

Drax: 'extract and exploit'



“Now the forests are gone, so is the sense of community.”

The government has given permission to Drax Power Station in East Yorkshire to build the UK's biggest gas power capacity.

The Secretary of State has given this green light to a project that will [lock us into fossil fuel production for at least another two decades](#) against the recommendation of their own planning inspectorate.

Read: 'You burn our trees to power your homes'

This is blatantly a [disaster for the climate](#) and must be challenged. But this is only part of Drax's story, and we must tell it all to tackle it at the root problems.

Environmental justice

Drax Power Station is also the world's biggest burner of wood-based biomass. [Falsely classified as renewable](#), this source of energy is on the rise across Europe - now making up two thirds of the EU's renewable energy supply - with the majority of wood being sourced from the Southeastern US.

In states such as North Carolina, wood pellet companies [such as Drax's main supplier Enviva](#) clear cut around [50 acres of forest a day](#) to feed growing demand from across the Atlantic, and are [planning a massive expansion](#).

Scratch below the surface more and we see that the majority of wood pellet mills and facilities constructed in the Southeastern US to feed biomass demands are clustered around certain areas and communities.

These communities are predominantly rural, predominantly of colour, and have a below state-average income. They are also likely to have already [experienced some kind of pollution from nearby industry](#), be that energy, agriculture or transport. They are often known, for these reasons, as [environmental justice communities](#).

A study from last year found that [all wood pellet mills in North and South Carolina were located in environmental justice communities](#). Residents here, already subject to industrial pollution and economic depression, and which suffer from five times the asthma rate of the rest of the state, now face a tide of increased air and noise pollution and a loss of the forests they have grown up with. This alongside all the benefits the forests provide - water filtration, flood protection, and fresh, cool air.

Sense of community

These impacts are covered up by Enviva and Drax but are severe. Wood pellet facilities are known to release significant amounts of particulate matter, which cause a range of health issues from obesity to asthma.

Deborah Kornegay, lives 6-7 miles from Enviva's Sampson County facility in North Carolina. She explained that this one facility increased particulate matter levels to [75 percent over pre-operation levels](#). Neighbour after neighbour has become reliant on inhalers, and are unable to sleep due to logging trucks barreling by every night.

The loss of the local environment has had a potent effect on the surrounding communities. James Woodley, who grew up in Northampton County, North Carolina, gave a [heart-wrenching testimony](#) recently, in which he described the importance of the local forests where he and his friends and family would visit when growing up - the fish would come and nibble at their feet when dabbled in the water: "Now the forests are gone, so is the sense of community".

Woodley continued: "Dust is everywhere, and even people are breathing in dust and becoming sick from it. The roads where the trucks barrel through the community daily are damaged, and until they are fixed they are also dangerous.

"We fear for our children and pets being hit by a truck, if those kids or animals are on the road during the heavy truck traffic periods, which seems to be all the time. The noise from the facility, and the trucks barreling through the community, is constant, and a real nuisance. We hate living here, we have nowhere to go though. We just try to make it through day by day."

Biodiversity hotspot

Why is this aspect of the story often lost? Because, as residents themselves say, companies such as Enviva deliberately pick the communities that are less able to fight back.

In fact, concerned citizens have been [denied the ability to comment](#) on newly proposed pellet mills in the past, despite Enviva being given more than enough time to make their case. No wonder these voices are never heard, if they are being systematically silenced.

Back to Drax. Why is it that last year, millions of tonnes of wood from a UN Biodiversity Hotspot was cut down and shipped 4000km overseas to be burnt in a UK power station, only to increase emissions? Why is it that communities on the sharp edge of environmental injustice are being marginalised further by an industry that, as Cindy Elmore rightly pointed out, is simply a [continuation of British colonialism](#)?

It is because Drax's burning of coal, wood, and potentially now gas, is just a symptom of a wider model. The model that Drax operates is one that sees both forests and communities as their right to exploit. This model exacerbates existing injustices, rather than tackling them.

The model is always the same, whether it is the [indigenous Shor of Siberia](#) losing their villages and culture to coal imported by Drax, the [communities of the South Eastern US](#) losing their forests and health to wood imported by Drax, or any new communities overseas being [displaced and broken apart by gas](#) imported by a future Drax facility. The natural world and communities on the frontline are expendable. Big corporations are not.

False separation

This is why we cannot create a false separation between the environment and social justice. If the solutions are devised by the powerful, they will continue to be weak, and hurt the marginalised the most.

This has been the case with carbon offsetting for decades now, which [industries still pretend will solve all our problems](#). It is why mega-mining companies are rushing to extract metals and minerals they claim are required for the renewable energy transition, but in fact are a [smokescreen for continued human rights abuses](#).

This is why a burgeoning biomass industry, which destroys forests and biodiversity, harms the climate, and ravages communities, has taken off with [barely any question from policymakers](#). It is why the people whose voices need to be centred are those that are most affected by these activities, not those committing them.

Drax is just a company clinging onto a model of the past that will not deliver climate justice. Time and time again it has proven that it is willing to open up new rounds of exploitation simply to survive, to keep burning. Now it wants to be the world leader in a [technology that requires vast amounts of land, water and forests](#), just so it can stay in operation.

North Carolina is already on the frontline of the climate crisis and is said to be the [birthplace of the environmental justice movement](#). The communities there should have the final say on the decisions that affect their livelihoods, not Drax. Otherwise, we risk repeating mistakes of the past over and over again.

This Author

Mark Robinson is a campaigner with Biofuelwatch, working to raise awareness of the negative impacts of industrial biofuels and bioenergy on biodiversity, human rights, food sovereignty and climate change. Biofuelwatch are currently campaigning to transfer over £1 billion in UK subsidies for biomass electricity towards genuinely renewable wind, wave and solar power.

Image: [US Forest Service](#), Flickr.

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