

Howling Wilderness and the Promised Land

Don LaCoss

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In mid-August, a three year-old lawsuit charging that environmentalist groups were religious extremists comparable to some of the more violent, intolerant ultra-orthodox Islamic sects collapsed when the attorney failed to meet a re-filing deadline with the U.S. Supreme Court.

The suit had been brought against Forest Guardians, the Superior Wilderness Action Network, and the U.S. Forest Service by the 125 companies that make up the Associated Contract Loggers (A.C.L.) of northern Minnesota. The loggers were asking for \$600,000 in damages and permission to plunder timber from the Superior National Forest.

Lawyers for the A.C.L. argued that deep ecology was actually a religion, and so by extension, environmental groups that espoused its philosophies were cults, and by outlawing timber cutting on so-called "federal land," the Forest Service was favoring a particular set of religious doctrines and was therefore violating the guarantee of neutrality in matters of religion purportedly vouchsafed in the U.S. Constitution.

According to theological scholars at the logging company syndicate like former executive director, Larry Jones, Deep Ecology is an "earth-centered religion," a "belief system" that holds that "trees and Man [sic] are equal." Anti-logging activists who extol the virtues of forested spaces over industry profit and environmental degradation are spiritual zealots, and the government functionaries who are swayed by their proselytizing may turn out to be fanatical closet druids themselves.

Stephen Young, the A.C.L. lawyer and a former Republican Party senatorial candidate, explained his legal action on such esteemed venues as Rush Limbaugh's radio show by saying that clear-cutting in national forests had been restricted by the Forest Service for no reason other than reverence for some fringe New Age religion.

A U.S. District Court judge in Minnesota dismissed the case as "frivolous" in February 2000, but the A.C.L. petitioned the Supreme Court last year after reports that Wahabi Islamic extremists were responsible for the blitzkrieg attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

"The doctrine of Deep Ecology is the very worldview that gave rise to eco-terrorism. We feel that after the events of September 11, it's an obligation of the Supreme Court to keep religious fanaticism in check," Young said. "Just as devout faith in the literal words of various Hadith of Mohammad gave the Taliban license to impose through state power harsh conditions on the women of Afghanistan, so Deep Ecology gives license to its adherents to take extreme actions against those who would live by different beliefs."

Perhaps the less said about this sleazy episode the better, which is just as well, since it is so hard to get a firm analytic grasp on it because it is sad and sick on so many different levels. For instance, likening the plight of women in Afghanistan to that of lumber barons in northern Minnesota is staggering in its shamelessness, as it has been my experience that women living near industrial logging camps are subjected to at least the same sort of abuse, derision, and masculinist domination as women who had been living in Taliban-controlled Kandahar.

And we all know that if the U.S. government was serious about keeping homicidal religious terrorism in check, then John Ashcroft and the Army of God anti-abortionists would be in the Guantanamo Bay gulag. It was all obviously just a miserable attempt to slander and jam up anti-logging activists with legal action, and it failed.

But I can't help thinking about the broader philosophical implications of this lawsuit and what it says about those who supported it. I have no idea as to whether or not there are Deep Ecologists involved in Forest Guardians or the Superior Wilderness Action Network (and I suspect that none are to be found among the Forest Service feds), but in demonizing Deep Ecology as an alien fanatical religious practice in this lawsuit, we can see once again how tightly Christianity is bound to capitalist exploitation and ecological destruction.

Deep Ecology is not a single doctrine, but rather an ethical sensibility informed by a variety of perspectives on the relationship of humankind to the whole of wild nature's systems. We can oversimplify deep ecology by saying that its fundamentals include a belief in the intrinsic value of all forms of life, as well as the holistic diversity of those life forms. The economic, technological, and ideological beliefs that prop up Western civilization antagonistically threaten the existence and diversity of natural life systems.

Individuals who adhere to the ideas of Deep Ecology are obligated to work towards radically changing those deadly attitudes and social structures. Deep ecology challenges the long-held anthropocentric notion which entitles humans to take advantage of and destroy wilderness at will and for private profit, a view obviously held sacred by the A.C.L. timber industrialists.

Anthropocentrism derives from core Judeo-Christian values that have been part of the settler-capitalist catechism on this continent since the early seventeenth-century. Consider, for example, the preaching of the powerful Puritan minister, John Cotton. In his popular pamphlet of the 1630s, "God's Promise to His Plantation," Cotton claimed that God desired colonists to "take possession" of land in New England, saying that whosoever "bestoweth culture and husbandry upon it" has an inviolable divine right to own it.

The Native Americans, dying in large numbers from exposure to European diseases was proof that God wanted to wipe the slate clean for the Puritans and thereby better facilitate His decree in the Book of Genesis that humans aggressively "subdue" the earth. Christians were the center of the universe, exclusively licensed by Almighty God to dominate the land, eradicate wild nature, and replace it with the purity of civilization. "All the world out of the Church is as a wilderness, or at best, a wild field where all manner of unclean and wild beasts live and feed," Cotton proclaimed in 1642.

There were many others during the period who were at least as enthusiastic about Christ, colonization, and commercial cultivation as Cotton was, and these ideas, linked to distinctly Judeo-Christian models of linear (rather than seasonally cyclical) time, became ingrained in the settler psyche, especially during the era of westward expansion some two centuries later. Justified by the Calvinist capitalism of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*—complete with its fallacious notions about the ennobling, "civilizing" powers of wealth, markets, and economic growth—the implications of Puritan repugnance for wilderness and wildness on the North American continent becomes depressingly clear.

As inheritors of Puritan fanaticism that have erected the violent, intolerant faith of capitalism, it is individuals and organizations like the A.C.L. who hold a worldview that advances a five hundred year-old campaign of terrorism against entire bioregions and "empowers its adherents to take extreme actions against those who would live by different beliefs."

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