

Forward!

Once and Future Earth First!

Bron Taylor

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Radical Environmentalism. Deep Ecology. Ecocentrism. Biodiversity. Ecofeminism. Bioregionalism. Ecotage. When I first went to the woods to meet Earth First! activists more than a decade ago, I knew little about such things. What I did know was that there was a group of rowdy activists risking arrest and repression in defense of nature. I knew also about the escalating rate of environmental deterioration—so something in the emerging portrait struck an internal chord.

I previously had concluded, as a student of social movements, that whenever people clamor outside the gates of power, risking their freedom doing so, all people of good will should carefully consider their claims and grievances. It is often from the margins that the greatest truths are told. Based on what I could read about the movement in the mainstream press, however, I was ambivalent. So I went to the woods to see for myself.

When asked to briefly explain radical environmentalism, I sometimes speak about three pillars of Earth First!’s activism:

First is a belief that the world’s living systems are valuable apart from their usefulness to humans and a conviction that all forms of life should flourish. (This is the essence of Deep Ecology.) There is great diversity in the experiences that evoke such feelings, and in the philosophical or religious streams with which movement activists feel affinity. To convey their sense of the value of life on Earth, however, movement activists of all sorts tend to refer to nature as sacred. No other word seems adequate.

Second is a fact-claim, that humans are precipitating a massive extinction episode.

Third is a fervent conviction that resisting this assault on the Earth’s living systems is a sacred duty, and that the finality of extinction can justify extra-legal tactics.

Of course there is far more to it than this. But this bare-bones outline can provide a framework for briefly reflecting on two decades—and the future—of Earth First! activism.

The sacred ground that animates Earth First! activism and the related EF! belief in the intrinsic value of nature cannot be arrived at by reason. They must be felt. This explains why activists often urge one another to get out to the remaining wild places, to “feel the magic” or “hear the Earth’s sacred voices.”

This is also why the arts and ritual became important aspects in the movement, for they can evoke what activists believe is a proper spiritual perception. Indeed, from the movement’s outset Dave Foreman insisted that to arrest environmental decline we must “resacralize” our perception of nature. Such a point of view is not subject to rational defense. But it is a premise you can test for yourself, outside, somewhere.

The fundamental fact-claim of the movement is subject to rational scrutiny: Humans are precipitating massive extinctions. After intensively studying contemporary environmental science, I have concluded that the extinction crisis is real and among the gravest threats to the Earth’s living systems.

The third central conviction, the one that makes Earth First! the radical vanguard of the international Deep Ecology movement, is that extralegal tactics are justifiable means to resist environmental degradation. This belief depends on a continuum of

political analyses. On the more reformist side is a belief that “politics as usual” cannot or will not respond quickly enough to prevent extinctions. On the revolutionary side is the conviction that modern political systems have no legitimacy and must be overturned. Activists who view the system as destructive and corrupt, but believe it is nevertheless amenable to popular pressure, deploy a diverse range of resistance tactics in an effort to wrest concessions from it. More pessimistic activists conclude that nothing short of the abolition of nation states and a return to foraging societies can reharmonize life on Earth. Such activists insist that this will occur through revolution or will eventually transpire as modern society collapses of its own suicidal inertia.

Perhaps because of such general and understandable pessimism, few activists fully recognize the extent to which Earth First! has had profound, positive impacts. When it was founded, few in America had even heard of the term “biological diversity” or knew about the dramatic decline of the Earth’s species and ecosystem variety. Similarly, few knew about the devastating environmental impacts of dam building, ranching, road building and industrial logging. Earth First! forced these issues onto the public agenda. Through harsh criticism and even ridicule, movement activists shamed mainstream environmental organizations for ignoring such issues, and put the commercial interests and government officials responsible for the devastation on the defensive.

Remarkably, Earth First!’s campaign goals (with the exception of its recent focus on resisting globalization) have been largely adopted, although not always championed, by the green mainstream. Meanwhile, Earth First! critiques, along with a growing chorus of mainstream greens parroting them, have even begun to transform the practices of federal and state agencies. Moreover, concessions on road building and ranching on public lands, to name just two examples, are inconceivable in the absence of two decades of Earth First! activism. And who would have imagined 20 years ago that in the late 1990s the Secretary of the Interior would enact on a small scale the vision of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, dismantling an environmentally destructive dam? Who then would have expected today’s serious debate over breaching the dam at Glen Canyon or those blockading the Columbia River Basin?

Also little recognized is that Earth First! activism has played a significant role in a seismic shift in human attitudes toward nature. Survey data collected in North America reveal that clear majorities agree with propositions asserting the intrinsic value of nature and even its spiritual importance, and few Americans currently express indifference or hostility toward endangered species. Meanwhile, large predators are now celebrated. School children and clear majorities of grownups support the reintroduction of formerly extirpated species, even those formerly called varmints, such as prairie dogs and ferrets. These changes have occurred in a blink of evolutionary time; we can take heart from them.

At its best, the radical environmental movement confronts the world with a salutary and unusual humility, claiming that humans are not superior to other life forms. This humility is also expressed in the understanding that because ecosystems are complex we will never fully understand them. Consequently, we should refuse to assume and

act as though we can. At its best, radical environmentalism fosters critical thinking about the roots of environmental degradation and intelligent and effective resistance in response.

It is appropriate and even empowering to note the movement's accomplishments, especially on the occasion of Earth First!'s 20th anniversary. But the global environment continues to worsen rapidly. One recent study estimated that 30 percent of the natural world was destroyed between 1970 and 1995. Although radical environmentalists have pioneered many ways to slow the destruction, obviously there is no time to waste on self-congratulation.

Instead, here at the cusp of the movement's third decade, it is time to think even more radically. We might begin with questions like: What have we learned in the past two decades? What has worked, what still works, and what never did? We should not leave it at that, but push the questioning deeper: What sorts of assumptions about political systems, and about the effectiveness of certain strategies and tactics, make the most sense, especially in the light of environmental history and global environmental politics?

This 20th anniversary issue provides a good trailhead for such questioning, yet reading it should only begin a longer path. To maximize effectiveness we must continually re-evaluate our premises, strategies, tactics and ethics. Such ongoing re-appraisal also requires humility, one that refuses to assume we have perfectly perceived the causes of and remedies to environmental decline. Such humility may also reduce the intensity of internal disagreements that sometimes distract activists from what Gary Snyder has called "the real work."

Whatever grief, anger or frustration we feel as we work to arrest further environmental destruction, the most effective resistance will make clear to adversaries and bystanders alike the true ground of our passions—namely our irrepressible love for life on Earth.

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