

# **The Religion and Politics of Earth First!**

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Illustration from *Earth First!* journal. For Earth First!ers the wolf is a potent symbol of wilderness and the interconnectedness of all forms of life.

Many observers view Earth First! as differing from other environmental groups principally in the militant tactics it espouses. In fact the differences go far deeper. Underpinning their ethics and actions are biocentric beliefs based on fundamentally *religious* sentiments. The recent schism in the movement has less to do with disagreements about these beliefs than with judgements about strategy and tactics. Despite internal tensions Earth First! and similar radical groups are likely to play an increasingly important role in future ecological struggles.

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The bombing of the car of two activists from Earth First! and the FBI's infiltration and arrest of five others has catapulted the group into public view. These radical environmentalists are willing to break the law to save wilderness areas — committing civil disobedience, spiking trees, removing survey stakes or destroying bulldozers, a practice they call “ecotage” or “monkey wrenching”.

Both proponents and opponents of Earth First! recognize the importance of religion in environmental conflicts. One extreme example can be found in a letter purportedly from the person who bombed the car of California Earth First!er Judi Bari, who, quoting Genesis 1:26 (the “dominion” creation story), wrote that “this possessed [pagan] demon Judy Bari ... [told] the multitude that trees were not God’s gift to man but that trees were themselves gods and it was a sin to cut them. [So] I felt the Power of the Lord stir within my heart and I knew I had been Chosen to strike down this demon.” The letter concludes with a warning to other tree worshipers that they will suffer the same fate, for “I AM THE LORDS AVENGER.” It is not known whether or not the letter is genuine, although it does bear strong internal evidence of authenticity

— including an accurate description of the bomb and a hard-to-fabricate narrative that seems to merge Christian fundamentalism and mental illness. But whether authentic or a ploy to cast suspicion away from the true bomber, this letter illustrates dramatically how competing spiritual values can underlie environmental controversies.

Conservationist Alston Chase expresses similar concerns without the violent overtones, he criticizes the “mindless pantheism” and “clandestine heresies” of radical environmentalists and complains that militant environmentalists have uncritically accepted Lynn White’s accusation that Judaism and Christianity produced the West’s anti-nature tendencies. Chase believes White’s article gave the environmental movement “an epistle for spiritual reform” hostile to Western religion.<sup>1</sup>

Although Earth First! militants do tend to reject organized religion, and many are uncomfortable with the explicitly religious rituals and songs now popular in the movement, most report a “spiritual” connection to nature. Earth First!ers often speak of the need to “resacralize” nature. Indeed, the heart and soul of Earth First! resides in a radical “ecological consciousness” that intuitively, affectively and deeply experiences a sense of the sacredness and interconnection of all life. From this experience is derived the claim that all life, and even ecosystems, are intrinsically valuable.

## Earth First! Myths

All religious traditions involve myth, symbol and ritual: the myths usually delineate how the world came to be (cosmogony), what it is like (cosmology), what people are like and capable or incapable of achieving (moral anthropology) and what the future holds (eschatology). The theory of evolution provides a primary cosmogony that promotes the “biocentric ethics” or “Deep Ecology” espoused by Earth First!ers. If all species evolved through the same process, and none were specially created for any particular purpose, then, as Earth First! philosopher Christopher Manes notes, the metaphysical underpinnings of anthropocentrism are displaced, along with the idea that human beings are at the top of the “Great Chain of Being”, ruling over all on Earth. “Taken seriously,” Manes concludes, “evolution means that there is no basis for seeing humans as more advanced or developed than any other species. *Homo sapiens* is not the goal of evolution, for as near as we can tell evolution has no telos — it simply unfolds, life-form after life-form ...” The ethical significance of this cosmogony is that since evolution gives life in all its complexity, the evolutionary process itself is of highest value. The central moral priority of Earth First! is to protect and restore wilderness because undisturbed wilderness provides the necessary genetic stock for the very continuance of evolution.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chase, A. *Playing God in Yellowstone: The Destruction of America’s First National Park*, Atlantic Monthly Press, Boston; White, L., Jr. ‘The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis’, *Science* 155, 1967, pp. 1203–1207.

<sup>2</sup> Manes, C. *Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization*, Little Brown and Co., Boston, London and Toronto, 1990. For an excellent example of the role of the evolutionary

This still does not answer the question: Why should we care about evolution, or wild places, in the first place? Manes' argument displacing humans from the centre of moral concern does not adequately explain where *value* actually resides. This is why so much spirituality gets pulled into the Earth First! movement: some form of spirituality is needed to provide a basis for valuing the evolutionary process and the resulting life forms. Manes himself roots Deep Ecology and Earth First! in "the profound spiritual attachment people have to nature".<sup>3</sup> Even those drawn to a biocentric ethic largely based on an evolutionary cosmogony eventually rely on metaphors of the sacred to explain their feelings.

Some of the diverse tributaries to the Earth First! movement are *explicitly* religious, tracing their biocentric sentiments to Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, witchcraft or pagan earth-worship. There are even a few Christian nature mystics among them. The most important spiritual home for Earth First! activists, however, resembles what historian of religion Amanda Porterfield calls "American Indian Spirituality". This exists as "a countercultural [and religious] movement whose proponents define themselves against the cultural system of American Society."<sup>4</sup> The central tenets of this spirituality, she says, "include the condemnation of American exploitation of nature and mistreatment of Indians, regard to precolonial America as a sacred place where nature and humanity lived in plentiful harmony, certainty that American Indian attitudes are opposite to those of American culture and morally superior on every count, and an underlying belief that American Indian attitudes toward nature are a means of revitalizing American culture."<sup>5</sup>

A better label for Earth First's beliefs would be *primal spirituality*, since Earth First!ers believe we should emulate the indigenous ways of life of most primal peoples, not just those in North America. Moreover, it is not merely the precolonial American landscape which is sacred but wilderness in general, wherever it can be found or restored.

Earth First!ers generally call themselves tribalists, and many Deep Ecologists believe that primal tribes can provide a basis for religion, philosophy and nature conservation applicable to our society.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Earth First!ers increasingly discuss the impor-

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cosmogony in Deep Ecology see Seed, J., Macy, J., Fleming, P. and Naess, A. (eds.) *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Manes, op. cit. 2, p. 149.

<sup>4</sup> Porterfield, A. 'American Indian Spirituality as a Countercultural Movement', in Christopher Vecsey (ed.) *Religion in Native North America*. University of Idaho Press, 1990, p.152.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 154. Many of the prominent leaders seem to have some connection to American Indian peoples or myths. Dave Foreman spent two years at a Zuni Pueblo. After her bombing, Indians at Big Mountain held healing ceremonies for Judi Bari, which she claims had miraculous effects, and some trace their militant vocations to religious visions guided by Indian shamans (Dick, R. 'The Monkey wrenchers', *Amicus Journal* 9, 4, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Manes, C. 'On Becoming *Homo Ludens*', *Earth First!* 9, 1, 1 Nov., 1988; Manes, op. cit. 2; Devall, B. and Sessions, G. *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, Peregrine Smith, Salt Lake City, 1985, p.96; Foreman, D. 'Becoming the Forest in Defense of Itself, in Christopher and Judith Plant

tance of ritual for any tribal “warrior society.” At meetings held in or near wilderness, they sometimes engage in ritual war dances, sometimes howling like wolves. Indeed, wolves, grizzly bears and other animals function as totems, symbolizing a mystical kinship between the tribe and other creature-peoples.

Native Americans often conceive of non-human species as kindred “peoples” and through “rituals of inclusion” extend the community of moral concern beyond human beings. Some Earth First!ers have developed their own rituals of inclusion, called ‘Council of All Beings’ workshops, which provide a ritual means to connect people spiritually to other creatures and the entire planet.<sup>7</sup> During these workshops, rituals are performed where people allow themselves to be imaginatively possessed by the spirits of some non-human creature, or even of rocks and rivers, and verbalize their hurt at having been so poorly treated by human beings. As personifications of these non-human forms, participants cry out for fair treatment and harmonious relations among all ecosystem citizens. Ecstatic ritual dance, celebrating inter-species and even inter-planetary oneness, may continue through the night. Such rituals enhance the sense that all is interconnected and sacred.

## Thinking Like Mountains

One of the central myths of the emerging Earth First! tradition has been borrowed from Aldo Leopold’s 1949 ‘Thinking like a Mountain’ essay. He begins by suggesting that perhaps mountains have knowledge superior to ours. Then he describes an experience he once had of approaching a wolf he had shot, just

“in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes — something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then ... I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters’ paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.”

Among Earth First!ers, this story has evolved into a mythic moral fable in which the wolf communicates with human beings, stressing inter-species kinship. (Animal-human communication is a common theme in primal religious myth, and animal-human and human-animal transmutation and communion are a part of shamanism. Many Earth First!ers report shamanistic experiences.) The wolf’s “green fire” has become a symbol of life in the wild, incorporated into the ritual of the tradition. Soon after

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(eds.) *Turtle Talk: Voices for a Sustainable Future*, New Society, Santa Cruz, CA, p.61. For qualifying views, see Wuerlhner, G. ‘An Ecological View of the Indian’, *Earth First!* 7, 7, 1 Aug., 1987; Devall, B. ‘Primal Peoples and Deep Ecology’, *Earth First!* 7, 7, 1 Aug., 1987; Abl>ey, E. *The Monkey-wrench Gang*, Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1975.

<sup>7</sup> Seed et al., op. cit. 2.



Earth First!er at a Rendezvous in Montante in 1990. The movement draws the inspiration for its myths and ritual from the religious beliefs and practices of native North Americans.

Paul Dix. Impact Visuals

the group was founded, several Earth First! activists went on “green fire” road shows, essentially biocentric revival meetings. “Dakota” Sid Clifford, a balladeer in these road shows, referred to them as “ecovangelism”. Clifford said that often audience members would come forward afterward, tears streaming down their faces. The converts sought to learn what was required to repent of their sins against nature. In these shows, the personified wolf calls on humans to repent from their destructive ways and to revere Earth and her creatures. Some of the shows ended with converts howling in symbolic identification with the wild and wolves.

An ecowarrior dance held at Earth First! wilderness gatherings, described in the *Earth First!* journal, included “pounding drums, naked neanderthals and wild creatures. An industrial machine was (symbolically) stopped in its tracks by monkey-wrench-waving children. Nearly everyone joined in the primal celebration of wild nature.” Commenting on the scattering of the warriors after the gathering, the author of the report exclaimed, “the green fire is still running wild and free [as] we are once again scattered across the country.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, primal spirituality is combined with the idea that an authentic human life is lived wildly and spontaneously in defence of Mother Earth.

## The Hunting of the Bulldozer

Ecotage, of course, is not merely acted out *symbolically* in ritual dance: ecotage and civil disobedience are themselves ritual actions. Some Earth First!ers recognize this. Leading Earth First!er Dave Foreman, although sometimes claiming to be an atheist,<sup>9</sup> speaks nevertheless of ecotage as ritual worship: monkeywrenching is “a form of worship toward the earth. It’s really a very spiritual thing to go out and do.”<sup>10</sup> Religious rituals function to transform ordinary time into sacred time, even to alter consciousness itself.<sup>11</sup> Earth First! rituals are no different. One Earth First!er ecstatically explains, “There’s a kind of magic that happens when you do an action. You can be up all night, then alert all day. There’s a sense of magic, calmness, clarity. It’s a life experience you cherish.”<sup>12</sup> John Davis, an editor of the *Earth First!* journal, suggested that tribal rites of passage should be developed that require direct action: “Rites of passage were essential for the health of primal cultures ... so why not reinstitute initiation rites and

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<sup>8</sup> Circles, Loose Hip ‘Riotous Rendezvous Remembered’, *Earth First!* 10, 7, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Bookchin, M. and Foreman, D. ‘Defending the Earth and Burying the Hatchet’, *Whole Earth Review*, Winter, 1990.

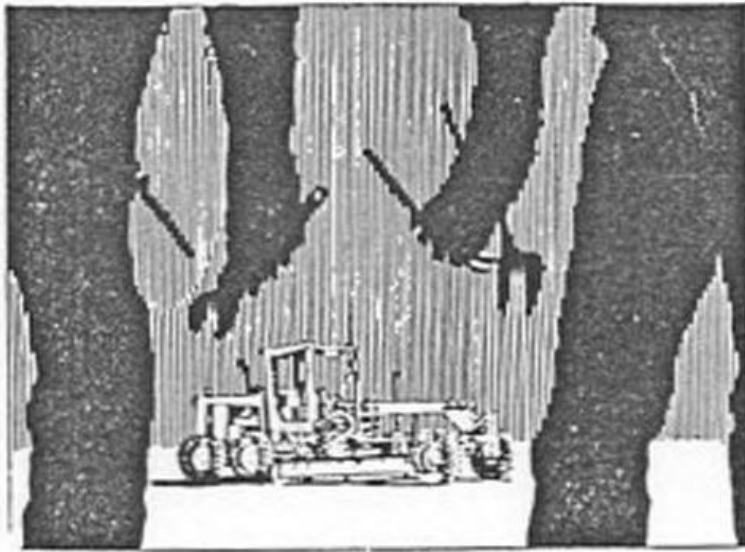
<sup>10</sup> Bando, D. ‘Ecoterrorism: The Dangerous Fringe of the Environment Movement’, *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* 764, Heritage Foundation, Washington, 1990, p.4; see also Foote, J. ‘Trying to Take Back the Planet: Radical Environmentalists are Honing their Militant Tactics and Gaining Followers’, *Newsweek*, 5 February, 1990. Foreman has been known to describe his religion as 2um or “twisted” Zen Buddhism.

<sup>11</sup> Seed et al., op. cit. 2, pp. 10–12, 16, 91; Snyder, G. *The Old Ways*, City Lights, San Francisco, 1977.

<sup>12</sup> Parfu, M. ‘Earth First!ers wield a mean monkey wrench’, *Smithsonian* 21,1, 1990.



# EARTH NIGHT 1990



Go out and do something for the EARTH . . .  
at night.

*Earth First!* journal's response to Earth Day.

other rituals in the form of ecodefense actions? Adolescents could earn their adulthood by successful completion of ritual hunts, as in days of yore, but for a new kind of quarry — bulldozers and their ilk.”<sup>13</sup>

Ecofeminism provides another tributary to Earth First!’s nature-revering spirituality.<sup>14</sup> Its ideas have been incorporated into Earth First! liturgy: many song-hymns heard at Earth First! gatherings satirize macho-hubris and male domination of nature and women, decry male massacres of witches and praise various pagan Earth Goddesses.

Ecofeminism and primal spirituality have a close affinity with yet another tributary — bioregionalism — which is a countercultural movement with increasing connections to Earth First!. Bioregionalism envisions communities of creatures living harmoniously and simply within the boundaries of distinct ecosystems. It criticizes growth-based industrial societies preferring locally self-sufficient and ecologically sustainable economies and decentralized political self-rule. Bioregionalists share Earth First!’s ecological consciousness regarding the intrinsic value and sacred interconnection of all life.<sup>15</sup> The earth-spirituality of bioregionalists parallels the primal spirituality prominent among Earth First!ers.

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### **Bombs, Accusations and Infiltrators**

In May 1990, a pipe bomb exploded beneath the seat of leading Earth First!er Judi Bari’s station wagon as she was driving through Oakland, California with fellow Earth First!er Daryl Cherney. Bari suffered extensive tissue damage and a broken pelvis while Cherney’s left eye was injured by flying debris.

The police and the FBI almost immediately blamed Bari and Cherney themselves for the bomb, claiming that it had accidentally exploded while being carried to an unknown location. For weeks after the bombing the FBI and police released information purporting to incriminate Bari and Cherney in the bombing.

However when the case came to court it collapsed and Bari and Cherney were set free. Within days. Greenpeace had hired a private investigator to search for the real culprits — suspected by many in the environmental movement as being linked to the timber industry.

A year before the car bombing the extent of FBI interest in Earth First! became apparent when 50 FBI agents stormed a group of activists attempting to cut through a

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<sup>13</sup> Davis, J. ‘A View of the Vortex’, *Earth First!* 9, I, I Nov., 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Plant, J. (ed.) *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, New Society, Santa Cruz, 1990; Diamond, I. and Orelstein, G.F. *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1990; Scarce, R. *Eco-Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement*, Nobel, Chicago, 1990, p.39.

<sup>15</sup> Andniss, V., Plant, C., Plant, J. and Wright, E. *Home: A Bioregional Reader*, New Society, Santa Cruz, 1990; Plant and Plant, op. cit. 6; Hacnkc, D. ‘Bioregionalism and Earth First!’, *Earth First!* 7, 2, 21 Dec., 1986; Naess, A. ‘Deep Ecology and Life Style’, *Earth First!* 5, 7, 1 Aug., 1985.

power pylon in the Arizona desert. Earth First! co-founder Dave Foreman was arrested at his house the next morning, waking up to find himself staring at an FBI agent's revolver. The group had been infiltrated in 1988 by an FBI agent, Mike Fain, posing as a carpenter.

The "Arizona Five" recently agreed to a plea bargain, admitting to assorted charges related to property destruction. While charges of a conspiracy to sabotage nuclear facility power lines were dismissed. Mark Davis received a six-year jail sentence and a \$20,000 fine for malicious destruction of property while Peg Millet. Mark Baker and Use Asplund were convicted of lesser accessory crimes. Foreman was convicted of conspiracy to commit property damage. In an unusual plea-bargain, probably designed to shut him up, his sentencing was postponed until the end of a five-year probationary period, when the charge could be reduced to a misdemeanor.

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Earth First!ers have a natural affinity for bioregionalism. Dave Foreman even suggested that bioregionalism was one term for what Earth First! was seeking: "the future primitive". He added that Earth First! could be the bioregional militia: as bioregionalists inhabit a place and *become* that place, they should defend it with Earth First!'s militant tactics.<sup>16</sup>

## Anticipating Ecocollapse

Before bioregionalism can flourish, however, many Earth Firstiers believe that industrial society must first collapse under its own ecologically unsustainable weight. The theory that society is creating an ecological catastrophe containing the seeds of its own destruction introduces another key part of Earth First!'s mythic structure: its *apocalyptic eschatology*. After great suffering, if enough of the genetic stock of the planet survives, evolution will resume its natural course. If human beings also survive, they will have the opportunity to re-establish tribal ways of living, such as bioregionalism, that are compatible with the evolutionary future. Edward Abbey, whose novel *The Monkey wrench Gang* helped forge the movement, provides a typical example of Earth First! eschatology:

"Whether [industrial society is] called capitalism or communism makes little difference ...[both] destroy nature and themselves... I predict that the military-industrial state will disappear from the surface of the Earth within 50 years. That belief is the basis of my inherent optimism, the source of my hope for the coming restoration of higher civilization: scattered human populations modest in number that live by fishing, hunting, food-gathering,

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<sup>16</sup> Foreman, D. 'Reinhabitation, Bioecentrism and Self Defense', *Earth First!* 7, 7, 1 Aug., 1987.

small-scale farming and ranching, that assemble once a year in the ruins of abandoned cities for great festivals of moral, spiritual, artistic and intellectual renewal — a people for whom the wilderness is not a playground but their natural and native home.”<sup>17</sup>

So while bioregionalism focuses on developing models for the future, to many within Earth First!’s mainstream, bioregionalism will not flourish without the catalyst of a prior eco-collapse. Thus, while praising its promise, Foreman has criticized the practice of most bioregionalists for becoming “mired in its composting toilets, organic gardens, handcrafts, recycling,” and so on. Although, he agrees, “these ... are important ... *bioregionalism is more than technique, it is resacralization [of Earth] and self-defense*.”<sup>18</sup>

## All Aboard the Woo Woo Choo Choo

Stopping here would leave a misleading portrait. Certainly biocentric and evolutionary premises, primal spirituality, eastern religions and a panoply of other spiritual tributaries contribute to Earth First!’s worldview. Certainly Earth First!ers often distrust reason, deriving their fundamental premises from intuitions and feelings: their love for wild, sacred places, and their corresponding rage at the destruction of such places. Certainly the tradition has evolved by appropriating and creating a fascinating variety of myths, symbols, and rituals. But reason is not abandoned: ecological science and political analysis is essential to Earth First! praxis. Many within the movement worry about excessive preoccupation with spirituality, with what they call “woo woo”. John Davis, himself responsible for much discussion of spirituality and ritual, cautions:

“Spiritual approaches to the planet seem to be of growing concern ... The last issue of the Journal reflects this trend. We ran many articles on sacred sites, rituals, and such, but very few articles pertaining to specific wild lands. (Almost we replaced ‘No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth\*’ on the masthead with ‘All Aboard the Woo Woo Choo Choo’.) ... Sacred sites, ritual, and matters of personal growth are important... However, Earth First! may lose effectiveness if it promotes these matters while neglecting the time-worn practices of presenting wilderness proposals ... and other such largely left-brain activity.”<sup>19</sup>

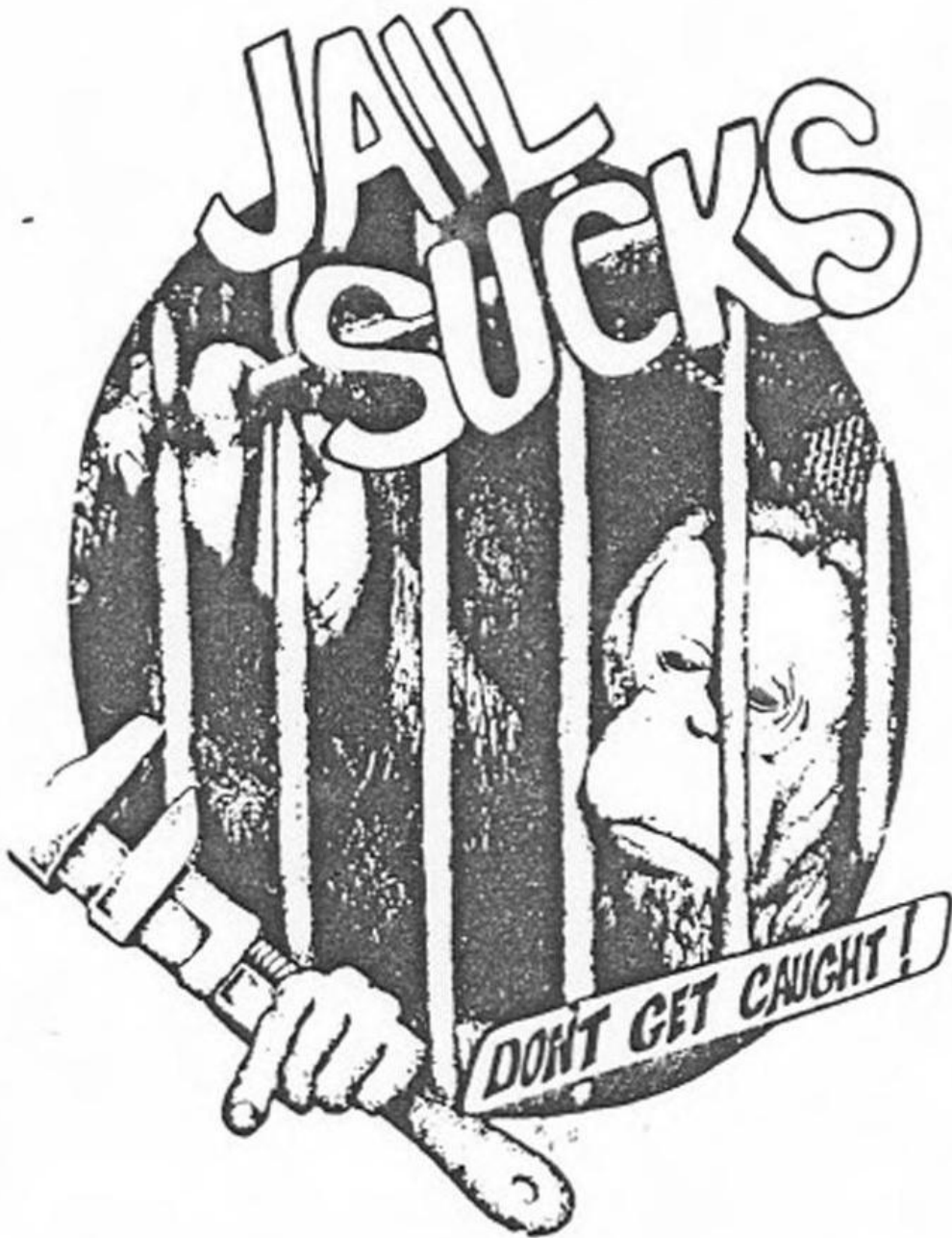
The ecological sciences provide the first wave of Earth First!’s left-brain activity. “We’re in a war,” Foreman says bluntly, “the war of industrial civilization against the natural world. If you look at what the leading scientists are telling us, we could lose

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<sup>17</sup> Abbey, E. ‘A Response to Smoother on Anarchy\*, *Earth First!* 6, 7, 1 Aug., 1986; Manes, op. cit. 2, p.241.

<sup>18</sup> Foreman, op. cit. 16, emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Davis, J. ‘Ramblings’, *Earth First!* 10, 1, 1 Nov., 1989.



Earth First! co-founder, Mike Roselle (foreground) and other activists blockade a bulldozer In Siskiyou National Forest, Oregon. The “Holies” faction, which is mainly based in Oregon and California, favour civil disobedience over monkey-wrenching.

one-third of all species in the next 40 years ... We're in one of the greatest extinction episodes in three-and-a-half billion years of evolution."<sup>20</sup> Such analyses, along with the affective/spiritual sense of the intrinsic worth of intact ecosystems, converge in a radical critique of both industrial society and human breeding.

Not only do we need bioregional tribalism as a new social organizing principle, but commitment to negative population growth is a moral "litmus test" for inclusion within the tribe.<sup>21</sup> The Journal is full of exhortations to breed less, and sometimes runs apparently serious letters advocating genocidal solutions to overpopulation. (At one gathering, a woman asked me, "How can you possibly justify having two children?" Conversation is a powerful means of enforcing procreative orthodoxy within the movement.) The basic procreative ethics is well summarized by Chirn Blea: "The impact of each of our middle-class babies is equivalent to that of 40 in the Third World — more old-growth timber clearcut, increased grazing pressures on marginal grasslands, another irrigation project drowning a desert ... Think before you have that baby. One more to cause suffering. One more to suffer. Have your tubal ligation, your vasectomy now."<sup>22</sup> Some have even humorously proposed vasectomy tables for Earth First! wilderness gatherings.

Political analysis provides the second critical wave of Earth First!'s left-brain activity. The founders of Earth First! were disgruntled conservationists, who were licking their wounds after losing an important legislative battle over the Federal Government's 1980 Roadless Area Review and Evaluation process. The lobbyists concluded that the government had protected only "rocks and ice", rather than the areas most important to the preservation of biodiversity.<sup>23</sup> What struck them afterwards was that they had been reasonable and moderate, backing up their proposals with ecological science, while the opponents acted like lunatics, casting the debate in terms of "sacred" values such as private property and the "American way of life". Moreover, despite their moderation, they were repeatedly and absurdly accused of being "environmental extremists". So, they concluded, as reasonableness often fails, perhaps Earth needed a group of wild-eyed, unreasonable fanatics. The overall strategy was to provide some real extremists and thereby strengthen the hand of the mainstream environmental groups, making them appear more moderate.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, (hey wanted to promote Deep Ecology — which they knew did not animate most mainstream environmentalists — and shift environmental debates from protect-

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<sup>20</sup> Gabriel, T. 'If a Tree Falls in the Forest, They Hear It', 77ie *New York Times Magazine*, Section 6, 4 Nov., 1990.

<sup>21</sup> Foreman, D. 'Whither Eanh First!?', *Earth First!* 7, 1, 1 Nov., 1987.

<sup>22</sup> Blea, C. 'The Question of Babies', *Earth First!* 6, 7, 1 Aug., 1986; cf. McCormick, B. 'Towards an Integrated Approach to Population and Justice'. *Earth First!* 6, 7, 1 Aug., 1986.

<sup>23</sup> Foreman, D. in Fayhce, J.M. 'Earth First! and Foremost: Environmental Saviors or Ecological Terrorists?', *Backpacker* 16, 5, September, 1988.

<sup>24</sup> Manes, op. cil. 2, pp. 1B7, 201.

ing scenic places to preserving biodiversity.<sup>25</sup> In their judgment, this requires the protection and restoration of *vast* areas to their natural state.<sup>26</sup> Mainstream groups rarely proposed *restoration* at all, and never on a large scale.

Beyond the effort to provide by their presence a trump card to mainstream environmentalists, Earth First!ers began to experiment with civil disobedience and monkeywrenching in a concerted strategy to protect biodiversity and raise awareness. Civil disobedience, and especially the destruction of equipment used to destroy habitat, dramatically posed the moral premise of the movement: biodiversity is more important than the superfluous desires and property of greedy human beings.

## Breaking the Law

When people break the law for reasons of conscience, particularly in formally democratic societies, they feel compelled to justify morally their actions. The major justifications advanced by Earth First!ers could be titled “it’s really that bad”: representative democracy is a sham, controlled as it is by the true criminals — corporate devils and government co-conspirators — who rape the land with impunity.<sup>27</sup> “Wilderness is our true home” and extra-legal direct action is justified as self-defense.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, environmental groups have failed to protect biodiversity, largely because they share the anthropocentric and industrial premises of mainstream culture. Worse still, the mainstream environmental movement has been overrun by well-paid bureaucrats and attorneys less concerned about Earth than their careers. The mainstream has been co-opted. Wilderness has been sold-out.<sup>29</sup>

Civil disobedience was originally justified as a stalling tactic: “in the [long-term] hope that an enlightened citizenry will one day appreciate more fully the need for the conservation of natural resources”;<sup>30</sup> in the short-term hope of providing time to win

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<sup>25</sup> Fayhce, op. cit. 23.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Sayen, J. ‘Taking Steps Toward a Restoration Ethic’, *Earth First!* 9, 5, 1 May, 1989; Saycti, J. ‘Thoughts on an Evolutionary Ethic’, *Earth First!* 9, 6, 21 June, 1989.

<sup>27</sup> Typical of such sentiments is Edward Abbey’s ‘Foreward!’ to Foreman, D. and Haywood, B. (eds.) *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. ed., Ned Ludd Books, Tucson, 1987. “Representative democracy in the United States has broken down. Our legislators do not represent those who elected them but rather the minority who finance their political campaigns and who control the organs of communication — the Tee Vee, the newspapers, the billboards, the radio — that have made politics a game for the rich only. Representative government in the USA represents money not people and therefore has forfeited our allegiance and moral support. We owe it nothing but the taxation it extorts from us under threats of seizure of property, or prison, or in some cases already, when resisted, a sudden and violent death by gunfire.” George Wuertlmer, on the other hand, redefines the criminal: “the real criminals (are) the logging criminals and their lackeys, the Forest Service” (‘Tree-Spiking and Moral Maturity’, *Earth First!* 5, 7, 1 Aug., 1985.)

<sup>28</sup> Foreman and Haywood, *ibid*.

<sup>29</sup> Manes, op. cit. 2, pp.45–65.

<sup>30</sup> Wuertlmer, op. cit. 27.

legislative victories or to file lawsuits (“paper monkey-wrenching”). Ecotage was also conceived of as a means to stall or prevent the destruction of wild places — again, to try to save some biotic diversity short-term. “When the floundering beast,” Howie Wolke’s metaphor for industrial society, “finally, mercifully chokes in its own dung pile, there’ll at least be *some* wilderness remaining as a seed bed for planet-wide recovery. Maybe even some Griz;... some wild humans;... some hope ... maybe even some human wisdom.”<sup>31</sup>

Just as important a rationale for ecotage is the idea that monkeywrenching can actually prevent destructive activity already underway — driving the worst Earth destroyers right out of business — erasing their profits by slowing their work and destroying their tools.<sup>32</sup> Early successes with tree spiking — some activists put nails into trees and thereby prevented some limber sales — convinced many Earth First!ers that ecotage could be effective.<sup>33</sup>

Others within the movement, however, doubt the effectiveness of ecotage. Disagreements about monkeywrenching led to some early disaffections from the movement, and have been part of the tensions leading to the first major schism in the movement since it was founded in 1980.

## The Earth First! Schism

Some observers, such as Michael Parfit, see tensions in the movement between “pragmatic” and “spiritual” factions.<sup>34</sup> Although some *are* uncomfortable with the spirituality in the movement, the overwhelming majority respect most forms of Earth spirituality. We have already noted Foreman’s spiritual side, but Parfit would place him among the alleged pragmatists. Parfit may have been misled by Foreman’s comment that “the woo woo stuff ... is beyond me.” But he does not adequately recognize that Foreman then added “but the diversity is good”.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, not all forms of Earth spirituality are orthodox. “New Age” spirituality is often derided by Earth First!ers for its anthropocentrism and overly optimistic view about the role of humans in creating, through technology, a new golden age.

Dave Foreman and Christopher Manes, and quite a few important Earth First! activists, recently disassociated themselves from the movement. In some of their hyperbole, they have inaccurately claimed that the competing faction — located mostly in California and Oregon — was abdicating biocentrism. Meanwhile, the California/

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<sup>31</sup> Wolke, H. ‘Thoughtful Radicalism’, *Earth First!* 10, 2, 21 Dec., 1989.

<sup>32</sup> Hellenbach, T.O. ‘The Future of Monkeywrenching’ in Foreman and Haywood, op. cit. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Foreman and Haywood, op. cit. 27, p.26 see also pp.27, 32–33.

<sup>34</sup> Parfit, op. cit. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Elsewhere, Foreman says that central to Earth First! is “a refusal to accept rationality as the only way of thinking. There is room for diversity within Earth First! on matters spiritual, and nowhere is tolerance for diversity more necessary” (Foreman, op. cit. 21).



Oregon faction, led by Judi Bari, Darryl Chemey and Mike Roselle (a movement co-founder who recently became an employee of Greenpeace), in turn charged in exaggerated tones that the Foreman faction was misanthropic, racist and elitist, ignoring social justice issues intrinsically related to biocentric concerns. It is possible, however, to characterize these disputes in a way that is more accurate and fair to all parties than the pictures painted by those in the heat of verbal battle. In my judgment, the schism is grounded more in disagreements about strategy and tactics than in fundamental moral differences: both factions remain biocentric. (Forexample, up until now, the portrait I have been painting generally reflects both factions.)

I call the Foreman/Manes faction the “Wilders”, because they fought to keep Earth First!’s focus exclusively on wilderness, and thereby, in their minds, on biodiversity and bioecentrism. (The new journal they began publishing in 1991 is called *Wild Earth*.) Wilders believe that tying environmental protection to other issues — such as social justice, anti-imperialism or workers rights — alienates many potential wilderness sympathizers. They also often consider themselves true patriots, trying to preserve the sacred landscape of America. Sometimes they fly the US flag, not out of nationalism (the system being morally bankrupt), but because they believe the flag can also symbolize the love of the land, which fits well with their overall moral sentiments. Moreover, as Foreman once told me, they did not want to leave the power of that symbol purely in the hands of land-rapers like Ronald Reagan and James Watt (Reagan’s notorious Secretary of the Interior).

Opposite the Wilders is the group I call the “Holies” — the Bari, Chemey, Roselle faction — who insist that a “holistic” perspective is needed; one has to examine how threats to biodiversity are related to other social issues. (The “Holies” label is also appropriate, because the people in this faction tend toward more overtly spiritual expression.) Holies argue that activism based on the separation of ecological and social issues will ultimately fail because industrial *society* destroys biodiversity — not only commercial incursions into biologically rich wilderness areas.<sup>36</sup> According to Judi Bari, Deep Ecology stresses interrelationships, so you cannot separate wilderness from the society around it: the strategy of focusing on wilderness set-asides “contradicts the very theory of biocentrism”.<sup>37</sup> Bari continues that environmental and class exploitation have to be fought together: “Our society has been built on the exploitation of both the lower classes *and the earth*.”<sup>38</sup> The primary dispute, then, is over the relative priority Earth First! should place on social issues which may not at first glance appear as

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<sup>36</sup> Goniolla, M. ‘Leadership Dispute Splits Earth First!’, *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, 12 Aug., 1990.

<sup>37</sup> Kcyscr, C. ‘Judi’s World’, *Express* (The East Bay’s Free Weekly), 1 February, 1991.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

environmental issues.<sup>39</sup>

## Tactical Disagreements

A related battle is over whether civil disobedience or ecotage is the most effective tactic. This debate is related to another dispute about the ultimate goal of direct action: to create a mass movement, or simply to thwart commercial incursions into biologically sensitive areas.

The Holies want the strategic priority to be the building of a mass movement to stop wilderness destruction, and ultimately, to supplant industrial lifestyles altogether. They believe that civil disobedience, with its focus on arousing the conscience of the community, is the best mass movement strategy. While many of the Holies have monkeywrenched, and most do not condemn it across the board, they do not think it should be emphasized. Some think it usually does more harm than good. Holies have completely rejected tree-spiking, fearing loggers could be hurt, irreparably harming their efforts to organize a mass movement. Roselle complains that “Foreman doesn’t realize we can accomplish more these days with civil disobedience than monkeywrenching.”<sup>40</sup> Judi Bari adds, “I don’t think people sneaking around in the woods pouring sand in gasoline tanks on bulldozers are going to bring about the level of pressure needed ... The only thing that brings about change is the fear of [the] loss of social control.”<sup>41</sup> To save the Barths, she believes, we are going to have to expand beyond the white middle and upper classes, because they are the ones “who most benefit from the destruction of the Barths.”<sup>42</sup>

Wilders, on the other hand, prefer monkeywrenching to civil disobedience, hoping to thwart industrial society and preserve as much biodiversity and wilderness as possible — at least until the ecological collapse arrives ushering in new, more humble ways of living. They generally agree that civil disobedience is an overrated tactic. Wilders assert that civil disobedience is often impractical because Barths First!ers are usually poor and cannot afford to be arrested and fined. This argument was strengthened when several activists lost a lawsuit filed against them for blockading a logging operation —

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<sup>39</sup> Recently, Dave Foreman rescinded to such criticisms, admitting that he has not said enough about his concern for “victims of multinational imperialism around the world” and other typically left-wing issues. “One problem I’ve had in getting the fullness of my message out comes from my impatience at seeing eco catastrophe going on all around me while so many of those on the left who are always talking about social justice don’t seem to even see the problem or care about species.” (Bookchin and Foreman, *Op. cit.* 9).

<sup>40</sup> Talbot, S. ‘Earth First! What Next?’, *Mother Jones*, Nov/Dec., 1990.

<sup>41</sup> Mendocino Environmental Center, *Forest Practices, the Timber Industry, and the North Coast* (Redwood Summer informational Packet). 106 W. Standley, Ukiah, CA 95482.

<sup>42</sup> Keyscr, *op. cit.* 37.

the logging company was awarded \$58,000 in compensatory and punitive damages.<sup>43</sup> Successful monkeywrenching does not entail such risks and costs, Foreman argues, and can be “extremely effective”.<sup>44</sup>

## Eschatological Differences

I believe the fundamental root of the schism I have been describing can be traced to small but significant differences in beliefs about human nature and eschatology. Holies are more optimistic than Wilders that human beings can be converted to biocentrism and can change their lifestyles. (They tend to be more influenced by “human potential” notions and less hostile to “New Age” beliefs than the Wilders). In short, they have not despaired completely of the potential for *voluntary* reform by the human species.

Wilders tend to be less optimistic than Holies about the human species. Wilders deride what they claim is humanism among Holies-types — a charge deeply resented by Holies such as Judy Bari — who points out that she and others have risked their own lives and been injured in their efforts to save the forest.<sup>45</sup> Some Wilders are unapologetically misanthropic.<sup>46</sup> Bari calls Foreman and others macho individualists and elitists, while others suggest that they are even fascistic.<sup>47</sup> Wilders have either despaired of reform, or believe any reform will be insufficient.<sup>48</sup> They tend to leave long-term hope to Mother Earth herself. In their more apocalyptic view, ecocollapse is probably inevitable — but if they do their part in thwarting industrial destruction, this may be not be bad. Ecocollapse may be the means Mother Earth will use in her self-defence — a way she can remove the human industrial cancer, and create the conditions people need to develop appropriate ways of living.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, the schism is also related to disagreements about the proper level of commitment to non-violence. When asked at a gathering, “What are the ethics of monkeywrenching?”, Earth First!ers voiced two versions: First, “Don’t hurt anybody. Don’t get caught. If you get caught, don’t fink.” The second version reversed the priority: “Don’t get caught. Don’t hurt anybody. If you get caught, don’t fink.” These two slogans reflect some of the tensions in the movement: both factions see themselves as non-violent, but I lories tend to place a premium on this. Wilders fear that non-violence is based

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<sup>43</sup> Manes, op. cit. 2, p.206; Scarce, op. cit. 24, pp.69–70.

<sup>44</sup> Foreman and Haywood, op. cit. 27, p.26.

<sup>45</sup> Bari, J. ‘The Earili First! Divorce’, in Mendocino Environmental Center, op. cit. 41.

<sup>46</sup> Blea, op. cit. 22; Miss Ann Thropy (pseud for Christopher Manes) ‘Population and Aids’, *Earth First!* 32, 1 May, 1987; Manes, C. ‘Why I am a Misanthrope’, *Earth First!* 11,2, 21 Dec., 1990.

<sup>47</sup> Kcyscr, op. cit. 37; Alien Nation, “‘Dangerous’ Tendencies in Earth First!”, *Earth First!* 8, 1, 1 Nov., 1987.

<sup>48</sup> Manes, op. cit. 2, p.170.

<sup>49</sup> I am trying to characterize the two major types here — as sociologists often do — in an attempt to clarify complex phenomena. Exceptions and overlaps between these two types within Earth First! activists (present and former) could no doubt be found.

on a pacifist humanism at odds with nature itself and biocentrism. Human beings are animals, and there may be times when their survival requires an emotional and adrenaline-fueled response. It may be, one corporately-written article suggests, that under certain circumstances violence may be more deeply non-violent in the long-run — violence may be necessary to cut off “the gangrene now infesting” Earth.<sup>50</sup>

Despite these tensions and the recent schism, there is far more that unites than divides these radical environmentalists. They are all animated by a deeply spiritual biocentrism, they share or respect the plural myths, symbols and rituals of the emerging Deep Ecology worldview as well as a cynicism about the system’s willingness or ability to respond to the ecological catastrophe descending upon us, and they are committed to extra-legal direct action to save as much of the genetic stock of the planet as possible. Both Holmes and Wilders tend to claim success for their preferred tactics, believing that all things considered, their tactics provide the most hope.

## The Prospects for Radical Environmentalism

Some Earth Firsters hope for a moral paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to biocentrism, from a stewardship ethic to an ethic of reverence for the land. Some even hope this shift will make the 1990s “make the ’60s look like the ’50s.” Assessing the actual impact of and prospects for such movements, however, is a difficult empirical task. Earth First! is certainly making itself increasingly felt. One indication of this is the FBI infiltration of the movement. Another comes from reports about damage done by “ecotours”, which has led some commercial interests to increase security and in some cases hire their own infiltrators to keep tabs on radical environmentalists.<sup>51</sup>

It would be premature to evaluate definitively the success of these groups, and of course, an evaluation would depend on the standard one applies. Dave Foreman says that saving one tree, one acre of grizzly bear or wolf habitat, is an accomplishment.<sup>52</sup> Those hoping to create a mass movement have set a higher standard of success, but they also can point to small victories that seem to have been won through direct action. There is widespread agreement that Earth Firsters have brought public exposure and debate to many previously ignored environmental issues. Moreover, many among the mainstream groups acknowledge that their hand is strengthened by the presence of the unreasonable Earth First I. Mainstream environmentalists increasingly, but quietly, inform Earth Firsters of opportunities for their unique form of activism. An American Indian tribal chairman once told me that, although he could not say this publicly, he

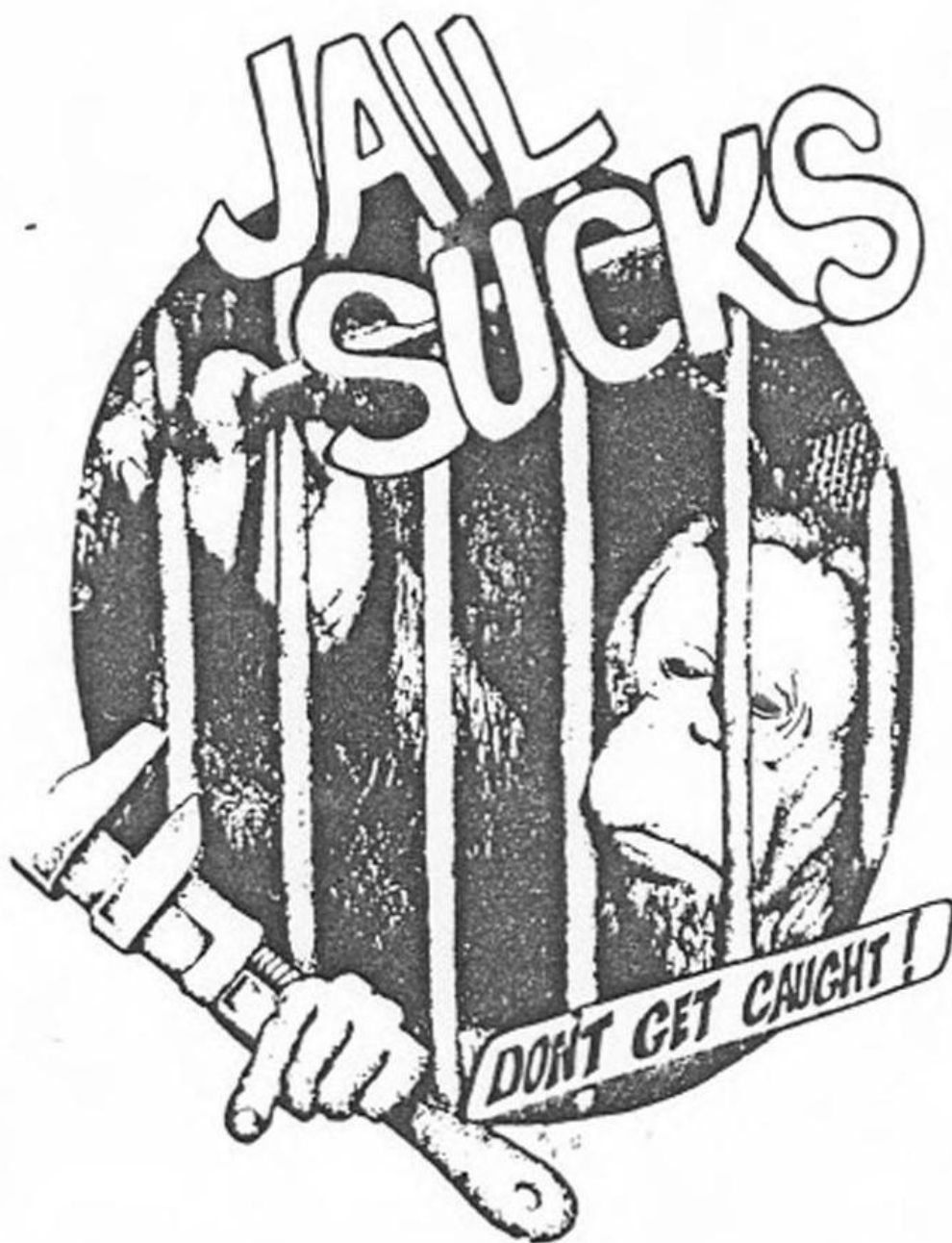
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<sup>50</sup> Bats in the Kafiers Affinity Group, ‘Non-Violent Direct Action Training: Our Tactic vs. their inferiority of Pacifism’, *Earth First!* 9, 7, 1 Aug. 1989. Foreman is ambivalent about civil disobedience because it comes largely out of a Christian tradition often more concerned with personal transformation and purity than with results. He worries, however, that concern for results can lead to an “attitude where the ends justify the means” (op. cit. 6).

<sup>51</sup> Manes, op. cit. 2, p.9 see also pp.3–22.

<sup>52</sup> Foreman, op. cit. 6, p.65.

was glad about an Earth First! campaign to disrupt a commercial activity threatening his reservation.



Earth First!

On the other hand, we have seen that some believe that ecotage does more harm than good. To this, T.O. Hollenbach responds:

“The charge that monkeywrenching alienates public opinion stems from an incomplete understanding of propaganda and history. Scientific studies of propaganda and the press show that the vast majority of the public remembers the news only in vaguest outline ... Basic concepts like ‘opposition to logging’ are all that are retained. History informs us that direct action engenders as much support as opposition... The majority of the public floats noncommittally between the conflicting forces.”<sup>53</sup>

My speculation is that radical environmentalism does promote its objectives by extending the range of the debate, thereby shifting the middle of public opinion closer to the positions of environmentalists than they would otherwise be. If this is correct, the impact of *Earth First!* and its derivatives will increase as these groups grow in number and intensify their resistance. There will be, of course, a negative reaction. But in general, concrete opposition to radical groups comes from people already hostile to environmentalists’ concerns. This would not produce a shift in public opinion against environmental concern.

More importantly, the growth of biocentric ethics in general, and of this movement in particular, suggests that both will have an increasing impact within North America. In ten years the *Earth First!* journal gained about 15,000 regular readers. Numerous smaller newsletters have sprung up. And *Earth First!*’s numbers are dwarfed by other less militant sister groups, including Greenpeace and those promoting animal liberation. Radical environmental groups are also emerging abroad — indeed — the boldest acts of ecotage have occurred outside the United States.<sup>54</sup> As the environmental costs of industrial growth intensify, so will green rage — indeed, this rage has only begun to emerge. Depending on one’s perspective, the militancy of *Earth First!* provides either hope, or an ominous portent of things to come.

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<sup>53</sup> Hollenbach, op. cit. 32, p.22. Hollenbach does not give his scientific studies.

<sup>54</sup> Scarce, Op. cit. 14, pp. 139–162.

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