

# **Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front**

Bron Taylor

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Radical Environmentalism comprises a cluster of environmental movements and ideologies that share an overall worldview that includes a perception of the sacredness of nature. The religious and ideological beliefs of these movements, and the criticisms to which they are typically subjected, are described in detail in RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM. Their basic orientation can be, however, briefly characterized: Radical environmental movements trace environmental degradation to anthropocentric and hierarchical western philosophies and religions. They prescribe in response lifestyle simplification, political resistance to the destructive forces, and a spiritual “reconnection” with nature. These responses, they believe, depend on a “resacralization” of human attitudes and perceptions of the natural world.

By the early twenty-first century Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) had become the best known of the radical environmental groups in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, and they had established beachheads in scores of countries on every continent but Antarctica.

## **Earth First!**

Earth First!, with its slogan “no compromise in defense of mother earth,” was founded in 1980. It rapidly became known for its dramatic civil disobedience campaigns and the occasional use of sabotage in its efforts to thwart commercial incursions into biologically sensitive lands. In its first two decades it focused especially upon North America’s remaining old-growth forests, evocatively labeled “ancient” or “cathedral” forests to reinforce their special importance.

Dave Foreman, who left the WILDERNESS SOCIETY after he became disenchanted with the efforts of such mainstream environmental groups to arrest environmental decline, was the most charismatic leader among Earth First!’s co-founders (variously numbered at 4 or 5, depending on differing movement origin myths). His strategic purpose in founding the group was, firstly, to introduce and promote sabotage as well as civil disobedience as a means of environmental struggle, whenever possible increasing the costs and removing the profit from environmentally destructive practices – in other words, waging economic warfare against those destroying nature; secondly, to shame mainstream environmentalists into taking stronger stands by harshly criticizing them and exposing their compromising positions; thirdly, and ironically given the second tactic, he expected that by taking on the mantle of “environmental extremism,” a label often applied to mainstream groups by their adversaries, that mainstream groups might appear more reasonable by comparison, thereby increasing their influence and effectiveness.

As importantly, Foreman wanted to attack anthropocentric attitudes, for he viewed the root of the problem as religious in essence. Drawing on historians such as Lynn White, Perry Miller and Roderick Nash, Foreman argued,

Our problem is a spiritual crisis. The Puritans brought with them a theology that saw the wilderness of North America as a haunt of Satan, with savages as his disciples and wild animals as his demons – all of which had to be cleared, defeated, tamed, or killed (Harpers Forum 1990: 44).

So like most radical greens, Foreman blamed the advent of agriculture (following Paul Shepard and Jim Mason), and Christianity as well, for environmental decline. During Earth First!'s early years, it was not difficult to find evidence of an anti-Christianity view, particularly since James Watt was the Secretary of the Interior. In 1976, before his appointment by President Ronald Reagan, Watt had founded the Mountain States Legal Foundation, which bills itself as a defender of individual liberty, property rights, and free enterprise. It is regarded by environmentalists as an anti-environmental group, one of the first and most important members of the so-called WISE USE MOVEMENT. Watt was also an evangelical Christian who minimized environmental problems and was widely if inaccurately perceived (largely due to selectively quoted congressional testimony) to believe the imminent second coming of Christ obviated the need for environmental concern. Reagan, who had appointed him, told confidants that he also expected the imminent return of Christ.

Like most radical greens, Foreman saw promise in pagan religions for a biocentric ethics. Indeed, the most common perception animating the movement can be labeled “pagan,” if this is defined as spirituality involving one or more of two perceptions: (1) the earth itself is alive and sacred, a perception that for many could properly be labeled Pantheism (a word derived by conflating the Greek word *pan* meaning “all” and *theos* meaning “god,” signifying that “all is god”); and (2) that the world is filled with non-human intelligences – often thought to be capable of communicating and communing with humans – who are worthy of reverence. Such perceptions, sometimes labeled “ANIMISM” (from the Latin for “soul”), involve a belief that various entities in nature have souls or spirits.

Early in the publication of the *Earth First!* journal, Foreman signaled his spiritual inclinations by publishing according to what has become known in contemporary Paganism as the PAGAN CALENDAR. He was significantly influenced by PAUL SHEPARD, GARY SNYDER, and STARHAWK, each of whom promoted earthen spiritualities. Even more influential upon Foreman was the subtle nature spirituality of the ecologist ALDO LEOPOLD and the novelist EDWARD ABBEY. After learning about ARNE NAESS and DEEP ECOLOGY shortly after founding Earth First!, Foreman and his comrades also immediately seized on and adopted deep ecology as Earth First!'s natural philosophy.

But it was Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (1968) that especially well the deep affective connections that Foreman had for nature, as it had for many other desert dwellers. In this book Abbey described mystical experiences in the desert that taught him humility and a proper spiritual perception, which for him meant biocentrism and a reverence for the land. Abbey's novel *The Monkeywrench Gang* (1975) portrayed ecological saboteurs fighting back against an industrial civilization portrayed as totalitarian and relentlessly

destructive. The book was not entirely fiction, because it was based on an ecological resistance movement that had begun in the 1950s and had been hinted at in *Desert Solitaire*. Indeed, Abbey's friend Jack Loeffler would later indicate that Abbey and many of his friends had been experimenting with *The Anarchist Cookbook* during the campaign to save BLACK MESA from Peabody Coal, and that some of these experiences, and related fantasies, were incorporated into the novel (author's interview, July 1997). Moreover, through its characters, *The Monkeywrench Gang* effectively captured the various types of nature religion that animated those early green rebels, such as Doc Sarvis's enthusiastic hope that "Pan shall rise again!" (1975: 44), and George Washington Hayduke's occasional pondering of "the oceanic unity of things" and his rationale for desert monkeywrenching as a perception that the desert was "holy country" (1975: 227, 128).

Like Abbey and most of his rebel characters, and critics including Louis Mumford and Gary Snyder, Foreman's social philosophy was anarchistic, although his was a kind of libertarian individualism common in the western United States, not the kind that envisioned the overthrow of the United States government. Yet the early *Earth First!* journal included language in its masthead about not accepting the authority of the state. Its pages expressed enthusiasm for anarchism, on the one hand, and paganism, indigenous religions, and sometimes religions originating in Asia, especially Daoism and Buddhism, on the other. These expressed affinities contributed to the kind of subcultures that were drawn to the movement, which included communitarian anarchists and anarcho-primitivists, who really *did* wish to overthrow the state, as well as Pagans and some Wiccans, many from California and the Pacific Northwest, who brought a more overt and ritualized form of nature religion to the movement.

In general, the newcomers were more avowedly anti-capitalist and likely to completely reject the legitimacy of nation-states than were Foreman and some of the environmentalists who had helped form Earth First!. In short, they did not believe the capitalistic world system could be reformed. Meanwhile pacifists, anti-war and anti-nuclear weapons activists, many who had been inspired by the religious ethics of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, were also drawn to the movement because of its willingness to engage in civil disobedience in defense of life.

The diverse streams that flowed into the movement quickly led to tensions. A few activists including Howie Wolke, an Earth First! co-founder and one of Foreman's closest friends, argued strongly but unsuccessfully that the pagan tone of the journal was counterproductive and should be halted. In 1982 an Earth First! editor objected to publishing articles describing tactics such as tree and road spiking (using metal or other sharp spikes in an effort to prevent tree felling by making it unprofitable, or to damage the tires of adversaries, sometimes in order to avert apprehension and incarceration). Despite his cogent argument that such tactics could lead to injuries, he was forced out by Foreman and his supporters, who considered the environmental crisis to be so grave that such risks were acceptable and necessary. Indeed, Foreman and many of his supporters, who sometimes musingly called themselves "rednecks for

wilderness,” asserted that if attacked during campaigns, they would not hesitate to use violence in self-defense, even lethal violence if necessary. Foreman wrote that while he admired the nonviolent approaches “advocated by Gandhi and Martin Luther King” he could not go along with them because, “unfortunately, I am still an animal . . . I cannot turn the other cheek” (1982: 4).

Two prominent Buddhists, Robert Aitken and Gary Snyder, criticized the martial and violent-sounding rhetoric of those initial years, but Foreman responded strongly in a way that many other Earth First!ers would later parrot:

Any creature, no matter how seemingly meek, will fight back when threatened . . . Eastern [religious] ideas of stepping out of the violent cycle are presumptuous and anthropocentric (by setting human beings apart from the semi-violent natural world) . . . I am entirely pragmatic about violence/non-violence. We should use whichever we feel comfortable with and whichever is most appropriate to a particular situation . . . There are many paths one can take to defend our Earth Mother. Including that of the warrior (Foreman 1982: 2).

By 1983 a “Cathedral Forest Action Group” had formed to defend Oregon’s forests and distance themselves from such martial tones, a group that generally thought that the revolution of consciousness that was needed would have to come from a loving rather than an angry and violent disposition. But another response was emerging at the same time, that of impatient Earth First!ers who thought that the time had come to escalate tactics. Some began to advocate arson, and such incidents began in the 1980s.

Others sought to develop a revolutionary strategy to overturn the nation state, or at least, to be ready to take advantage of the inevitable devolution of industrial civilization, which they considered to be unsustainable. In 1988, for example, an anarchist faction began publishing *Live Wild or Die* to promote what they considered to be an even more radical approach. During the same period of the mid to late 1980s, a former labor organizer turned environmentalist, Judi Bari, rose to some prominence, advocating “revolutionary ecology” in an effort to blend biocentrism and socialism in a pro-worker green ideology.

Bari became famous when a bomb exploded in her automobile in May 1990, permanently disabling her and causing lesser injuries to fellow Earth First! campaigner Darryl Cherney. Both were soon arrested, charged with knowingly possessing the bomb and labeled “ecoterrorists” by law enforcement authorities. They were soon released for lack of evidence in a case that was never solved.

Both Bari and Cherney had been campaigning to protect California’s redwood forests and had strong, pagan spiritual sensibilities; Cherney even had become involved with the innovative, pagan CHURCH OF ALL WORLDS, itself inspired by Robert Heinlein’s science fiction novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961). Bari and Cherney sued the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Police Department in Oakland, where the bombing occurred, asserting these authorities had violated their rights when they publicly accused them of knowingly transporting the bomb and of planning to

use it in an act of ecoterrorism. Bari and Cherney won their lawsuit in 2002 and were awarded 4.4 million dollars in damages, five years after Bari's death from cancer in 1997. She specified that her obituaries list her occupation as a "revolutionary" and urged her friends to remember what Wobbly martyr Joe Hill said just before he was executed in 1915: "Don't mourn. Organize!"

A year before the bombing, in 1989, Foreman and four others were arrested and charged with a number of sabotage incidents after a multi-million dollar FBI operation. The attention of the authorities had been drawn to Earth First! as a result of their rhetoric and a growing amount of "ecotage" (a term meaning sabotage in defense of the environment), occurring in the Western United States. FBI agents infiltrated Earth First!, identified an active group of saboteurs, and encouraged it to use explosives, which its members refused to do. The cell decided to use torches to topple power line towers carrying electricity from a nuclear power plant. The plan was hatched as a protest of nuclear power, which radical environmentalists oppose for the radioactive pollutants it produces, as well as for its role in nuclear weapons production and as an example of an irresponsible human appetite for energy. Authorities successfully portrayed the action as nuclear terrorism, even though stopping electricity transmission from a power plant poses no danger to its stability or safety.

After the arrests, of course, Foreman and his supporters were feeling especially vulnerable. The west coast leftists (including Judi Bari) and anarchists of Earth First! continued to press for a more radical movement. Between 1989 and 1990, a schism occurred, with Foreman and many of the earliest Earth First!ers disassociating themselves from the movement that they had launched.

One of the many reasons for the schism was that many Earth First!ers, including at least two who had been arrested and charged with Foreman, felt that he had disassociated himself from the movement for selfish motives, as part of a strategy to prevent a long prison sentence. Foreman, in an unusual plea agreement, pled guilty to a felony conspiracy charge in the powerline incident, and the charge was reduced to a misdemeanor after a period of good behavior was certified by the court. He thus escaped serving time in prison. Two other activists with relatively minor roles received little jail time, but Peg Millett and Mark Davis, who had been directly involved in trying to topple the power line towers, served several years each in federal prison.

Both Millett and Davis were motivated by a deep earthen spirituality. Millett often sang songs expressing reverence for the earth at Earth First! gatherings, and did so also during her sentencing hearing, to convey why she had taken such an action. Davis explained his vandalism of ski lifts in Arizona as an effort to thwart the expansion of a ski resort in Arizona's San Francisco Mountains, because he agreed with the Hopi and Navajo tribes who believe "those mountains are sacred." He concluded with regret that "what has occurred there, despite our feeble efforts, is a terrible spiritual mistake" (Letter to the author, Summer 1992).

After the disposition of the case and writing from prison to the Earth First! journal, Davis asserted that his own, more honorable silence, had enabled Foreman and

his attorneys to craft his creative plea agreement. Davis claimed that Foreman had knowingly given him \$480 for the anti-nuclear action and that he “was fully aware of the anti-nuke plans. I know this because I told him myself . . . I could easily have cut a deal to [put him in prison] and save myself” (Davis 1993: 14).

The arrests, bombing, and the aftermath of both, intensified the tensions inherent in the diverse streams of American radicalism that had been drawn to Earth First! By the late 1990s the contradictions that produced the schism that had begun the decade had led to the departure of the majority of Earth Firsters who did not consider themselves anarchists (or considered themselves more libertarian than communitarian/socialistic), along with some of the anarchists who considered their primary passion and moral commitment to be the protection of wilderness and biodiversity. Such activists did not leave environmental work, but created or joined other groups to continue it. Dave Foreman, for example, founded the Wildlands Project in 1992 and started a new magazine, *Wild Earth*. Both endeavors reflected a more mainstream political strategy and drew on Conservation Biology, as Foreman continued his association with many of the leading figures in this field. The strategy was to draw together scientists, grassroots biodiversity activists, private landholders, and environmental groups such as the Nature Conservancy to secure critical habitat while simultaneously lobbying North American governments to support research and policies congruent with managing ecosystems for long-term biodiversity preservation.

Another outcome from all the discord was that beginning in the late 1980s and through the mid 1990s, many of the movement’s most talented musicians and ritual innovators drifted away, including Dana Lyons, whose songs, including *Tree Music* (which has also been turned into a children’s book), would later find an audience within the wider environmental movement. With such figures went much of the wilderness ritualizing that had evolved within the movement, especially from the early 1980s to the middle of the 1990s. This ritualizing had included song and poetry fests, Wicca-influenced dances, and other processes designed to deepen connections with non-human nature, such as the Council of All Beings. At the annual “Round River Rendezvous” (named after a story by Aldo Leopold), sometimes elaborate pageants had been performed that expressed the typical radical environmental cosmogony of a fall from a foraging paradise, a sense of an apocalyptic present, and the hope for a world with all life forms that would again live in a sacred balance.

Most long-term participants recognized that the Earth First! of the 1980s and first half of the 1990s, which had involved a great deal of religious innovation, had been replaced by the end of the century with a much more urban and anarchistic ethos. The movement was increasingly fueled by disaffected youth from large cities more than by career environmental activists whose primary passion was the wilderness. Many long-term activists came to consider moribund the movement they had known earlier. Many of these felt nostalgic for what had been and regretted their own uncharitable behavior that led to its devolution. The upshot of this history is that by the early twenty-first century, it seemed less likely than it did a decade earlier that Earth First!

would establish itself as a nature religion with its own evolving ritual life that would continue to inspire environmental action.

This does not mean that radical environmental activism had disappeared or lost social power. Its worldview continued to spread, and in the early 1990s, a new faction emerged, interjecting new energy, if not into the movement's religious dimensions, into its strategic arsenal. This came with the invention of the Earth Liberation Front.

## The Earth Liberation Front

Earth First! was established in the United Kingdom after a 1990 "roadshow" tour by activists from the United States. It grew and flourished there in the 1990s in the midst of sometimes furious direct action resistance to road building projects, much of which enjoyed significant public support. Much of this campaign was conducted under the Earth First! umbrella, which had a number of creative expressions, including overtly pagan groups such as the Donga Tribe and Dragon Environmental Network.

In a way reminiscent of the factionalizing of the Earth First! movement in the United States, however, individuals who considered themselves to be the most radical if not revolutionary of these activists, felt that more aggressive tactics than non-violent civil disobedience were necessary. According to an account published in the *Earth First!* journal in the United States, activists frustrated with resistance within Earth First! to more aggressive tactics, formed the "Earth Liberation Front" in 1992 (ELF 1993). A communiqué from "Tara the Sea Elf" (ELF members refer to themselves as "elves") claimed that by 1993 the elves had created twenty clandestine cells in England, and had used arson and other means to attack corporations in Europe and North America, including a number engaged in producing genetically modified organisms.

In the United States, many of the most radical of Earth First! and green anarchists quickly adopted the ELF acronym, seemingly emboldened by it. The name caught on rapidly in part because it provided a rubric for the most radical of actions that was good public relations: elves are viewed positively in western literature as playfully mischievous, not malicious. The moniker caught on also, in part, because the idea of elves in the woods cohered with the pagan spiritualities commonly found in radical environmental movements and among some of these activists.

Given the covert nature of the ELF, which makes interviewing such activists nearly impossible, care must be taken when discussing the religious motivations of its participants. Interviewing spokespeople is problematic, for it is unclear how close they and their views are to the elves themselves. Two anarchists, Craig Rosebraugh and Leslie James Pickering, who said they had received anonymous communiqués from ELF activists and were anointed (by themselves and the media) as official ELF spokespeople, claimed not to know any of the Elves personally. Moreover, they did not dwell on spiritual motivations in defending ELF actions.

Instead, they seemed primarily interested in promoting their anarchist cause, connecting it closely with an understanding of ELF as an anti-capitalist movement. They “resigned” from their spokesperson’s roles in 2003, they averred, because they did not believe the ELF had a revolutionary strategy, nor did they believe that arson and other sabotage tactics should preclude harming human beings. For these reasons, they said, they were resigning in order to form a truly revolutionary organization. The desire to avoid further unwanted attention by law enforcement authorities may have provided a more concrete rationale for the resignations.

Despite the difficulties involved in learning directly from ELF cell members, it is possible to surmise, given the ELF’s birth from the Earth First! movement which is often overtly pagan in its spirituality, that at least some of its activists would be similarly motivated. Tara the Sea Elf provides concrete reason to suspect a similar spirituality animating both Earth First and the ELF. She asserted that the ELF

... perpetuates the legends of the “Little People,” which in most European countries have a history of causing trouble, being mischievously always heard, but never seen. These “mythical creatures” lived close to the earth in most legends (1996: 18).

Here elves function as fairies have for other radical environmental activists – they are appropriated as symbolic earth warriors – conjuring images that resonate with the pagan spirituality of many such activists. One Earth First!er, for example, writing under the pseudonym “Buck Young,” argued that modern people cannot experience the world as enchanted because they have paved over and thus muted the earth’s sacred voices. He wrote an innovative account of the emergence of radical environmental activism that hints at why “elves” proved to be an attractive trope:

Gnomes and elves, fauns and faeries, goblins and ogres, trolls and bogies . . . [must infiltrate our world to] effect change from the inside . . . [These nature-spirits are] running around in human bodies . . . working in co-ops . . . talking to themselves in the streets . . . spiking trees and blowing up tractors . . . starting revolutions . . . [and] making up religions (Young 1991: 8-9).

This statement reveals not only a pagan spirituality but also awareness that he and his compatriots are inventing religion. In an interview during an Earth First Rendezvous (Vermont, August 1991) he explained, for example, that J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy novels, *The Lord of the Rings*, were important to his nature spirituality. In this he is not alone, for these novels were inspirational to a number of radical greens. He is also not alone in recognizing that he and others are making up a new green religion, crafting it in innovative ways from historical sources, existing religions, and new sources wherever found, whenever useful.

Tara the Sea Elf would have no objection to spiritualities that help people to perceive the earth’s sacred voices. She concluded her own primer on the ELF by asserting that radical environmental and indigenous groups like the militant American Indian Movement “reflect the philosophy of many First Nations [indigenous peoples] across the world, that you have to show your enemy how serious you are in defending what you regard as sacred” (1996: 18). Yet she insisted that Elves and their sympathizers

emphasize non-violence, with the proviso that it is improper to consider property damage violent: “As always, ELF calls for no injury to life, only to profit and property” (1996: 18).

By 2004, a little more than a decade after it was founded, the elves had proven fertile and innovative, growing in number and expanding their targets to include luxury homes and apartments being built in areas considered ecologically sensitive, ski resorts expanding into habitats considered critical to endangered species, and sport utility vehicles, considered the most egregious examples of unbridled materialism and pollution-causing consumption. In the United States alone, damages had grown to well over 100 million dollars, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation had labeled the ELF its number one domestic terrorism group. Yet neither Earth First! nor the ELF had caused serious injuries or deaths of their adversaries or bystanders, although their many critics understandably asserted that it was only a matter of time before they would do so, even if unintentionally. Meanwhile, other critics claimed it was only a matter of time before some of their members broke off into another faction that would intend, and succeed, in doing so.

## Conclusions

Care must be taken not to overemphasize the influence of religion when analyzing social movements, for religion is a variable that combines with other factors in complicated ways, and its relative importance is often obscure. Nevertheless, earth-centered religious perceptions and motivations do appear to be decisive for many if not most in radical environmentalism and Earth First!, and probably in the shadowy realm of the movement’s elvish underground.

If there is a radical environmental milieu in which these subcultures freely trade in religious and political ideologies that are at variance with the mainstreams of the cultures in which they are situated, it would make sense to assume that this process of exchange and cross-fertilization will continue. There does seem to be such a milieu, so this process is likely to continue, as will the debates and contested nature over what different people consider authentic expressions of radical environmental sensibility. Only time will tell the future evolution of radical environmentalism in general, and the Earth First! and ELF movements, but in the short term, it looks like the twenty-first century will see more of such earthen spirituality-inspired activism.

Despite the commitment not to cause injuries to adversaries or innocents that is professed by most of the activists who engage in sabotage or arson, they clearly risk causing harm. Some of the most radical among them, at least rhetorically, seem ready to abandon such scruples.

Presumably they would if the revolutionary moment appeared to be nigh. This may be the most common criticism, and fear, of Earth First! and the ELF. There are other criticisms of the radical environmental worldview and ideology that are discussed in

RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM, as well as typical rejoinders, which need not be repeated here.

What ought not to be lost in the social scientific analysis of these movements is the moral challenge posed by them. Whether one ends up agreeing with or condemning them, or doing a little of both, carefully considering the claims these activists make can spur reasoned moral debate. With their illegal, outrageous, and sometimes dangerous tactics, they urge us to evaluate whether our behaviors are threatening the fecundity and diversity of life on earth. They demand that we consider whether our putatively democratic political systems provide what they claim to, namely, a reasonable chance to promote and protect the values that we as citizens consider inviolable. And they pose the morally and spiritually radical question, whether nature is sacred in some way, and if so, what moral duties to the wider community of life inhere to such a perception, to such a faith.

Bron Taylor, University of Florida

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- See also:* Ananda Marga's Tantric Neo-Humanism; Anarchism; Abbey, Edward; Biocentric Religion; Bioregionalism; Bioregionalism and the North American Bioregional Congress; Black Mesa; Conservation Biology; Deep Ecology; Depth Ecology; Diggers and Levelers; Donga Tribe; Dragon Environmental Network; Eco-Magic; Ecopsychology; Ecosophy T; Environmental Ethics; Faerie Faith in Scotland; Heidegger, Martin; Magic, Animism and the Shamans Craft; Middle Earth; Music of Resistance; Naess Arne; Power Animals; Radical Environmentalism (and adjacent), Rodney Coronado and the Animal Liberation Front; Religious Environmentalist Paradigm; Seed, John; Sexuality and Eco-Spirituality; Shepard, Paul; Snyder, Gary; Starhawk; Tree Music; Watson, Paul and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society; White, Lynn.

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Bron Taylor, Editor in Chief Continuum International, 2005.

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