrorism as we've seen recently with this fight in West Virginia. So what happened to me next is a lesson to me in why more people who are protected by class or race or whatever status really need to be putting it on the line.

YCC: What were you charged with, and what was the outcome?

Satterwhite: I was charged with interfering with the property rights of another and something about a vehicle. (Editor's note: Satterwhite was charged with tampering with a vehicle.) The second charge was dropped. I made a plea agreement to do 200 hours of community service and spent a year on probation.

YCC: What did you do for your community service?

Satterwhite: My 10-year-old and I took care of cats at the local animal shelter. So watch out, we've radicalized the shelter cats. (laughs)

YCC: Have you faced professional repercussions?

Satterwhite: It's been very painful. I've been accused of not being a scholar. Those are fighting words. I take that very seriously. Everything that I've done, I've done based on solid knowledge about the fate of the planet.

YCC: What did you take away from this experience? Did it change you?

Satterwhite: Yeah. I suppose I thought that was going to be the culmination of the fight for me, not the start of a whole new phase. It's been very hard because despite the fact that the academy claims that we should be applying our knowledge to real-world problems, the academy doesn't actually mean acting on the kind of knowledge that I have out of Appalachian studies.

YCC: What do you mean by ‘the academy’?

Satterwhite: Universities. People like me who are tenured professors — and have a lot of protection because of that — have, to my mind, an opportunity. In 2017, there was a public health expert who came and talked about the one-planet model and the way we're using more resources than we have to be sustainable. And one of the things he asked in that presentation was, “What's tenure for? They don't grant us tenure for private gain. It's for public good, so how are you going to use tenure for the public good?” If we apply our knowledge and our status for
the good of the communities that we serve, then it's seen as political in a way that it's not if you're working with industry partners or the Department of Defense. So for me, being someone with tenure means having a responsibility to think about what my knowledge tells me is the right thing to do in this time of climate crisis.

YCC: What do you think you'll do next?

A. Well, I can’t say that! I just got off probation. (laughs) I mean, this fight is amazing — hundreds and hundreds of people all across West Virginia and Virginia and now North Carolina working every day on every angle. There are people working on the health effects of the toxic coating on the pipeline. There are people working on Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. There are people monitoring the work that the pipeline company is doing. There are lawyers working pro bono. There are people living in trees here in Montgomery County who’ve been there for more than a year. So if anyone ever doubted that we could do something about climate change if we just work together, they just need to come here to southwest Virginia and see what we’re doing. There's hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people just working as hard as you can imagine to save the planet.