

Thoughtful Radicalism Revisited

Because Sometimes *#!%ing Shit Up Just Isn't Enough

Christopher Baer

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The early months of 1999 may well prove to be a turning point for the Earth First! movement. The death of Headwaters defender David Chain renewed public attention on the destruction of ancient forests and violence against conservation activists. David's legacy will be thousands of protected acres of old-growth redwoods. Equally, he might have left us with increased public support for wilderness and whole ecosystems. His story touched middle America, which recognized in it not only that conservation is right but that it could have easily been their outdoor-loving son, daughter, brother, sister or friend who was laid to rest because of the callous actions of those who would destroy the wild.

The arson at the Vail ski resort a few months later by individuals claiming to be from the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), supposedly to protect the Two Elk Roadless Area from the resort's planned expansion, once again focused public attention on Earth First!. Colorado conservationists, including Ancient Forest Rescue (AFR) and Boulder Earth First!ers, were quick to denounce the arson, being well aware of the negative impact it would have on the campaign to preserve the Two Elk.

While the responses of AFR and Boulder Earth First!ers were thoughtful, intelligent and demonstrated the maturity that develops in uncompromising wilderness activism, public reaction by Earth First!ers, including members of the *Earth First! Journal's* editorial collective in numerous press outlets, the editorial, Dear Ned Ludd and the SFB illustrations of the last issue, clearly show that there are some in our movement who have not thoroughly thought through the Vail arson in terms of its appropriateness as an act of wilderness defense but only in terms of its level of radicalness.

Thoughtful Radicalism

“No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth” is a radical philosophy to be sure, but it is one that must be put into practice by thoughtful radicals if our movement's goals of big wilderness and healthy native ecosystems are to be achieved. The idea of “thoughtful radicalism” was first introduced 10 years ago by former Wyoming representative for Friends of the Earth, wilderness guide, Earth First! co-founder and convicted monkeywrencher Howie Wolke (*EF!J* December-January '89). In the wake of the Vail fire and the negative impact on wilderness defense it has had in Colorado, it seems appropriate to revisit Wolke's ideas in the hope of preventing well intentioned but poorly considered acts of ecotage in the future.

The Four Cornerstones

According to Wolke there are four cornerstones of thoughtful radicalism: thwart, protect, restore and educate. Wolke recognizes that, “It is admittedly impossible for all radical actions—legal or not—to always build upon the four cornerstones. Sometimes,

all you can hope for is to perhaps contribute to the long-term protection for an area. But it is always possible to avoid regression. That means we should consider both the short- and long-term consequences... Don't damage any "cornerstones."

Because monkeywrenching by its nature does not contribute to restoring the land, this measuring stick will not evaluate the cornerstone of restoration.

Thwart

While it may have been the intention of the arsonists to thwart the expansion of Vail into the Two Elk, they did not succeed, as evidenced by the continuing expansion into the roadless area. No act of monkeywrenching is guaranteed to meet with success, but those committing it can increase the chances by carefully thinking through their plans. A look at the evidence reveals that the arson stood no chance of thwarting Vail and saving the Two Elk.

First, the arsonists violated one of the primary guidelines of ecotage, which is to not engage in it if a legal victory appears imminent or if a civil disobedience campaign looks like it will succeed because monkeywrenching can impair public support for long-term protection. While it appeared that all legal remedies for stopping the expansion had been exhausted at Vail, a civil disobedience campaign led by Ancient Forest Rescue was being organized. These activists were in the field in the Two Elk the night of the fires. The level of local support, combined with the action theater of a large ski resort, would have undoubtedly made the defense of the Two Elk a highly visible campaign, one that would have attracted a great deal of media attention and one that stood a strong chance of succeeding until the area could be protected by law.

Second, assuming that it was the appropriate time in the Two Elk campaign to commit a major act of ecotage, the targets of the arsonist were poorly chosen and were not appropriate if the real motivation was to save the roadless area. The burning of a ski lodge, ski patrol building and chair lift, while guaranteeing a short-term, minor financial setback for Vail Associates (VA), stood no chance of stopping the bulldozers from rolling into the wild. What's more, any financial setback caused to VA as a whole stood no chance of jeopardizing the project because of the amount of capital available to the company.

If the arsonists had taken the time to think about how they could have had the greatest negative impact on Vail's expansion and had understood that in a large company a single act of ecotage can only inflict serious financial damage to individual project budgets, not the whole, they would have instead looked to make the specific work of destroying the Two Elk more difficult by decommissioning bulldozers, desurveying the area, etc. Such actions would have likely been more effective by slowing if not stopping the work, decreasing worker willingness to participate in the project and increasing insurance premiums, which could have made the project unprofitable and justified its abandonment. It is likely that these actions also would not have gen-

erated the widespread negative attention on the Two Elk campaign and on wilderness advocates that the arson did.

The arson failed to thwart the destruction of the Two Elk Roadless Area because it was poorly timed and did not select targets that could have guaranteed the desired outcome. Because the scale of the arson represented a “final solution,” it undermined additional efforts aimed at thwarting the expansion. Longtime Earth First!er Karen Pickett once remarked that “Our motto is ‘No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth!’ not ‘Fuck Shit Up!’” But fuck shit up is exactly what ELF did, not for VA, but for the Two Elk, and those who cared about it and were willing to defend it. In doing so the ELF did a disservice to the cause of wilderness and damaged the very cornerstone they were trying to facilitate.

Protect

Successful attempts at thwarting wilderness destruction organically provide de facto protection to wild areas by temporarily removing the threat. In a limited sense then, thwarting creates short-term protection until a new threat arises, at which time activists must fall back to their thwarting tactics. This cycle continues ad infinitum until final protection can be gained for an area by designating it wilderness or other appropriate land management classification. Protection is the end goal of conservation activism, and it is the cornerstone towards which the other three point.

If the ELF’s attempts to thwart VA had succeeded, they would have achieved short-term protection for the Two Elk and that would have been a good thing. But the ELF’s success was never a possibility as a result of poor target selection and poor timing, damaging the ability of other activists to act and denying even short-term protection for the Two Elk. Thus, the arson can also be judged a thoughtless action when evaluated in regards to this cornerstone.

Education

We educate to develop foot soldiers and allies, for with them our efforts to thwart, protect and restore wild nature are made much more achievable. A negative public perception undermines our ability to educate; a positive one supports it. The Vail arson created a negative public perception. When David Chain died Earth First!ers were victims of violence. When Vail burned, we became terrorists and our efforts to get the truth out there about what is happening to the planet and to inspire mass action in its defense became that much more difficult.

On top of those of thwart and protect, the Vail arson also damaged the educational cornerstone. That’s three out of four, with one of them not being considered. The

inappropriateness of the ELF's action in terms of its lending itself to wilderness defense seems clear.

In his indispensable work, *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold summarized the land ethic shared by Earth First!ers, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the beauty, integrity and stability of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." Thoughtful radicalism attempts to set forth a way of acting with this ethic in mind. The fires at Vail have shown us that actions which claim to be in defense of the wild, if not well thought out can be just as damaging as a bulldozer.

If we are worthy of calling ourselves Earth First!ers, then we will support those actions that "tend to conserve the beauty, integrity and stability of the biotic community" because they are right and condemn those that "tend otherwise" because they are wrong, be they committed by Vail Associates or the Earth Liberation Front. As Earth First!ers we aspire to become effective defenders of the wild in the hope of wresting the continent away from rampant civilization and restoring its ecological integrity. To accomplish our task we must use every tool in the box.

At the same time we must choose our tools wisely and employ them thoughtfully so that they have the greatest positive impact on the achievement of our goal of a wild America. We should not be afraid to openly criticize the Wilderness Society when it does a disservice to wilderness, and we should not be afraid to criticize the Earth Liberation Front when they demonstrate thoughtlessness and poor strategic planning in an action that extinguishes all hope for protecting a wild area. While there is considerable room for varying lifestyles and personal philosophies within the Earth First! movement, Earth First!ers need seriously consider whether there is enough room to accommodate individuals whose revolutionary angst overshadows their love of the wilderness to the point that they become a liability to its preservation. Earth First!

Editor's Note: The editors were unable to contact the author to approve the edited version of this piece.

The Ted K Archive

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