

Fifth Estate/Earth First!

The Twain Meet in New Mexico

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It already seems like a long time ago, but this past June three of us from the *Fifth Estate* staff headed out by train to New Mexico for our first Earth First! (EF!) Round River Rendezvous (RRR). This was the tenth annual RRR, which EF! describes as its yearly “tribal celebration.”

Needless to say, after the past couple of years of argument, discussion and heated exchange between *Fifth Estate* writers and people in EF! (see FE’s Fall 1987 through Spring 1989), we undertook the journey with excitement and a bit of trepidation. We were anxious to meet more of the faces behind the words, and though we had received warm invitations from several EF! individuals, we also received a few not so warm challenges to attend, and we weren’t sure we’d be welcomed by all.

Our purpose in going to New Mexico was two-fold: we wanted to attend some of the EF! gathering, but we also wanted to see northern New Mexico. Living in Detroit’s large, urban industrial environment, we were anxious to take in those wide, dry vistas, to see the earth under different angles of light, and to breathe fresh, relatively pure air.

What follows is a very partial report on the rendezvous—we were only there for 3 days of the event which lasted a week. Following our own instincts and EF! advice to get out into the wilderness, we spent the rest of our journey hiking and camping throughout the area.

The RRR took place June 19–26 in the Jemez Mountains of North Central New Mexico, just west of Los Alamos, at an altitude of 7,500 feet. We drove eight miles down a dirt logging road into the national forest, left our rented car and hiked with our supplies about a mile to Butterfly Springs—the rendezvous site.

Some two to three hundred people were camping in the area when we arrived, many arranged by state or by EF! group. The campers made a conscious effort not to disturb the natural habitat by designating paths through the meadow to keep it from being trampled and building small stone barriers around anthills and prickly pear cactuses, as well as observing the request to not use the spring to wash dishes. An attempt to separate refuse for recycling was moderately successful, and non-chemical portable privies were on site that used only lime.

Given EF!’s wilderness-wise reputation, we wondered how we would compare, and traveled lightly lest we be singled out as urbanoid “fungos” (an EF! in-house term for mindless and voracious consumers). But in this regard the range was remarkable, with everything from the simple ascetic campsites of taoist sages to a kind of backwoods hovel replete with scattered sardine tins, aluminum foil boxes and the like. Presumably, the place was cleaned up properly after all left (though that little alpine meadow is probably still trying to recover from the dancing and camping that went on in it).

Not Typical Rendezvous

We were aware that this was not a typical EF! rendezvous due to the paranoia and tension around recent indictments and grand jury subpoenas of EF! activists. The presence of New Mexico State Police and armed (and unarmed) U.S. Forest Service rangers added to the sense that a police raid might become part of the entertainment, though generally the cops chatted amicably with participants, and several rangers bought EF! T-shirts (as trophies, perhaps?). Attendance was probably cut slightly, with some staying away entirely (none of the original founders was present, though Dave Foreman showed up after we left), and others leaving children at home. About 350 participated over the week.

In the absence of the EF! founders and with the presence of a number of newcomers, the gathering was frequently reminded by those considering themselves “old guard” that this rendezvous was “different.” The newcomers, many of whom were both sympathetic to and critical of EF!, were stereotyped by this “old guard” as anarchists and “anarchist hippies” (though a large percentage of people on all sides of the many discussions often described themselves as anarchists or as sympathetic to anarchist principles).

Some even charged that “anarchists are hijacking our movement,” and recommended a “no-fault divorce” between those who did not agree (with, presumably, this self-defined old guard getting the property in the settlement, and the others getting the boot).

Roger Featherstone, an organizer for the group, was quoted by national media as saying, “This isn’t appearing like it’s an EF! gathering any more. It’s a left-wing, hippie-type thing.”

Most people we met at the RRR were friendly, genuine and eager to meet us. Many told us that they didn’t pay attention to the ravings in the EF! Journal, and in fact, shared our political criticisms of Foreman’s reactionary statements and the aggressive malthusianism that some in the movement maintain. Several had been arrested at Central America-related, anti-intervention actions.

They were, as they continued to insist, a diverse and admirable collection of committed people. Anti-statism, a hatred for technology and an identification with primal peoples were common. Republican EF!ers were not in evidence.

Human Wolf Howls

Each morning as we tumbled out of our sleeping bags into the crisp mountain air, we were greeted by human wolf howls calling us to the morning circle. Circles were also convened at other times as needed to discuss whatever issues and problems of general concern arose. We were impressed with the way these seemingly unstructured, informal and spontaneous meetings, often with 60 to 80 people in attendance, functioned.

Facilitators were very conscious of taking care of the circle and of allowing everyone who wanted to speak the opportunity to do so. Women took on strong roles and were clearly as outspoken as the men. People seemed very considerate of each other and aware of potential problems with process. One morning, in the midst of a heated discussion, someone pointed out that we were upsetting a mother chipping sparrow trying to get to her chicks in a small tree at the edge of our circle, so we moved aside and she was able to get on with her day.

Workshops took place throughout each day on a variety of topics, from how-to sessions on tree-climbing and tree-sitting, to strategy discussions and planning for future actions, to discussions of philosophy, biodiversity and politics. In a display of celebrated EF! camaraderie and revelry, people gathered each evening around a huge (and not very ecological, but still appealing) bonfire, while spirited and very talented singers and musicians roused us to song and laughter. When the moon finally made it up high enough in the sky to peak over the meadow of what was once an ancient volcano powerful enough to spew its ash as far away as modern-day Ohio, it was greeted by ‘a chorus of wild howls from around the blaze.

June 20th was the occasion of a solstice celebration dance and dramatization presented in the evening twilight. Loosely organized to tell, with drums and dance, the story of evolution, the destruction of the earth by the Machine and the eventual salvation of the planet and its beings by child monekywrenchers, the nude and semi-clothed and

paint-daubed dancers exhibited a spirit so contagious that at the finale many onlookers kicked off shoes and clothes and joined in a frenzied celebration of life and renewal. (See Kelpie Willsin's account on the Letters page.)

Later we learned that in the aftermath of the dance some disrespectful persons had burned a U.S. flag (one of three or four that had hung over the EF! information table). Many of the dancers had stomped out the fire in glee. This incident kicked up an even-bigger dust storm, as the more patriotic "rednecks" became enraged over the insult to the sacred icon. Featherstone led the attack, calling flag burning "just plain stupid" and warning that it would alienate mainstream americans that EF! needed to save wilderness.

"If you want a social change movement, there are plenty out there," he said. "But Earth First! is not a social change movement, it's about saving wilderness." Not only would such irresponsible acts tarnish EF!'s good name in the media, went the argument, they would cause the victimization of those facing prosecution. The flagburners were going to get their friends locked up for a long time.

It was ironic that the flagburning took place the very night before the newspapers reported that the U.S. Supreme Court had upheld flag-burning as legitimate free speech. When the flag-burners hung up the burned remnants of old glory with a placard proclaiming "Earth First! Nationalism Last!" someone scrawled "FBI Commie Scum" on it, and a fistfight almost occurred when another angry person tried to rip it down.

There were several discussions in circles about the matter, and after a while some who were tired of the whole discussion started threatening to stomp and burn the very next person who brought up the topic. After a while, nevertheless, it became clear that the vast majority of EF!ers, new and old, dedicated activists and arm-chair supporters, did not agree with the "rednecks."

There was a significant number who believed that the burning was poorly timed, but many of them said, on second thought, that the problem could be avoided by getting rid of all the flags altogether, since they were earth firsters and felt no great sympathy for the flag of a state that was implicated in fabulous levels of land-pillage. Others said the only solution was to affirm diversity. The comment "some of us fly 'em, some of us burn 'em" got a hearty applause from the large majority at one circle.

Nor did people accept the argument that flagburning automatically endangered those in jail. State repression was not to determine a monolithic strategy of the group. In any case, it was pointed out, the group was defending sabotage openly to the press, so the flag burning wasn't about to make a difference. Depending on the media to paint a positive portrait of eco-radicals, no matter how well they behaved, was also criticized as naive. All in all, the majority did not agree: the "rednecks" got less than a draw.

In a workshop organized by Lone Wolf Circles to explore and overcome the political differences underlying the kind of polarization we saw going on in Earth First!, Lone Wolf criticized theoretical debate as a divisive element in a growing earth-oriented radicalism, and argued that common action and activism would naturally overcome such divisions. Yet this very workshop was interrupted when it was announced that someone was tearing down the anti-nationalism poster nearby.

This seemed to reflect the need for a deepening social critique, not The putting aside of differences, even as people engaged in common actions. Earth First! is to be commended for its concentration on wilderness, work that is of the utmost importance. Yet if it is to overcome its present challenges and meet those to come with a clear vision, it must find a way to maintain its focus on wilderness while seeing the connections this struggle has to other aspects of the same crisis.

It must become, for lack of a better phrase, a "social change movement," because it will take authentic, revolutionary social change to save wilderness or anything else. Hopefully, EF! will remain part of, and grow with, that necessary process.

On Monday, June 26 after the RRR, about 100 EF!ers attempted to shut down a timber sale, i.e., a tree slaughter, in the Santa Fe National Forest. Six protesters chained themselves to a cattle guard leading to the access road to the timber sale and were successful in turning away one logging truck.

Small groups using the more splashy diversion of the chain-in set about blockading a half mile of road further in, using downed trees left by loggers. In another action that day, five EF!ers were arrested for blockading a road with their bodies, and those who had chained themselves eventually voluntarily unlocked themselves after Forest Service rangers agreed to only issue them warnings.

While all of that was going on, the three of us from the Fifth Estate were dreamily stretched out on a rock outcropping overlooking the ruins of an Anasazi pueblo village in Bandelier National Park. We were so high above the long abandoned dwellings of The Ancient Ones that turkey buzzards soared beneath us on warm air currents coming up from the canyon. At first reading this might appear as a dereliction of our revolutionary “duty”—we lounge while others struggle, but really it was part of the same fabric. Our immersion in what is truly a “land of enchantment” (as the New Mexico license plates claim) at once created a sense of peace and connectedness that seem all but impossible amidst the urban concrete and steel and their attendant despair.

It also increased our sense of reverence for those who came long before us and knew in their old ways how to walk gently on the land and be in touch with its rhythms. We came back determined to keep fighting in theoretical struggles and in the streets and back roads of the empire.

Poem

We, who can still hear the jaguar scream.

We dream of a day when all things wild will again be free.

We long for a time when every species will be loved and honored equally.

It is a dream we may never see fulfilled.

But in answer to our own wild hearts.

It is a dream we will fight for until the day we die.

Pro-flag burning placard

EARTH FIRST! NATIONALISM LAST!

* NATIONALISM is the justification for treating the earth as raw material to be exploited: surveyed, fenced, bordered, controlled, guarded, mined, logged, abused...

* NATION-STATES build, maintain & enlarge themselves through systematic plunder of the biosphere and the exploitation of people defined as “other.” Looting of the wilderness is the material sustenance of the state.

* NATIONAL BORDERS, governments, armies & the “empire of capital” that they maintain (military-industrial complexes, factories, machines, etc.) are the death of wilderness, wildness, biodiversity and human freedom.

* Nationalism is the antithesis of authentic human tribal community.

* BORDERS divide & subjugate the planet in the same manner that roads & fences divide the forest.

NO BORDERS, NO NATIONS

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