

Book Review: Coyotes and Town Dogs

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Coyotes and Town Dogs: Earth First! and the Environmental Movement. By Susan Zakin. (New York: Viking, 1993.) 483 pp. Endnotes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$22.50.

In 1980, a few former staff members of various environmental organizations, mostly from the Wilderness Society, set out to change the whole idea of what an environmental group should be, and do. Rather than conferring with the opposition and their potential allies, Earth First! would forget the whole premise of “working within the system” or seeking legitimacy for its positions in other people’s terms; instead, it would seek to demonstrate its own faith in the humanity and morality of radical resistance to the culture that was chewing up the last of the West.

Organizationally, activists in the West perceived a coup at the top, as the Washington staff of many environmental groups demanded top-down management of those who had struggled to enliven and represent the growing Western and rural environmental spirit. As western activists saw it, politically Washington was once again the heart of darkness. As in the Nixon years, the management of what used to be the resistance was apparently convinced that clout meant being on a first name basis with bureaucrats, and having a chatty little lunch with the person who approved clear-cutting the latest deficit timber sale. Furthermore, they sensed that the end of the Carter and the onset of the Reagan administrations foreclosed hopes of all sorts; regulatory and management agencies were given over to appointees devoted to their dismantling, the idea of an energy policy was rejected, and the progress of the 1970s was the target of the new administration’s domestic policy. After decades of “working within the system” the system seemed more hopeless and destructive than ever.

The destruction of the environment was only part of the dismal picture environmentalists perceived. Activists in the West were further disheartened by the “professionalization” campaigns in the Washington and San Francisco environmental headquarters. Earth First! became the symbolic focus for the lurking conviction that the traditional environmental groups were part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. The idea of working “with” the agencies, openly politicized and arrogant as never before, made little sense to increasing numbers of those who wrote the letters, braved hostile meetings and hearings, argued with their neighbors, and found themselves threatened on every front. As a result, a few former environmental staff from the various former Western shoe-box offices headed south of the border, hoping for political detoxification. Dave Foreman, Bart Koehler, Howie Wolke, Mike Roselle, and Ron Kezar found instead the ongoing need to fight on.

Environmental historians have generally sought to avoid writing histories of the stars, and journalist Susan Zakin’s *Coyotes and Town Dogs*, a highly personalized account of Earth First!, reminds us of the virtues of such a course. Zakin, a writer for *Rolling Stone*, displays a lively and cinematic writing style, that provides rich detail on Foreman, Koehler, and their colleagues as well as their protagonists. But we need

more. First, she overlooks the stories of the many others whose hearts were with Earth First! One of the peculiar qualities of the environmental movement in the West was how many people played important roles, and then disappeared to history. Indeed, the environmentalist successes of the Carter years resulted from a groundswell of bottom-up activism.

Missing too from Zakin's account is an analysis of Earth First!'s intellectually sophisticated response to the organizational and political climate it faced. The fundamental role and intention of Earth First! should be understood as much more self-aware than Zakin's subjects seem to drawingly suggest. She is too willing to take an individualized view of the struggle between Doug Scott, straight-arrow of the Sierra Club, and Dave Foreman, wild-man of Earth First! Zakin presents the players as if they were not each acting as tips of ideological icebergs, threatening whole sets of more or less explicit conceptions of the nature of American government, capitalism, and humans as a species. Foreman, Koehler, and the rest were never acting in isolation from this debate, and they were never unaware of their potential to alter the terms of debate in Washington; in fact, many supported Earth First! precisely to change the terms. People commonly talked about enlarging the set of positions, making barely tolerable, minimal concessions look like what they were, rather than allowing them to be treated as thousands of percent better than nothing. They were, of course, very small fractions of the possible, and this was the point: who frames the debate, and whose views are "reasonable" in whose terms?

Coyotes and Town Dogs does illustrate the intense personal stress felt by Earth First! activists; no one even vaguely participating will forget people under thirty chainsmoking while chewing Turns. What is left out is the sheer force of the debates that led these hearts to that triple by-pass. Could the Sierra Club be moved toward better and more courageous positions if there was someone farther out than Friends of the Earth? Could the Defenders of Wildlife, the Izaak Walton League, Ducks and Trout Unlimited, and the Audubon Society be encouraged to ask for more than rocks and ice wilderness scraps like jewels on top of ravaged surrounding ecosystems? Could state government agencies be sued into fulfilling their mandates, if the hearings were stacked hard enough, often enough?

Zakin, finally, underestimates the self-awareness and the coherence of the environmental debates of the 1970s and 1980s. She gives the impression it was a jolly drunken good time, rather than a bitterly fought culmination of several years' work against openly hostile opponents on all sides. Earth First! should be remembered for keeping spirits up, and for honestly dealing with the emotional and visceral nature of the situation; none of the stars fancied themselves generals the way others did, and that was the essential difference that Zakin's treatment betrays, however unwittingly.

The history of Earth First!, that anarchic "tribe" that declared the ideal of "No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth," deserves more recognition for its intellectual and moral integrity than Zakin gives it. One of the most interesting aspects of the Earth First! phenomenon was the depth and breadth of support for radical positions

that they received. The organization also demands attention because of its expression of widely-held convictions, not because of the sometimes comic, usually playful, and finally disappointingly small short-term results of the effort. Earth First! members committed far less criminal damage than the average drunken vehicular homicide, despite the bravado and theatrics.

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