

Eco-radicals warn of violence

Nick Cohen meets members of Earth First!, British offshoot of a US group that favours 'new forms of action'

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A FOUNDER of Earth First!, newest and most radical environmental group in Britain, has predicted that explosives will soon be used to attack the property of hardwood timber suppliers and motorway builders.

As Earth First! members gathered in Brighton to discuss tactics at their first conference this weekend, Harry [not his real name], said: "People are getting angrier. Bombs have been used in the United States and Europe and we're bound to see desperate acts here. There's a frustration. No one talked about the environment during the election. Industry and government are just not listening."

The Earth First! movement began in the US. Its British offshoot was formed a year ago when Harry and a handful of other activists met while they were in Borneo protesting against the destruction of rainforests. Now it has about 1,000 UK sympathisers in a network of branches in most major cities.

Its members — students, workers and even some pensioners — have been arrested for getting in the way of bulldozers preparing the M3 extension across Twyford Down in Hampshire and have occupied docks importing tropical timbers. Last Sunday Earth First! took its first step over the line that divides civil disobedience from criminal damage.

Members raided a Fisons compound in South Yorkshire. The fertiliser company is probably the firm British greens despise most. Friends of the Earth and nine other organisations have been campaigning for two years against its practice of stripping peat from the few remaining lowland peat bogs in England. Many DIY stores and garden centres have stopped buying Fisons peat and the company has promised to give some — but not all — of its virgin moorland to English Nature. In a few hours Yorkshire Earth First! members caused £100,000 of damage by cutting wires and pouring sand into the engines of nine tractors and earthmovers and wrecking pumps and fire-fighting equipment.

In three weeks' time, Earth First! members will surround an Oxford timber yard which holds large stocks of tropical hardwoods. They may just block entrances and exits — or it may turn nastier. There are no agreed tactics. Jerry, a northern member, said: "You'll talk to a lot of people in Earth First! who'll condemn what happened to Fisons, but I think it was cracking. People like Fisons have got to be physically stopped, and the only way is by hitting them where it hurts — in their pocket. Even if we've only put their insurance premiums up, we've caused them bother."

Jerry's reference to the doubts of other Earth Firsters reveals a truth about the group. Earth First! is not an embryonic terrorist organisation; indeed, it is not an organisation at all. Today's meeting is not an annual conference but a "gathering of the movement". There are no leaders or followers, simply participants who believe in two principles: "no compromise in the defence of mother earth" and "no violence to any living creature". Earth Firsters have no party line, and are highly critical of tightly organised groups like Greenpeace, which they call "hierarchical and conventional".

Members in Brighton may, therefore, vote against the tactics used on Fisons, but it would not matter particularly. Individuals will be left to do what they want. This

absence of a central organisation means that many are vague and even contradictory about what the group is doing and might do in the future.

Simon Mansfield, a 22-year-old oceanographer at Liverpool University, helped organise an occupation at Liverpool docks which delayed the delivery of a shipload of tropical timber, and was recently arrested in a demonstration outside the Malaysian Tourist Board in London against the destruction of forests. He said the group used the tactics of civil disobedience and did not cause damage: "They were non-violent direct actions in London and Liverpool. Earth First! doesn't believe that you should damage property or people."

Other members of the group said the same, and added that the claim that Earth Firsters had been responsible for the Fisons raid was a smear by the group's enemies. It was only later that they were forced to agree that Earth First! members had been responsible.

The hints of a move towards violence have alarmed other greens. Friends of the Earth last week called the Fisons action "naïve" and warned that it could undermine public support for environmentalism.

The fear they express is based in part on the history of Earth First! in the US. Since it was founded in 1980, it has deployed the techniques of "monkeywrenching" — sabotaging the machinery of developers — and "tree spiking" -banking metal poles into tree trunks so lumberjacks cannot fell them.

An undercover FBI investigation led three years ago to the jailing of four Earth First! members for trying to blow up power lines to a uranium mine in Arizona. Two other Earth Firsters were seriously hurt in 1990 when a bomb exploded in their car as they organised a campaign to protect redwood forests in California. Depending on whom you believe, the bomb belonged to the Earth Firsters and went off accidentally or had been planted by the FBI, CIA or born-again Christians.

Accusations of "eco-fascism" followed those of "eco-terrorism" when David Foreman, one of the group's founders, described disease as nature's way of limiting an expanding human population which was destroying the planet. Environmentalists, he said, should keep the population down by supporting immigration controls, and opposing Third World aid programmes and attempts to find cures for Aids. Mr Foreman has now left the group.

Jake Jagoff, an American Earth First-er who toured 18 British cities in February to raise support, said that the US group now neither condemned nor condoned violence. "We believe that much of the environmental movement is stuffy and predictable," he added. "We need new forms of action to protect the earth. We are very excited that people in England are starting to realise this."

British Earth Firsters are likely to shrug off the criticism and agree with the philosophy of their US colleagues. The key word everyone in the movement uses is "empowerment". Direct action, even if it fails, as did the demonstrations at Twyford Down, Liverpool and Tilbury, is an "empowering experience". It gives the individual some control.

One young activist, who said he had seen the military government in Burma buying the arms it uses to repress the population with the proceeds of logging in the rainforest, said: ‘We’ve had enough of letter-writing and fund-raising for other organisations. People want to get up and do something. You have an immense sense of empowerment even if you just keep a timber ship out of Britain for a day.’





Earth First! protests: at Tilbury (top), barring a ship earning rainforest timber, and (above) at the M3 extension near Winchester



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