

Book Review of 'Green Backlash'

Cindy Baxter

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Green Backlash
The Global Subversion of the Environmental Movement
By Andrew Rowell
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The backlash by industry and governments against the environmental movement was bound to happen. Until now though, few recognized the scale and extent to which the anti-environmental movement has grown or just how effective it has become. Andrew Rowell's *Green Backlash* documents a rapidly growing international movement to counter environmentalists. For the first time, the violence, the deaths, the threats and the organized global backlash against environmentalists have been drawn together in one volume. And it makes a chilling tale.

“The lessons learnt from the stories in this book are that with the collapse of communism, environmentalists are now increasingly being identified as a global scapegoat for threatening the vested interest of power: the triple engines of unrestricted corporate capitalism, right-wing political ideology and the nation state's protection of the status quo. The backlash tracked from the US to the UK, Brazil, Ecuador, Malaysia, the South Pacific and India, involves multinational industry in collusion with the governments that benefit from the vast profits to be made at the expense of the environment. Add huge public relations companies to the mix and a new web of 'grassroots' coalitions and campaigners comprised of people whose jobs would be affected by environmental controls. The money, the power and the use of environmentalists' own tactics add up to an effective and lethal combination. The result? What we find is that violence and intimidation are on the increase around the world against environmentalists,” writes Rowell.

The themes and tactics around the globe are similar, but one thing is clear: The less money the country has, the poorer the people, the more deaths and violence there is. In the North, in the US and the UK, more sophisticated means like public relations machines and front groups are used to fight environmentalists. In the developing world, authorities are less inclined to appear concerned and balanced, and environmentalists are more likely to be arrested, shot or disappeared. Rowell takes us through harrowing tales of company collusion with military regimes, such as Shell in Nigeria and Texaco in Ecuador. Always, the same trend emerges: Where environmentalists are effective in bringing world attention to an issue, they are met with increased violence. Government

authorities either turn a blind eye or actively participate by labeling the protesters “violent” to sanction the use of violence against them.

Toward the end of the 1980s, with the threat of communism receding, the right-wing movement in the United States realized it had a new enemy to focus on: environmentalists. Effective environmental legislation in the US began to stop industry’s slash-and-burn tactics, and it was starting to cost them money. Enter the wise use movement, headed by Ron Arnold, whose advice to the multinationals was not to fight environmentalists at a corporate level, where the public would inevitably support David rather than Goliath. Rather, he suggested, the corporations should prop up the ordinary folk who were simply defending their jobs and forming grassroots groups to counter the greenies at their own level. Various legal bodies, representing a multitude of industries, were set up to effectively lobby the government against environmental legislation. “We know how to lobby better than they do, and we’ve got coalitions that can overwhelm them. That’s never happened to them before. It frightened them big time,” commented Arnold after the wise use movement’s first legislative victory against environmentalists.

In the late 1980s, Arnold was hired as a consultant by MacMillan Bloedel, the company clearcutting Clayoquot Sound on Vancouver Island, to help in its fight against environmentalist trying to stop the logging. Arnold told MacMillan Bloedel to give money to the coalitions of pro-logging citizens groups. “You stop defending yourselves, let them do it, and you get the hell out of the way. Because citizens groups have credibility and industries don’t.” Soon after, the first of many grassroots groups was formed, well-funded by the forestry industry.

In the UK, Rowell writes, there are two groups of campaigners who have suffered most from the state’s attempts to silence them: anti-nuclear activists in the 1980s and the anti-roads protesters in the 1990s. “Moreover, the state has attempted to demonize both sets of protesters, either as communists, in the case of anti-nuclear protesters or terrorists and fascists in the case of anti-road organizations. Incorrectly labeling people as communists, terrorists and fascists justifies a different response to that of a mere protester. They can be deemed a threat to national security, whereas protesters are not. It can also vindicate violence, harassment and surveillance of them by the state as has happened with the anti-nuclear movement.”

Rowell documents the past five years of grassroots road protesting in the UK, and the picture, never before seen as a whole, shows an official use and increase in violence and harassment. The rising use of private security firms to defend roadbuilding contractors is at the heart of it, and there’s little happening to stop it.

When we move to the developing world, the story is far, far worse. The pressure on governments to pay back debt provides an ideal feeding ground for a multinational company whose greed fits snugly with the governments’ commitments to the World Bank. Environmental laws are either dropped or ignored, and soldiers are sent to quell local protests by people whose only crime is living on land where resources are found. The more money to be made, the harsher the crackdown against the protesters. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Nigeria, where nearly 2,000 Ogoni people (two

percent of the total population) have died at the hands of the Nigerian military for protests against 35 years of Shell's oil drilling operations in the Niger Delta. "A Shell-shocked Land" tells the awful tale of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni people's nonviolent protests against Shell, and Ken's subsequent persecution and then execution after a trumped-up military tribunal found him guilty of murder.

Green Backlash paints a grim picture of the anti-environmental movement. The words "know thine enemy" spring to mind. Rowell leaves us with words of wisdom particularly relevant to the larger environmental groups: If we don't get back to the grassroots campaigning ideals and start organizing, campaigning and talking face to face, door to door, street to street and community to community, the anti-environmental movement will win.

"Grassroots organizing is definitely an area where the anti-environmental movement has beaten the environmentalists over the last few years. There is no doubt either that they have been able to exploit the weaknesses of the mainstream groups. The backlash is now an intricate part of working on, writing on, speaking on, campaigning on or even teaching on ecological issues. The paradigm shift that is occurring across the globe looks set to continue."

Rowell also warns that the environmental movement must build a new vision for the future, instead of simply opposing current practices. The movement has neglected social concerns, leaving the right wing to step in and accuse it of putting wilderness preservation before the human consequences of such policy decisions. "The backlash has given the environmental movement the opportunity to change for the better, it should not blow that chance." *Green Backlash* is mandatory reading for environmentalists who want to win their campaigns against polluting corporations anywhere in the world.

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