

# ATWA (Air, Trees, Water, Animals)

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ATWA (an acronym for both “Air, Trees, Water, Animals” and “All The Way Alive”) represents the uncompromising ecological mandate propounded by the infamous American convict Charles Manson (b. 11 November 1934) and a number of his most loyal associates.

The exact origins of ATWA are obscure, although related ecological beliefs appear to have been present among Manson and his associates during the late 1960s. After having spent most of his early life behind bars for a string of criminal offenses ranging from auto theft to check fraud, Manson was paroled in 1967 and found a welcoming environment in the burgeoning counterculture. Together with a small retinue of disaffected young people, he took flight from the “madness of the cities” and established a communal colony at a ranch in the Santa Susana Mountains outside of Los Angeles, California. The group began to make survivalist forays into Death Valley in order to scout out more remote areas of the desert, and in September 1969 some members attempted to thwart nearby road developments by deliberately setting an expensive piece of Earth-moving equipment on fire. This early act of “monkey wrenching” – occurring a number of years before the concept would be popularized by Edward Abbey, Dave Foreman, and other radical environmentalists – was a key factor that caused the encampment of Manson associates to come under scrutiny from local law-enforcement authorities.

A study of contemporary testimonies reveals that Manson discouraged meat eating while advocating a primal understanding of the natural world which included totemistic identification with various animals. Speaking to *Rolling Stone* in 1970 after his arrest in connection with the Tate/LaBianca murders, he stated:

Have you ever seen the coyote in the desert? Watching, tuned in, completely aware. Christ on the cross, the coyote in the desert – it’s the same thing, man. The coyote is beautiful . . . He hears every sound, smells every smell, sees everything that moves. He’s always in a state of total paranoia, and total paranoia is total awareness (Manson in Lombardi 1972: 362)

Asked what he would do if released, Manson replied:

I would go out into the desert. The desert is magic . . . Nobody ever wanted me and nobody wants the desert . . . I’ll live in the desert, like a coyote. I know where every waterhole is, and every berry and fruit that’s edible . . . The desert is God’s kingdom (Lombardi 1972: 362, 371).

In the years following Manson’s conviction and imprisonment with a life sentence, his close associates Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme and Sandra Good became increasingly active in their efforts to raise awareness of the present system’s failure properly to steward the Earth. In what was apparently a desperate attempt to draw attention to this message, Fromme was apprehended after pulling a 1914 military issue .45 handgun

on president Gerald Ford in 1975 in Sacramento, California. Shortly afterward Good was arrested for conspiracy to mail death threats to hundreds of corporate polluters under the aegis of the IPCR, or “International People’s Court of Retribution,” which may have been a precursor to ATWA. Good served a ten-year sentence and was released, while Fromme is currently serving a life sentence.

By the early 1980s Manson and his supporters were primarily using the term ATWA, which usually stood for “Air, Trees, Water, Animals,” to represent their ecological-spiritual worldview. The name clearly refers to the elements of the biosphere that are crucial to human survival; these can also be closely equated to the four cardinal elements in ancient Hermetic philosophy: Air, Earth, Water, and Fire. ATWA is not represented by any formal organization or membership. In contrast to mainstream environmental groups with bureaucratic structures and tendencies toward compromise, ATWA is a state of radical consciousness, a way of thought and action that seeks to completely redress not just worldwide industrial pollution and ecological imbalance, but also the perceived unnatural evils of media control, consumerism, feminism and matriarchy, overpopulation, and racial intermixing. In blunt language, ATWA’s proponents emphasize the unity of life on Earth, which is often spoken of in religious terms. Manson has stated that “Ecology is god, for without it we are dead forever.” This perspective informs both the urgency and the moral fervor of statements such as the following from Sandra Good:

You are either working for ATWA – life – or you’re working for death. Fix it and live or run from it and die . . . ATWA is ATWAR with pollution. ATWA is a revolution against pollution. ATWA is a holy war (“Access Manson” website).

The representatives of ATWA believe that the devastation of the Earth can only be halted and reversed by a one world government with the vision and military power to enforce this goal. It is further implied that Manson is one of the few people possessed of the necessary degree of understanding and insight to articulate the course for such solutions.

Despite the passage of time, Charles Manson maintains his status in American popular culture as a perennial outsider to the “Establishment” and continues to attract interest from new generations of young people. Over the years, aspects of his philosophy have been adopted by radical enterprises ranging from the ultra-left June 2nd movement to revolutionary National Socialists. While Manson’s ideas often reach a wide audience through various websites, music releases, and occasional media interviews, only a few outside of his immediate circle appear to have understood the centrality of ATWA to his worldview.

## Further Reading

- Bravin, Jess. *Squeaky: The Life and Times of Lynette Alice Fromme*. New York: Buzz Books, 1998.
- Lombardi, John, ed. *The Age of Paranoia: How the Sixties Ended*. New York: Pocket, 1972.
- Moynihan, Michael. "Charles Manson Interview." *Seconds* 32 (1995), 64–74.
- Shreck, Nikolas, ed. *The Manson File*. New York: Amok, 1988.

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