

Earth First! meeting serene, but rhetoric still radical

Mike Dennison

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Member Bill Haskins sets up his tent at Earth First! annual outdoor meeting Monday in the foothills of the Gravelly Range.

CAMERON (AP) — The opening day of Earth First!’s annual outdoor meeting Monday belied the group’s radical image, as small circles of activists and friends gathered quietly in a high-country meadow, debating how to defend Mother Earth.

“It’s the camaraderie more than anything,” Mitch Friedman; . a biologist from Bellingham, Wash., said after arriving at the site in the Beaverhead National Forest. “I’m looking forward to the workshops, but I’m really looking forward to seeing my friends.”

Volkswagen buses and battered cars bulging with camping gear dotted the parking area one-half mile from the Round River Rendezvous, where as many as 500 Earth First! members are expected to gather for a week of music, dance, skits and environmental activism.

The vehicles sported license plates from as far away as New York and bumper stickers like “Support Organic Farmers” and “greed kills.”

More than 100 participants had arrived by midday at the grassy, tree-lined meadow in the foothills of the Gravelly Range in southwestern Montana, about 25 miles west of Yellowstone National Park.

“There’s a big piece of wild country here and we’re trying to keep it wild,” said Philip Knight, an Earth First! member from Bozeman and ‘an organizer of the event. “That’s why we’re here.”

Local law officers, wary of counter-demonstrators and Earth First!’s reputation for environmental civil disobedience, said they will keep an eye on the proceedings. But no officers were in sight at the meeting Monday.

Robert Kellog, Forest Service law enforcement officer, said he’s not expecting any problems because Earth First! historically has not created trouble near its meeting sites and “there’s no reason to expect they will this time.

“They’re just a group of people who have banded together for a common cause,” he said. “That’s what makes the United States great.

While the atmosphere Monday was festive, the talk turned serious at a “first-timer” meeting, where about 75 Earth First! members discussed the group’s image and future and the hazards of environmental activism.

Some Earth First! publications have advocated “monkeywrenching” — illegal acts of sabotage against those who develop the nation’s wildlands. But Earth First! members say the group takes no official stance on such activity and that its members are mostly involved in acts. of civil disobedience.

In fact, a workshop on non-violent protest tactics is on the rendezvous agenda and a protest action is planned somewhere locally next Monday, Kasper said. Above all, the speakers at the meeting emphasized the need for Earth First! to remain vigilant in its radical pro-environment stand.

“You want acceptance, go join the Audubon Society”, Kasper said. “You want to be reasonable, go join the Sierra Club.”



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