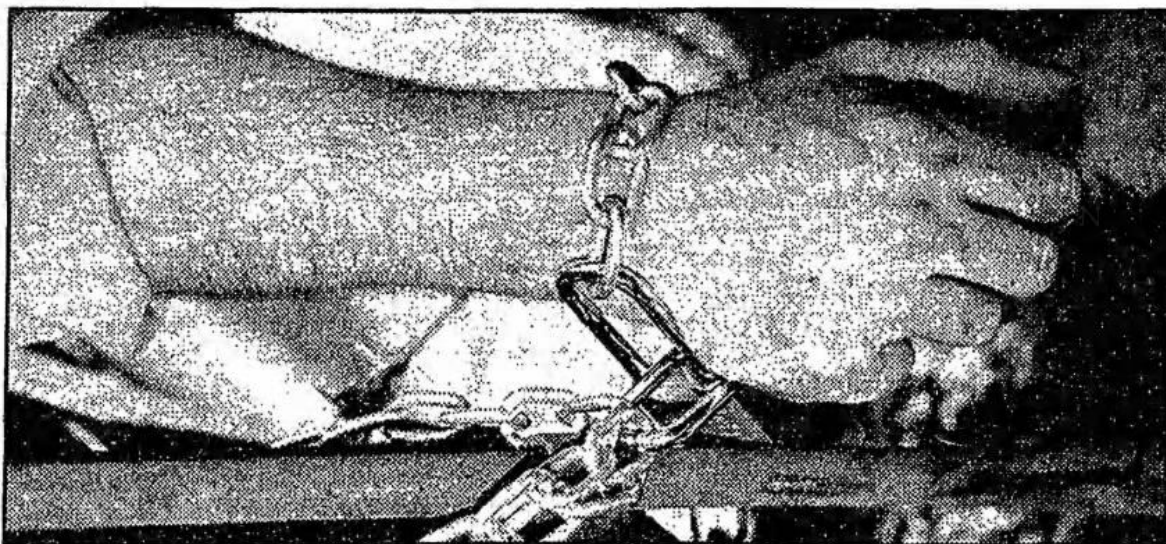


Sound and fury of the eco-worriers

John Vidal

Aug 28, 1992



Chains and challenge ... Earth First! protesters in action at an Oxford timber yard they consider to be environmental vandals

PHOTOGRAPHS: ADRIAN ARBIB

CLAIRE is caterwauling atop an 8ft-high steel perimeter fence at Scott's, the Gravesend-based tissue and lavatory paper makers. It is a ghastly sound, suitable for the industrial dereliction around her.

She is tuneless, toneless, practically hoarse. "The river is flowing, to the sea," she wails in several keys, urging a platoon of protesters on to the barricades. A policeman waiting below her holds his hands to his ears as she mauls the peace: "We are the flowers, we are the future..."

Thirty Earth First! petunias charge a thin blue line outside the toilet roll factory but are easily held back. They retreat and turn to ripping down and stamping on two high court injunction notices served against individuals who are not there. A gust of wind overturns one of the barricades and, as the police try to pick it up, a few demonstrators rush through — into a second line of police. In the end 12 people are detained and then released without charges. It's all ritualistic and semi-orchestrated for the television cameras.

Scott's Northfleet paperworks and the Gravesend police, like others warned that Earth First! is about to strike, have reacted as if an army of eco-warriors, prepared to lay down life and limb for Gaia, was about to descend. More than 100 officers had been detailed to defend Fortress Loo Roll, even protecting the front of the factory from a river assault. Scott's has battened down the hatches and told only a skeleton work force to turn up for work.

The cost of policing is approximately £60,000. The cost to production is nil and the cost of organising the “action”, an Earth Firster says, is about £200 — enough to keep one sergeant on duty for one day.

“All this for 50 protesters,” a police officer says. “Shame about the singing though,” he mutters as Claire keeps up her rant. “Very disappointing. We usually get 100 or more,” a long haired youth agrees.

Earth First! has cultivated the image of American-inspired rabid monkey-wrenchers blooded in eco-fascism and hard-core environmental defence tactics to further its message. But the reality of the British version is so far rather mundane: angry rather than malicious, emotionally liberal but politically unfocused, these Earth Firsters dream of a mass movement up to the anti-nuclear movement without, so far, the intellectual base that spawned the great rallies of the seventies and eighties.

They have now set up 30 “cells” around the country of people prepared to take “direct action” against companies they consider to be environmental vandals. They say their numbers are swelling every week and that they are bucking the tide of dwindling interest in the environment.

LEADERLESS, with no membership, accounts or /status and a minimalist constitution, they describe themselves variously as a “nonviolent civil disobedience movement” or “anarchists”. The older “members” say they hope to radicalise other environment groups (which they believe are tame, out of touch with their members and deeply establishment); the younger ones would seem to owe no allegiance to anyone and are demonstrating out of a blind fury with establishment politics, which they see as drifting rudderless on a sea of British ennui.

They attract disaffected youth, university students and a number of professionals from traditional environment groups. Most are not from London. Jake Burbridge, one of the Gravesend demonstrators, says: “We are the provisional wing of the Green movement. Publicly, we have been ostracised by the environmental groups but really we are doing what they did years ago. Call us the new generation.”

But eco-warriors? This is pushing it. At a gathering of the group held in Brighton in April, after much debate on whether they should even call themselves Earth First!, the assembly issued a statement saying they neither condemned nor condoned people “who may feel moved to damage property”, adding that such actions are the “sole responsibility” of the individuals involved and that Earth First! itself followed “strict principles of nonviolence” when confronting destruction of the environment.

So upset were certain Earth Firsters with this that they split off to form the Earth Liberation Front, which has dived underground and has not noticeably surfaced. The destruction of £100,000 of Fisons peat-digging equipment was pinned on Earth First!, as was the disabling of contractors’ equipment at Twyford Down, but the police are all but powerless, as anyone can, in theory, call themselves Earth First!.

“Things do happen in the middle of the night,” Rowan Tilly, another demonstrator, says. “But these are individual actions which have nothing to do with Earth First!”

So far the group's demonstrations have successfully closed down several tropical timber yards in Oxford and Rochdale and created mild havoc in Liverpool and Bolton. More "actions" are being considered for chemical companies and car makers.

More importantly, perhaps, Earth First! has seized on the one area that the middle aged, traditional environment movement, bogged down in policy statements and acting increasingly like a quasi governmental think-tank, is being accused of ignoring: its loyal constituency. "Earth First! appeals to the heart. Everyone else nowadays appeals to the pocket," another Scott's protester says.

In so doing, Earth First! has set the cat among the pigeons in some of the more respectable groups which are busy trying to ignore them and are worried that they will give their carefully nurtured, "responsible" images a dent. "We are made up of people who are alienated, disempowered by the traditional environment groups," one protester says. "Anyway, look at Greenpeace Friends of the Earth: didn't they start with just a few angry young people?"

Steve, another demonstrator on the Scott's picket line, says: "Friends of the Earth is now a middle-class social club, patronising the working classes." He implies that Earth First! is working class, committed and angry.

Relations between Earth First! and other groups are strained. At the Twyford Down protest, FoE effectively evicted the Earth Firsters from "their" site. FoE campaigns director Andrew Lees admits to being "wary of anyone who opportunistically, assumes that because they wave a banner under television camera they have saved the day".

What worries FoE and others is that Earth First! has begun to strike sympathetic chord among their local groups: "FoE and others have been winning arguments for years but environmental destruction is accelerating," Oxford FoE activist Will Saunders says.

"Small wonder people are turning to Earth First! in sheer desperation." Greenpeace takes a more relaxed line: "We are all in the same field," a spokeswoman says. "There are bound to be overlaps and crossovers."

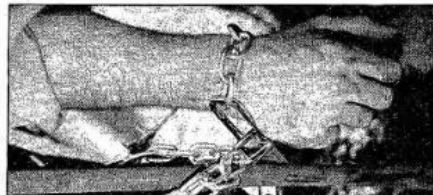
FoE rejects accusations of elitism: "It would be a fair criticism if we were entirely centralised, suit lobbying organisation trying to degrease the corridors of power. But we are active at all levels. I'm not aware of any other environmental organisation that has our degree of structural democracy."

The start of the new university term will see Earth First! campaigners tapping into a new generation of potentially militant environmentalists. Robert St George, one of Earth First!'s more militant "members" says: "Such activity is catching. We do not need the media to grow. All we need are empowering ideas, ideals and visions and the tools to spread them. Fiery ideas feed on tinder material — the minds maturing youth who have no hope in the Left or in any other group who work within our corrupt political system.

"These people have no faith in anybody to champion their vision or ideals with the urgency needed to save the planet".

Environment Guardian

The disaffected activists of the Green movement... John Vidal hears the war cry of Earth First! and Thomas Harding speaks out for the youth of A SEED



Chains and challenge... Earth First! protesters in action at an Oxford timber yard they consider to be environmental vandals

Sound and fury of the eco-warriors

CLAIRE is catavaulting atop an 8ft-high steel perimeter fence at Scott's, the Gravesend-based iron and inventory paper makers. It is a chaotic scene, suitable for the industrial demolition around her. She is fearless, fearless, practically fearless. "The river is flowing, down to the sea," she wails in several keys, singing a platform of protest as to the harridan. A policeman waiting below her holds his hands to his ears as the music swells. "We are the flowers, we are the future..."

Thirty Earth First! protesters charge a thin blue line outside the toilet roll factory but are easily held back. They retreat and turn to rapping down and stamping on two high court injunction notices served against individuals who are not there. A gust of wind overturns one of the barricades and, as the police try to pick it up, a few demonstrators rush through — who a second law of police. In the end 12 people are detained and then released without charges. It's all ritualistic and semi-orchestrated for the television camera.

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Earth First! has cultivated the image of American inspired radical eco-warriors. Banned in eco-fascism and hard-core environmental defence tactics to further its message. But the reality of the British version is as far removed as the "eco-warriors" of the "solo responsibility" of the individuals involved and that Earth First! itself followed "strict principles of non-violence" when confronting destruction of the environment.

So upset were certain Earth Firsters with this that they split off to form the Earth Liberation Front, which has dived underground and has not noticeably surfaced. The destruction of 100,000 of Fraser's peat-digging equipment was aimed on Earth First!, as was the disabling of contractors' equipment at Tynford Down, but the police are all but powerless, as anyone can, in theory, call themselves Earth First!

"Things do happen in the middle of the night," Rowan Tilly, another demonstrator, says. "But these are individual actions which have nothing to do with Earth First!" So far the group's demonstrations have successfully closed down several tropical timber yards in Oxford and Rochdale and created mild havoc in Liverpool and Bolton. More "actions" are being considered for chemical companies and car makers.

More importantly, perhaps, Earth First! has seized on the one area that the middle-aged, traditional environmental movement, bogged down in policy statements and acting increasingly like a quasi-governmental agency, is least constituted to ignore: its loyal constituency.

"Earth First! appeals to the heart. Everyone else nowadays appeals to the pocket," another Scott's protester says. In so doing, Earth First! has set out among the pages in some of the more respectable groups which are busy trying to ignore them and are worried

that they will give their carefully nurtured, "responsible" image a dent. "We are made up of people who are alienated, disempowered by the traditional environmental groups," one protester says. "Anyway, look at Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth: didn't they start with just a few angry young people?"

Sieve, another demonstrator on the Scott's picket line, says: "Friends of the Earth is now a middle-class social club, putting out the working classes." It implies that Earth First! is working class, committed and angry.

Relations between Earth First! and other groups are strained. At the Tynford Down protest, Full effectively evicted the Earth Firsters from "their" site. Full campaign director Andrew Lees admits to being "very of anyone who opportunistically assumes that because they were a banner under a television camera they have saved the day."

What worries Full and others is that Earth First! has begun to strike a sympathetic chord among their local groups. "Full and others have been winning all the arguments for years but environmental destruction is accelerating," Oxford Full activist Will Saunders says. "Small wonder people are turning to Earth First! in their desperation."

Greenpeace takes a more relaxed line: "We are all in the same field," a spokeswoman says. "There are bound to be overlaps and crossovers." Full rejects accusations of elitism: "It would be a fair criticism if we were an entirely centralised, suit-wearing, identity-organising trying to de-grass the corridors of power. But we are active at all levels. I'm not aware of any other environmental organisation that has our degree of structural democracy."

The start of the new university term will see Earth First! campaigners tapping into a new generation of potentially militant environmentalists. Robert St George, one of Earth First's more militant "members" says: "Such activity is catching. We do not need the media to grow. All we need are empowering ideas, ideals and vision and the tools to spread them."

Fury ideas feed on under-dry material — the minds of mature youth who have no hope in the Left or in any other group who work within our corrupt political system.

"These people have no faith in anybody to champion their vision or ideals with the urgency needed to save the planet."

Additional reporting by Oliver Tickell

Shake tactics

YOUNG people know there's a problem. A big one. Some of us have experienced years of abuse of our own environments and economies. We've all been pummeled with endless episodes of the global horror movie.

One in five young British women have reportedly been raped. Young black men make up the majority of prisoners in the US. The young are always the first to die, whether in Yugoslavia, Bosnia or Somalia.

Young women are exploited in assembly factories in Malaysia and Korea. The young are the most vulnerable to market whims, the most susceptible. This all adds up to a general sense of heart and injustice. And frustration that the agents of change are stuck in a vicious mesh. Anger has turned into a people game of words: "empowerment", "participatory development", "partnership".

How can the young take a government seriously when, having committed itself in Rio to involving young people in all areas of decision-making, it now says the "primary mechanism" for this will be next year's one-off Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) Conference?

How can we take the mainstream environmental and development groups seriously when they are either tied up by government processes or too weak? They have lost any sense of anger and sense of where they should go. The result is the feeling of a growing anti-environmental grassroots movement. Many of us are turning to action groups like the Hunt Saboteurs, Earth First! and Rainforest Action Network, that underlying the social, environmental and economic issues is a question of power. This is what needs to be addressed.

The answer to a polluting factory is to stop the pollution, not to shut it down and leave jobs. But this can only happen when the needs of the whole community are taken into consideration. So we must work to give local people skills to take control of their communities. Thus "sustainable development" ceases to be the quest for unlimited national growth tempered by environmental care — as advocated by the Brundtland Commission — but becomes the quest for environmental and economic justice of local level.

Many youth activists are already practising this approach and have formed an international network known as A SEED — Action for Solidarity, Equality, Environment and Development. The coalition relies heavily on computer networks to co-ordinate international campaigns and to share information. In the UK we are planning boycotts of some of the banks, actions against cars and a youth guide to the Rio conference. It's a start.

A SEED is based at 89 Lucky Lane, Woodhatch, Wilt, SN4 2HG. Tel: 01262 515476.



The Ted K Archive

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