

Was Ed Abbey an “ecoterrorist”

James M Cahalan

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Just about nobody irks me more than people who call Edward Abbey an “ecoterrorist.” Back in 1996, when I announced plans for a state historical marker for Abbey in Home, Pennsylvania, I received a fax from an official with the California Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission: “I am shocked and amazed that you would even be proposing a memorial commemorating the self-proclaimed eco-terrorism promoter, Edward Abbey.” He claimed that Abbey was responsible not only for Earth First! but for the Unabomber as well. Nor was this kind of reactionary crackdown limited to isolated cranks.

As reported in Colorado’s *Summit Daily* on June 20, 2003, police visited a local public library in 1998, right after the Earth Liberation Front burned a ski lodge in Vail. They asked for a list of those who had borrowed Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, assuming that the arsonists would have been readers of the novel. But the librarian replied that past borrowers’ names were no longer in the database and that “two-thirds of the people in this county have read that book.”

In our post-9/11, “Operation Iraqi Freedom” world, to call Abbey an “ecoterrorist” is a more loaded accusation than ever before. As a telling example of just how loaded it is, consider the true story of Neil Godfrey. On October 10, 2001, 22-year-old Godfrey got dropped off at the Philadelphia airport with lots of spare time before his flight to Phoenix, where he planned to meet his father and go on to Disneyland. Godfrey’s mistake was in bringing along his paperback copy of Abbey’s *Hayduke Lives!*, with its cover illustration of a hand holding a clock-controlled package of dynamite presumably somewhere near Glen Canyon Dam. As Godfrey approached the metal detector, a security guard frowned when he saw the novel. It began to dawn on Neil that there might be trouble.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, he was detained by a national guardsman who was soon joined by city police officers, state policemen, and airport security personnel. Nearly a dozen of them took turns puzzling over the novel and scribbling notes for some 45 minutes. Neil Godfrey never made that flight. Once released, he went back home, where his mother rebooked him on another flight, and this time he left *Hayduke Lives!* at home and returned with a copy of a Harry Potter novel. But by then Neil was on the suspicious list, so they wouldn’t let him on that flight either. Neil eventually got to Phoenix, but *Hayduke Lives!* cost him one of the most difficult days of his life.

I had already read this story when Bill Abbey, Ed’s youngest brother, sent me a copy of it with this note: “Jim, no need to look for the release of the *Monkey Wrench* movie any time soon.”

Film rights have been continually under option since February 1975, several months before the novel’s first publication. Many scripts have been written, including one by Abbey himself, who dearly wanted this movie to be made. *The Monkey Wrench Gang* has it all for the big screen — red rock canyon country, chase scenes, drama, sex, wild characters. Yet it never quite seems to happen, even after the Associated Press reported in April 1998 that Dennis Hopper would be shooting it that summer with

Woody Harrelson as Hayduke and Jack Nicholson as the mysterious Lone Ranger — and we all got ready to go to the theatres.

Today, the film languishes seemingly forever in “development,” as it is listed on Pressman Films’ website. Nobody there ever returned my phone calls, but at one of my November 2001 book signings in Phoenix, somebody tipped me off that the partner of the film’s producer had a photography exhibit nearby that same evening. So I sped across town and had a little chat with him. It was one of those unfathomable Hollywood stories. His partner, he says, raised quite a lot of money; he quoted sums that could fund good causes for many years. But he was still a long way short of what he needed and, his partner told me, didn’t like to talk about it, turning sour whenever the subject came up.

Why doesn’t that movie ever get made? Gary Snyder put his finger on the reason in a letter to Dave Foreman back in 1982. According to the perversity of Hollywood films, one can spray as much human blood across the big screen as one likes, but don’t ever dare depict the sabotage of machinery! This is because that violates the most sacred American value: property.

As Abbey noted, in agreement with Snyder, “in our culture, property is sacred, valued far above human life.” Abbey was always clear in distinguishing unacceptable violence against people — terrorism — from sabotage, “an act of force or violence against property,” in Abbey’s words, or machinery, in which “life is not endangered, or should not be.” According to the terms of the distinction, terrorism is everywhere in Hollywood films, but environmental sabotage remains censored and invisible. Financial sponsors get cold feet about producing a movie of this book in which people don’t get killed. As the movie mogul Ed Pressman himself admitted on October 7, 2002 as reported on the online “Indiewire” about independent films, “in a time of the fear of terrorism, the line between civil disobedience and terrorism becomes hard to distinguish and the studios have a hard time considering it.”

The word “ecoterrorism” should be banished from the English language, since I’m not aware of anyone who has deliberately killed anyone else specifically for environmentalist reasons. Abbey may have had many flaws in other respects, but for him the distinction between terrorism and sabotage was no casual afterthought. It was the subject of his M. A. thesis in philosophy at the University of New Mexico back in the 1950s. In “Anarchism and the Morality of Violence,” his basic question was, “Have anarchists satisfactorily justified violence against people?”

His answer — after 75 pages of close scholarly reasoning — was a resounding *no*. Abbey explained that while Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi showed that anarchists can be pacifists, mostly anarchism has been linked to revolutionary violence. He concluded that even his favorite anarchists had failed to satisfactorily justify violence against people. Here are the final three sentences of his thesis: “The anarchists devoted the chief effort of their lives to the attempt to persuade” others “that the ‘critical situation’ had engulfed them and that political violence was therefore justified. But in

this effort, for many and various reasons, they failed. And in so far as they failed in this, they also failed to justify violence.”

Abbey wrote that conclusion over 44 years ago and stuck to it for the rest of his life, yet the false “ecoterrorist” label remains. He knew well the etymological root of “sabotage” in sabot, the French word for the wooden shoe worn by the peasants of France and Belgium. The peasants would avenge themselves on their evil landlords by trampling their crops with those wooden shoes.

Abbey’s rejection of violence and clear definition of sabotage as focused on machines, not people, remained part of his principles of monkeywrenching. Among his three key rules, as explained in *Hayduke Lives!* by Doc Sarvis, rules 2 and 3 were “don’t get caught” and “if you do get caught you’re on your own.” But rule number one, as Doc insists to Hayduke, is “Nobody gets hurt. Nobody. Not even yourself.”

As Abbey argued in his essay “Eco-Defense,” the people destroying wilderness and life-forms were the real terrorists, whereas the conscientious saboteur was engaged in an act of self-defense, as an anti-terrorist, trying to protect life against death.

Wouldn’t it be nice if somebody made a Monkey Wrench movie? If people could look at *Hayduke Lives!* and not confuse sabotage with terrorism? If the word “ecoterrorism” could be abandoned? 12 acres a day were going under to “development” in Tucson, I read during my 3-month stay there in 1999, and I suspect that figure hasn’t changed much. More importantly than anything else, wouldn’t it be good if the onslaught on wilderness and other environments could be stopped or at least slowed down?

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