

Deep Ecology Debate Continues

Earth First!ers Respond

Various Authors

1988

The following is a sampling of letters we have received from supporters of Earth First! who have taken exception to our criticisms of the radical environmental group in our last two issues (see FE #327, Fall 1987 and FE #328, Spring 1988). The debate is too long to recount in its entirety, but its broader aspects can be recounted thusly:

Earth First! embraces a philosophy of environmentalism—deep ecology—which posits a biocentric (equality of all organisms) rather than an anthropocentric (human centered) world view. Deep ecology accurately describes the depths of the current ecological crisis and often can show insights into its root causes, but fails to understand the centrality of the social component in searching for explanations. In refusing to see the system of capitalism as being fundamental to the degradation of the environment, it places it as only one of a number of human created “problems: Instead, they indict the entire human species as being responsible without differentiating between sex, race, class or geography.

As deep ecology’s most militant exponent, Earth First! has been severely criticized by this paper and others for a misanthropic stance which has tipped over into racism, patriotism and a self-serving Malthusianism, which rather than going beyond “left and right” as they contend, has come down decidedly on the side of the latter. The Fifth Estate also made the contention that Earth First! is dominated by the style and politics of the editor of their newspaper, Dave Foreman, who gives it a macho, redneck image while shutting out all criticism.



On April 27, eight of us from Detroit, including people from the Fifth Estate staff, traveled 200 miles north to Cadillac, Michigan to participate in the Earth First! initiated “Days of Outrage Against the U.S. Forest Service.” The Forest Service has been selling off large chunks of wilderness areas and national forests to rapacious logging concerns which have destroyed millions of acres of trees. The USFS has opened areas to logging by an extensive road building program which destroys habitat and wildlife and plans an additional 50,000 miles if they are not stopped. The EF! action brought out people in 40 locations around the country including ours at the headquarters of the Manistee/Huron National Forests. EF! has an important brochure detailing the danger posed by the Forest Service; contact Earth First!, P.O. Box 5871, Tucson AZ 85703. A dollar for postage would be appreciated.

The letters herein have been edited for space as have the FE responses. We will send the complete texts to anyone who desires them. Though many other letters failed to make these pages which were both supportive of our position and critical, they may appear in subsequent issues with full responses.

In the main we are heartened by the letters from the supporters of EF!, but one wonders why more of their statements haven't shown up in their own newspaper. It appears that EF!'s much crowed about "diversity" is somewhat more widespread than appears from reading Foreman's tightly edited paper. And, that is exactly the nub of the problem: the paper defines for all practical purposes an official party line which is the way in which those outside of the activist core view the movement. Also, it is on the basis of the non-diverse political pronouncements of the Tucson inner circle that new people will be attracted to the movement.

Several anarchists have written us stating their support of EF!, but it seems they do so only by ignoring the dark side of the group. While doing many worthwhile projects in defense of the planet, EF!'s calls for protecting the U.S. borders against Hispanic immigrants and cheering AIDS as population control makes us ask, what is the role of these anti-authoritarians within the local groups? If Foreman/ Abbeyism is allowed to remain ascendant within EF!, the movement will travel down the road to right-wing reaction.

We are not an enemy of EF!; we are its critic. It was because of this posture that we found nothing inconsistent in some of us taking part in the April 27 National Days of Outrage against the abuses of the U.S. Forest Service's rape of the Wilderness (see photo). We continue to express encouragement for much of the ecological writing in the EF! paper and for the actions of their local groups. However, we would be remiss not to continue a criticism that in many instances has become a dialogue with those in Earth First! with whom we share the same revolutionary passion for a defense of the wilderness and a ridding of the planet of this vile civilization.

Not Threatened

To the FE:

E.B. Maple's recent attack on Earth First! sounds like it was written by a frustrated armchair academician who likes to fashion him/herself the ultimate Free Thinker. How tired I am of people who are so bogged down in rhetoric, they can't even recognize who's on their side and who's not.

I'm an Earth First!er and I'm a woman. I consider myself a feminist and a warrior, and I'm damned proud of it. I am not at all threatened by the "macho" or "rowdy" or "redneck" tone of EF!; nor by what you refer to as the "male centrality," and there's a reason for it. Simply, there's too much work to be done. I haven't the time to sit around and listen to a bunch of angry victims—female or not—rap on and on about the evils of anything that reeks of male energy.

Things masculine are good and useful as are things feminine. Most EF!ers are motivated by a very sensitive and feminine love of the Earth. Our response, however, is often very masculine, as we are warriors, battling what we see as a crazy destructive, civilization.

Ynestra King insults me to describe EF! as a "bunch of guys who have set themselves up as the self-appointed protectors of another virgin..." Perhaps Ms. King should have joined us at the recent EF! Women's Rendezvous in the California desert. There she would have seen a sizable group of powerful women warriors, women who aren't afraid to pick up a monkeywrench and apply it where it will do the most good, ignoring the risk. These brave women are not only independent thinkers, but many are important and respected leaders in Earth First! Perhaps before you devote such a sizable portion of your paper to ripping us apart, you should get to know who we really are, outside of our journal.

Don't worry about the direction Earth First! is going in. Our love of things wild and our individual dedication will be the only guides we ever will listen to, and it will keep us vibrant, fighting, non-compromising, strong and hopefully effective. But thanks for your concern.

A New Mexico Woman
Albuquerque, NM

Lynne Clive responds: I'd like to affirm something you said at the end of your letter—our love of things wild certainly links us—you and me, many people who work with EF!, the few of us who for years have been working on the FE, and many individuals not connected to these projects.

I feel that love and respect for the earth includes a similar regard for genuine human community, and that being a part of humankind (and acknowledging that it, along with the earth, has been exploited and fragmented) we cannot consider one without the other.

In contrast to you, I am threatened and insulted by the “macho,” “redneck,” “male centrality” of the *EF! Journal*. These characteristics are the cornerstones of the patriarchal, hierarchical civilization which conquered and destroyed the wilderness and earth based cultures. Working with individual “redneck macho” men on actions to save the earth is one thing, but it's very different and very dangerous to support that kind of male posturing in the *EF! Journal*. If there are brave, independent thinking women EF! activists (and I know there are), why is their voice not strongly represented in the *EF! Journal*?

Realizing that the journal was NOT representative of people like you was what led us to critique it in part. And many of the letters we've received from EF! activists who don't work on the journal confirm our criticisms. Many of them realize that we were not “ripping you apart” in the FE; our focus was rather the faulty misleading ideas put forth in the journal and articulated by many deep ecologists and neo-malthusians who have influenced people like Foreman and Abbey.

I sympathize with your frustrations—wanting and trying so passionately to save what remains of the natural world from corporate greed, from industry, “progress,” development, from a fragmented society that denigrates the earth in countless routinized daily activities. We have been conscious of this deadly leviathan for a long time, and our frustration led us to analyze, critique, expose it, as well as to participate in actions that challenge its constant encroachment in our daily lives.

We must be very careful with our ideas. It is one thing to have a misanthropic sense of humor and say, “fuck the human race” to your friends in a bar or even on an action, but it's entirely different to push this attitude in a journal that prints thousands of copies and influences countless people who are coming to an environmental consciousness from numerous diverse perspectives. The media (and alternative media as well) have power beyond the control of the individuals who work on it. Clever condemnations of the sanctuary movement and racist statements against Mexicans, for example, should not be tolerated in a truly ecological journal. Having been involved in work to oppose U.S. intervention in Central America and to support Guatemalan indigenous peoples, I was personally insulted and extremely disappointed to read such statements in EF! If you can get a hold of a book by a Guatemalan Indian woman entitled *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, please read it and perhaps you'll understand some of our dismay. It's people like Rigoberta that Foreman would like to (“sadly” he says) send back to their “unfortunate fates” (i.e., certain death at the hands of U.S. backed death squads).

I do worry about the direction of EF! and of the entire environmental movement. If our love of things wild includes a love and respect for people like Rigoberta (who comes from a native culture more in tune with and integrated in the natural world than you or I will ever be) then I would worry much less. If you want to say “fuck the human race” then start with the corporate fat cats who finance and master-mind development projects and leave the Rigobertas of the world to teach us the old ways.

FE Note: The above mentioned book, *I, Rigoberta Menchu An Indian Woman In Guatemala*, has just arrived in the Fifth Estate Bookstore. See book page for description and ordering information.

Organize Diversity

Dear George Bradford & Fifth Estate,

I have a few comments on your recent effort to criticize Earth First! While it is a nice piece of scholarship and does a good job of illuminating the fuzzy thinking behind some statements in the EF! journal regarding immigration and third world populations, you are really missing some important points of the deep ecology perspective. Yes, its various proponents are naive or mistaken on several subjects, but you are reading far more serious flaws into their thought than actually exist. For one, I am really sick of seeing the term “fascist” thrown around so irre-

sponsibly. Yes, Foreman, Abbey and some others have redneck roots, but for rednecks they have come a long way! Especially Foreman.

I've had an opportunity to communicate with Foreman recently, and the criticisms of life boat ethics, etc. have made him think. It's good they were undertaken. But who really cares what Foreman thinks? Sure he has editorial control over a journal. So do you for that matter. I don't agree with everything you say, but I still like to read the FE. By now I have met a lot of people through EF! Most everyone is very individual and has strong and differing opinions on everything. Fact is, EF! is striving to organize on the principle of diversity: rednecks, feminists, anarchists, pagans; if all are strong, none will dominate. Yes, this group was founded by rednecks and retains some of that flavor. I find it amusing at times, stupid at others, but not a dangerous tendency.

As for your pals from Alien-nation, was present at most of the events described in their report. I too was upset by the way the rendezvous committee handled them, they are due for major criticism on that score. However, I could not help but feel that Alien-nation came to the RRR not intending to communicate, but to get in a big confrontation and fight and get high on the adrenaline rush. I say this for two reasons. One, they had very obnoxious and aggressive "debating" style, especially their big man (I don't remember his name, but he wore a black t-shirt the whole time and acted like a typical vulgar Marxist). Two, at the anarchist potluck which I helped organize there was far more interest and support for anarchy than opposition or reservations. I was very heartened by the discussion; there was quite a lot of criticism of the Tucson bias. Alien-nation, however, only says they were personal anarchists and somehow limited. Come on, didn't we all learn long ago that the personal is political? These things make me feel that they came to the RRR with their minds made up and were only seeking validation, evidence.

Finally, a few words about deep ecology. You really give your misunderstanding away George, on page 4 where you decry "deep ecology's...refusal to place the environmental crisis within its social, economic and political context..." What is wrong with admitting that there may be more instructive contexts than the social, economic and political? Personally, I am more of a Stirnerite, but if I am going to approach things in terms of an enlightened self interest, I find it more valid to consider the whole of the earth and not just the human part of it.

As far as your insistence on relating everything back to capital, capital is just the latest manifestation of dominance which has previously appeared as feudalism, patriarchy, theocracy, etc., and which arose as a result of humanity's alienation from nature. To demand an earth based culture and that earth come first seems more radical than to merely demand the end of capital. Such a view is also very consistent with the story of human oppression told by Perlman in *Against His-story*, *Against Leviathan*.

Another Anarchist for Earth First!

Kelpie Willsin
Chico, CA

George Bradford responds: As for "irresponsible" use of the word fascism, a rereading of my essay will only show a very careful use of the term. In my original letter to EF! I had described the "life boat ethic" of Garrett Hardin as ecofascism, and I stand by that. The "life boat ethic" argues that too many people are destroying the commons of the Earth and that the poor should be left to starve, yet says nothing about property development as a mode of capital accumulation or the nation state (except to affirm it).

This pseudo-radicalism is very reminiscent of fascism, appealing as it does to nationalism and concealing the real, material institutions of global capitalism that are destroying nature and human communities on a planetary level. People—ultimately other people—become the enemy, so Foreman's comments on closing borders (what only very right-wing or left-wing dictatorships do) and letting people starve who are the victims of capitalist civil wars become "acceptable" suggestions.

Few inside EF! may take his weirdness seriously, especially when he does so many other exemplary things, but in the general culture his legitimations of the U.S. nation state and "defense" of "our resources" and borders will elicit unexpected and dangerous responses. He should think about that.

Fascism is a difficult question, but Murray Bookchin's tirades and the superficial replies aside, as radicals we need to examine how earlier anti-industrial traditions, as in Germany, could be colonized and captured by fascism. The nazis were able to colonize anti-capitalist sentiments with a vague anti-business rhetoric that never developed a global critique of actual institutions and their role in oppression and exploitation (mainly because the capitalists were bankrolling them).

They also appealed to a longing for a return to nature in some of their propaganda, excoriating the modern world as the “asphalt civilization,” while avoiding the nature of the society that made the asphalt. The FE has discussed the character of this civilization for a number of years, showing the inadequacies of simplistic “anti-capitalism” and how it leads to left-wing nazism or gulag leninism. But a lack of understanding of capital as a system of internal alienation and external domination, and of its actual operations around the globe, is just as dangerous as mindless leftism. That is why I undertook the deep ecology critique.

I emphasized the positive aspects of EF! and what the wider movement does, even the many positive things about deep ecology, with which I think I share a biocentric perspective, but positive things are done by leftists too, and that doesn’t mean that we should withhold our differences. EF!ers and authoritarian leftists both participated in tearing up the train tracks after a munitions train ran over Brian Willson last spring, for example, but we should still express our criticisms of their perspectives while supporting their actions.

As for diversity, I believe EF! is diverse, but Foreman’s argument that the malthusian view of the crisis is rooted in human numbers (a view I call starvationism), that it is a “litmus test” for the group, does not strike me as an expression of diversity. EF! women, in particular, should confront this ideology, because it is profoundly anti-woman. The resolution of the population growth crisis is rooted in the necessity for women’s emancipation, their access to basic health, reproductive freedom and land.

There is a rich literature of feminist writing on this issue (including the recent *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs* by Betsy Hartmann, which I reviewed in the last FE) that belies the masculinist myth of simple quantities as the underlying problem. This radical vision needs to be explored and represented to the EF! group. Telling people that they are a plague, “the AIDS of the Earth,” as Paul Watson recently had it in Toronto, is not only a mystification, but also contributes to entropy, since no one will be won to a radical ecological vision by the argument that they should just “die off.”

As for the context of the ecological crisis, my point is that human civilization is causing the poisoning of the Earth and the present extinction spasm, and that the underlying causes are to be found in deep imbalances in the society of humans. As humans, we are destroying the rest of the planet, but that only begs the question. What about our civilization (I use the word “our” advisedly) is causing this? It cannot be found in ecological science, which does not analyze or critique relations of power or social-cultural-historical modes within human society.

Today, industrial capitalism has emerged as the culmination and deadliest mode of the social plague of domination, hierarchy and alienation. As Fredy Perlman’s book aptly and poetically reveals, capital—as external domination and conquest, and internal authoritarian conditioning, as universal despiritization, commodification and mechanization—exists in its fundamental germ state with the original rupture in primal society and the emergence of the state (the “-archy” that anarchy tries to resist and destroy).

Revolt, revolution and the creation of communities of such resistance have gone on since the beginning, since that break. It is a rich tradition and we are part of it. Deep ecology tends to ignore it, blaming undifferentiated humanity for the problem, seeing “humanism” as the cause. But “humanism” is only the secular religion of the modern bourgeoisie—the mask that covers the underlying relations of power that keep us all reproducing the planetary work pyramid, the Leviathan.

The only way out is to explode those deepest forms of alienation, to begin to see our place again in nature, but to allow no illusions about the concrete institutions of modern capital, East and West, today. We have learned much from the same literature from which deep ecology draws its strengths, but deep ecology could learn at least as much from us, from the history of radical anti-capitalism, anarchism and libertarian communism, and the communalist revolts of the past.

In the June 1988 issue of *EF!*, Dave Foreman argues that EF! is the “avant garde” (read: vanguard) of radical environmentalism and the writers (like him and Miss Ann Thropy) of the journal are the avant garde of the avant garde. I prefer to see current emerging anti-industrial movements as part of a reality that is kaleidoscopic. EF! has a piece of the truth, but they need to listen to their critics (even ones like Murray) and examine their assumptions, or that truth will crystallize into ideology and manipulation, and end up being something different than what they intend and what we all desire.

Dim Realization

Sir,

I wish to respond specifically to some of the claims made by E.B. Maple in the Spring 1988 issue of FE. Maple repeatedly refers to the "male centrality" which purportedly dominates EF!. This shows a real lack of knowledge of EF! and its adherents. Maple seems to be relying on the image of EF! portrayed by popular media: rough-and-ready, beer-swilling redneck ecoterrorists. While this may apply to some members, EF! cannot be so easily stereotyped, and anyone writing for an underground publication like FE should know better than to rely on popular media for accurate portrayals of facts.

If EF! is really male dominated, you'd better tell all the EF! women! In late March an EF! women's rendezvous was held in the California desert. It was attended by some of the real leaders of the movement; strong-minded, highly intelligent women who I doubt would allow themselves to be sucked into a male-dominated group.

One of the things which attracted me to EF! is the movement's encouragement of feminine traits in both men and women. I'm not talking about wearing makeup or putting on skirts. I'm talking about creativity, openness, free display of emotion, nonviolence, and empathy for other life forms. EF! does not qualify for the attributes of "violence and male rage," as Maple claims.

Maple does display a dim realization of what EF! actually is and does. I quote from his/her article: "Earth First! constantly and quite accurately, berates the U.S. Forest Service," and, "their willingness to militantly defend wilderness through direct action and sabotage is admirable and sometimes effective." Hey!

This is Earth First! How about a little more credit for those qualities? As Maple says, "The ultimate direction of the movement will depend greatly upon the rank and file of Earth First!." Local groups are becoming more and more autonomous and effective on their own turf. We come together not to goose-step to some "right-wing caudillo," but to defend the Wilderness.

Randall Restless

Wild Rockies Earth First!

P.O. Box 6151

Bozeman MT 59715

FE Note: Randall Restless was arrested May 27 at an Earth First! demonstration protecting grizzly bear habitat in Yellowstone National Park. Restless was wearing a bear suit and chained himself to a Park sign. Protect the griz; free Randall! He wants to be contacted at the above address for further campaigns.

Also: This is not meant as a low blow to diminish the points you make in your letter, but you probably would have gotten farther in your refutation of EF!'s male centrality if you had not addressed our gender-mixed staff as "Sir." The woman who opened your letter immediately circled your greeting and your remarks on women in EF!.

Sacred World View

Amigos,

Ed Abbey's opinions on immigration or Foreman's attitude are no more representative of Earth First! than Oregon EF!'s prayer circles or my controversial poetry performances. It is proof of our anarchistic tribalism that such diversity exists under one priority: the Earth, "in toto," comes first! Ahead of our short-term material/political concerns.

Deep Ecology is an academic term for the sacred world view shared in common by all races in their ancestral past, a recognition of the sacred (intrinsic, equal) value in all things, not their value to one species anointed as "care-takers" of the Earth by the Judeo-Christian power structure. Deep Ecology denounces the patriarchal domination of ourselves, women, children, and other species who also have a right to live out their species destiny unfettered.

Let's not take ourselves too seriously. Revolution with a smile, Ghost Dancers at Armageddon, jammin'...

It's not our generation's job to build more barriers, or dress up the old ones with intellectual irrelevancy. It is our job to tear the fucking walls down!

Insist on the dream!

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