

Earth First!

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EARTH FIRST!

Earth First! is an American environmental advocacy group formed in 1980 at a highway rest stop north of Tucson, Arizona (Cahalan 2001, p. 192). Angered by the federal government's continued failure to protect and preserve wilderness (Scarce 2006, p. 58), a small cadre of friends acted on impulse and inspiration, vowing "No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth" (Cahalan 2001, p. 192). The group gained members instantly, becoming known, politically, for its cynicism of regular legislative process and its penchant for direct action, and, prophetically, for anticipating ecological apocalypse (Foreman 1986, p. 2) and the demise of industrialized civilization (Abbey 1986, p. 22).

Whereas political environmental groups such as the Sierra Club attempt to preserve biodiversity through lobbying and legislation, Earth First! prefers techniques of "direct action" pioneered by Greenpeace (Scarce 2006, pp. 47–48). The goal of direct action is twofold. First is to draw public attention to environmental problems through media stunts in order to bolster the efforts of mainstream environmental organizations. Earth First!'s initial foray into public relations was the memorable "cracking" of Glen Canyon Dam (Scarce 2006, pp. 57–58).

Second, Earth First! seeks to physically impede development. The most common strategy is nonviolent civil disobedience such as personally blocking bulldozers. Much more controversial is sabotage, principal to the establishment of Earth First! but rejected by Greenpeace (Scarce 2006, p. 54). One known instance of Earth First! sabotage was the targeting of a power line tower in Arizona (Robbins 1989). Though violent, sabotage is not terrorism. Terrorism aims at mutilation and murder; sabotage, in the spirit of English activist Ned Ludd (Sale 1999), is designed to destroy the technological infrastructure of industrial economy (Abbey 1983, p. 94).

Cofounder Dave Foreman traces the necessity of direct action back to the formation of the U.S political economy and the near absolute control of industrialists on environmental policy. Foreman contrasts the visions of Alexander Hamilton, who advocated an economy

built on industry, and Thomas Jefferson, who advocated an economy built on agriculture. According to Foreman, the Hamiltonian vision triumphed, with the U.S. government essentially becoming an organ for the promotion of business (Lee 1995, p. 5) making normal legal and political means insufficient for the end of wilderness preservation.

For Foreman biodiversity is the summum bonum (greatest good). Economic activities that threaten biodiversity must be forestalled. Earth First! claims that in this mainstream environmentalism has failed through capitulation and concession (Foreman 1983, pp. 95–96). In an industrial economy, destruction of industrial infrastructure is more effective than negotiation. Laws protect property, making sabotage intrinsically illegal. In contrast to "reform" environmentalism, which operates within normal legal paradigms (Manes 1990, pp. 45–65), sabotage, as illegal, is "radical" (Scarce 2006, p. 5).

Sabotage for ecological ends—"ecotage" or "ecosabotage"—is the use of the tools of industry against itself (Foreman 1981). This method, also known as "monkeywrenching," was famously sketched by Edward Abbey in novel form (1985 [1975]). In the enigmatic relationship between Abbey, who clearly enjoyed the role of rhetorician provocateur, and Earth First!, art imitated actuality, and actuality art. Of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Abbey wrote: "This book, though fictional in form, is based strictly on historical fact. Everything in it is real or actually happened. And it all began just one year from today" (1985, frontispiece). Foreman (1993, frontispiece) makes a similar jocular disclaimer in his practical field guide to ecotage in spite of the book's apparent intent to foment the collapse of the Hamiltonian economy.

Foreman diagnosed philosophical rumination leading to political impotence (1983). Given the preference for action over thought, the exact ecological axiology in the Earth First! platform is vague, a conglomeration of biocentric egalitarianism (Foreman 1995 [1980], p. 2), ecocentric holism (Wolke 1983, p. 3), and pantheism (Taylor 1991). The strongest of these themes is ecocentrism. The loci of moral consideration are ecological wholes, and given the negative human impact on the biosphere, *Homo sapiens* are of disvalue (Foreman 1991, p. 26).

Themes of antihumanism in Earth First! became explicit in the mid-1980s. Associate journal editor Christopher Manes (1986) argued that technology exacerbates overpopulation by staving off death and therefore the practice of medicine ought to be discontinued. Most contentiously, Manes (1987) asserted that the biosphere would benefit from a substantial decline in human population, and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) might provide a welcome palliative.

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Members of Earth First! Protest the Timber Industry. *Earth First! is an environmental activist group that distinguishes itself by utilizing direct action, nonviolent civil disobedience, and sometimes ecotage as techniques. Here members protest logging of old-growth or “ancient” forests in the Pacific Northwest. Some, including Murray Bookchin, have criticized the group’s ideology as being antihumanist.* STEPHEN FERRY/LIAISON/GETTY IMAGES.

Predictably, this argument and others like it provoked the wrath of social justice thinkers and drew the battle lines of a barbed exchange between Foreman and Murray Bookchin (Chase 1991). Bookchin argued that ecocentrism leads to unconscionable misanthropy (1988, p. 25). Earth First!ers treat humanity as one undifferentiated overpopulating mass, missing the fact that ecological problems are not the result of human existence per se but rather the differential consumption of resources between socioeconomic classes (Chase 1991, p. 57). Bookchin’s critique suggests Foreman has tended to focus categorically on the impact of humans on nonhuman nature in terms of industrialization and overpopulation. This overlooks the relationships of individuals to each other within unjust social structures (such as patriarchy and class hierarchy) and how these inequities translate into the human devastation of ecological systems.

This external debate mirrored an internal debate and precipitated an eventual rupture in the ranks of Earth First! (Lee 1995, pp. 115–127). Demographically, this schism occurred between the original founding faction—

the “rednecks”—predominately from the desert southwest, and younger members—the “hippies”—predominately from northern California and Oregon.

Generally, while the founding faction applauded ecotage, the second generation favored civil disobedience. For the latter, environmental justice requires social change, and ecotage merely generates antagonism. Judi Bari publicly renounced tree spiking, the iconic hallmark of Earth First! ecotage, in an effort to forge alliances between loggers and environmentalists and win public support (Lee 1995, p. 134).

Ecotage works best when decentralized. In this sense, first-generation Earth First!ers departed from their fundamental premise the moment they gave themselves a name. Nevertheless, the project of initiating social change is amenable to, and benefits from, efficient systematic organization. This ideological difference gave the social change faction an inherent institutional advantage. By the late 1980s these dynamics played out and the social justice faction gained majority control. Foreman departed in 1990 (Lee 1995, pp. 139–140) and, perhaps ironically,

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went on to serve on the Sierra Club's Executive Committee from 1995 to 1996 (Sierra Club 2007).

Earth First! has succeeded remarkably in expanding the range of debate about environmental issues. It has achieved its objective of making mainstream environmentalism seem moderate and hence more widely palatable. Any assessment of Earth First! must look beyond the group itself to the ripple effect it has had on the totality of political ecology.

SEE ALSO *Abbey, Edward; Biodiversity; Civil Disobedience; Deep Ecology; Ecosabotage; Ecotage and Ecoterrorism; Environmental Activism; Greenpeace; Nongovernmental Organizations; Sierra Club.*

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EARTH SUMMIT

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), popularly known as the Earth Summit, was convened in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 1992 in the hopes of securing a number of environmentally responsible international agreements. The conference brought together the largest number of world leaders that had ever been assembled: 118 heads of state and government and delegations from 178 nations. There were 7,000 diplomats and their staff. As Thomas Kamm wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, this "mother of all summits" was "the biggest gathering of world leaders ever held" (1992, p. A1). Through media coverage from the 7,000 journalists who were present, UNCED gained world attention for major environmental issues. The chief official for UNCED was Maurice Strong, a Canadian businessman and environmentalist.

THE CONFERENCE AND ITS PUBLICATIONS

Parallel to the official summit was a Global Forum. Here, by one count, there were 3,738 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from 153 countries that had something to say about the environment, and about 30,000 participants in total. The Global Forum featured hundreds of displays in outdoor booths and had hundreds of speakers, including many celebrities.

The conference produced the *Rio Declaration* (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development 1992b), a short statement of principles on environment and development. It also produced *Agenda 21* (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development 1992a), at over 500 pages long perhaps the most complex and comprehensive international document ever attempted. Initially, there was hope for four international conventions—(1) Forests, (2) Biotechnology, (3) Biodiversity, and (4) Climate—though only the latter two survived the negotiating process, both in greatly weakened form. The principal stumbling blocks on biodiversity and biotechnology conventions revolved around access to genetic resources and technology transfer.