

# **EF! at 30**

Bron Taylor

November 2010

Like many who were drawn to Earth First! during the 1980s, I had been an activist fighting US interventionism in Latin America and involved in anti-Nuclear campaigns. Hoping to be more effective, I went to graduate school to better understand the ways religious and ethical beliefs and practices both block and sometimes promote grassroots political mobilization and rebellion. Although I was committed to such movements, deep down I knew something was missing.

In the Autumn of 1987, I noticed newspaper accounts about activists who had blockaded the “Barstow to Las Vegas” motorcycle race. They were hoping to thwart the destruction of the Mojave’s fragile desert ecosystem. They called themselves “Earth First!”

I soon learned that the same group was sabotaging the hunting of endangered bighorn sheep, and that others were being arrested resisting deforestation and nuclear power.

These activists knew what was missing—aggressive defense of the Earth’s living systems.

A decade earlier I read Edward Abbey’s *The Monkeywrench Gang*, the ribald tale of outraged greens engaged in sabotage to thwart the destruction of the places they knew and loved. At the time I did not know that it was based on forms of resistance emerging at least as early as the 1950s. Although it struck a chord, I thought it was just fiction.

Earth First! demonstrated that it was not.

I was thrilled to learn a movement was emerging that rejected anthropocentrism (the notion that only human beings had moral value). I resonated with its ecocentric and biocentric values, that natural systems and all life forms have intrinsic value apart from their usefulness to human beings. But I was unsure about claims that our species was precipitating a massive extinction event or assertions that illegal tactics were warranted and effective. So, I left for the woods to find these activists, to learn from them and scrutinize their claims. Through this encounter, I sought to sharpen my own understandings and reflect these back to the movement in the hope of contributing, in my own way, to its effectiveness.

For more than two decades, Earth First! has been my muse. Many of its activists have become both heroes and fast friends to me.

Although I suspect that I have learned more from movement activists than any have from me, I have written widely on the movement and expressed views about it that some movement people have told me they value. I cannot repeat this body of work in these pages, but I can review some of what I have found, and point those interested towards deeper reading.

The first article I published was “The Religion and Politics of Earth First!” (1990). It identified three pillars undergirding Earth First! activism: first, a deeply spiritual biocentrism including variously understood beliefs that the natural world is sacred; next, a belief that human beings were precipitating a catastrophic extinction event; and finally, a conviction that most religious, cultural and political systems fuel destructive

anthropocentric attitudes and practices. The article also explained the diversity of the movement and some of the factions within it, while also explicating how these premises were used to justify lawbreaking.

The first pillar is not something that can be rationally justified—it must be experienced and felt. This perception, this feeling, I easily shared with movement people. But it took years of careful study and deliberation to conclude that movement activists were also correct, in the main, about the anthropogenic (human-caused) extinction crisis and its cultural roots.

Meanwhile, the movement was facing many lines of criticism from outsiders, while internal critiques were often no less harsh. Like activists in the movement, I tried my best to sort out the competing views. Some critics, for example, charged that elite, misanthropic, and misogynist white men in affluent, advanced capitalist countries constituted radical environmentalism. They claimed that movement activists were unconcerned with the plight of disadvantaged people around the world. Although my own experiences belied this portrait, the criticisms nevertheless raised for me important questions: To what extent, if any, is radical environmentalism merely a phenomenon of relatively affluent Northern countries? If there are social movements that can be considered radical environmentalist around the world, to what extent and in what ways do they resemble, or differ, from ones in the capitalist North?

Such questions led to *Ecological Resistance Movements: the Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism* (1995), a collection of articles reflecting original research that I had commissioned and edited. Among other things, we found that around the world there are increasing numbers and diverse expressions of social movements that are engaged in direct action resistance to environmental degradation. This on-the-ground research contradicted those who charged that radical environmentalism is a bastion of white male privilege. We also found, contrary to the views of some radical environmentalists, that radical action in defense of nature can be independent of the radical worldview and consciousness alteration, that many of those who had been deeply influenced by deep ecology philosophy thought was a prerequisite to environmental resistance. One implication of this finding was, and is, that coalitions between radical environmentalists and deep ecologists are possible with those whose worldviews are shaped by the world's predominant religions and cultures. The key, we found, is to begin by focusing on the ways in which outsiders are usurping the land, threatening lives and livelihoods, while also eroding the future prospects of their children. To promote such coalitions of resistance most effectively, of course, activists must also continually teach that human wellbeing is mutually dependent upon the flourishing of all other living things, and upon the health of environmental systems themselves.

I followed up this work during the following decade with a series of articles seeking to illuminate the critical aspects of the movement, especially in North America.

Ten years ago I contributed an essay entitled “Forward!” to the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of the *Journal*, spotlighting some of the most significant victories that movement activists had achieved during the first two decades. Since then, I have traveled far

more widely around the world. Through these experiences and further historical and cultural research, I have become convinced that the radical environmental movement has both been reflecting important, growing trends and effectively promoting them. In short, although it may be difficult for activists in the trenches to see, because more obvious are the immediate losses and the wrenching challenges, they are participating in and precipitating some profound and positive cultural transformations.

These trends I analyze in my latest book, *Dark Green Religion: Nature, Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (2010). In the parts of the book that may be of greatest interest to radical environmentalists, I provide my most detailed analysis yet of the tributaries to the movement, while noting its most common features. With this laid out in an early chapter, I then show that the spiritualities of belonging and connection to the Earth, that are common within the movement, are finding increasingly diverse expressions outside of it. I demonstrate, moreover, that these developments are not only occurring in relatively affluent countries, but around the world. A key part of my argument is that if we think very long term—since these are sensory and thus sensible spiritualities— we can surmise that these are the worldviews and spiritualities that are most likely to flourish. This is because it is those who adopt such spiritualities and practices who are the most likely to move rapidly toward lifeways and livelihoods that are themselves able to survive and flourish long term.



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Earth First! Journal, Vol 31, No. 1, November 2010. Republished by the Environment  
& Society Portal, Multimedia Library. <[environmentandsociety.org/node/7261](http://environmentandsociety.org/node/7261)>

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