

# **Bumpy Roads, Cold Beer and the Formation of Earth First!**

Rik Scarce

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Some say Earth First! was Abbey's brainchild, and, in truth, there can be no doubt that its fun-loving, monkey wrench-wielding spirit draws much inspiration from the writings of "Cactus Ed," as Abbey was called. But it was indeed the failure of the political system that gave rise to Earth First!. Dave Foreman, who had left his job as the Wilderness Society's Southwest regional representative nine months before, said at the rally following the Cracking, "The main reason for Earth First! is to create a broader spectrum within the environmental community....The people who started Earth First! felt there was a need for a radical wing to the environmental movement. Somebody has to say what needs to be said."<sup>1</sup>

The particular political defeat which spurred Foreman and four other activists to break away from the muddle-through crowd and form Earth First! was RARE II, the Forest Service's Roadless Area Review and Evaluation project that had seen the old-line environmental groups compromise so much internally that less than one-fourth of the eighty million acres under study was designated as wilderness. It was time for the creation of a new niche within the environmental community. The idea itself, however, was not new. Foreman recalls that Bill Mounsey, a Colorado wilderness guide and outfitter, established a group called "the Striders...for just that purpose, sort of an artificial spectrum."<sup>2</sup> Hard-core wilderness advocates and even high-level Washington, D.C., lobbyists tossed around the idea of something similar, a group that would ask for double the acreage of any wilderness proposal made by the mainstream organizations. In so doing, perhaps the mainstream would appear reasonable.

But nothing came of the talk until Foreman, ex-Yippie Mike Roselle, Wyoming Wilderness Society representative Bart Koehler, his sidekick Howie Wolke, and former Park Service seasonal ranger Ron Kezar took a trip to the Pinacate Desert in northern Mexico. "If Earth First! hadn't come along, somebody else would have come along with something like it," says Kezar. "It was an idea whose time had come."<sup>3</sup> When he and the others stumbled out of Foreman's Volkswagen van into the warm Mexican sun in April 1980, their primary intention was to have a good time, not to carve a new niche for themselves in the environmental movement. They wanted to drink cases of beer at a sitting, eat fulsome quantities of shrimp, and forget about what was happening in D.C. As they sat around the campfire, however, their love for wild places took over.

What to do? In ways these five were an ideal bunch to do something new in the environmental movement. They were white males, like most of the rest of the movement, so even if they decided to become "radicals" they would still be noticed. More important for the long run, however, was the connections, credentials, commitment, and individual talents they brought with them. Roselle was the green one of the bunch when it came to environmental issues; his strong suit was grassroots radical politics. "I think they realized that I had a lot of experience that would be necessary if we

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<sup>1</sup> Earth Image Films, *The Cracking of Glen Canyon Damn*.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Dave Foreman, Visalia, California, October 2, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Telephone interview with Ron Kezar, March 31, 1990.

were to start a radical environmental group,” Roselle says, “since I had a lot of experience in radical groups and knew the politics of confrontation, how to work with the media, and organizing techniques to help people develop a program that would be confrontational. The environmentalists at that time didn’t know how to do any of that stuff.”<sup>4</sup> Roselle was already a veteran of the anti-Vietnam War movement when he left home at sixteen. After time spent with Abbie Hoffman’s anarchic, counter-culture Youth International Party, where he learned how to direct and motivate people and to manipulate the press, he took off across the country on a years-long journey that began in Washington, D.C., following Richard Nixon’s second inaugural, and ended up in Wyoming. Although Roselle did not know it at the time, he was on a pilgrimage to the wilderness.

In Wyoming Roselle met a wilderness advocate named Howie Wolke. Wolke was the Wyoming representative for Friends of the Earth, earning a paltry \$75 a month for thirty hours or more of environmental activism a week. He was the sort whose primary motivation for fighting against the war had been “because they were ruining the jungle....There was an underlying feeling that war is not healthy for the planet.”<sup>5</sup> After graduating from the University of New Hampshire in 1975 with a degree in conservation, Wolke eventually met up with Bart Koehler, a respected Wyoming conservationist for the Wilderness Society. The two met in Jackson, got drunk, and hit it off. For two years Wolke meticulously inventoried roadless areas throughout Wyoming for Koehler, growing to know and love some of the most pristine wild country anywhere in the land. Through Koehler’s tutelage he began to comprehend the convoluted politics behind conservation.

There must be wilderness in Koehler’s blood. His birthday was April 21, 1948: the very day Aldo Leopold, the uncompromising founder of environmental philosophy and co-founder of the Wilderness Society, died, and the one-hundred-tenth-year anniversary of John Muir’s birthday. Koehler grew up in the still-wild Adirondaks, spending his summers hiking and canoeing. In high school he took the trees’ side to argue with his father, who was bent on clearing the land around their home. Driven by this urge to “work for the underdog,” after college Koehler went west and earned his Master’s degree in Environmental and Regional Planning at the University of Wyoming—his 1972 thesis, arguing for protection of wildlands, is still cited in scholarly papers. The following year, he was hired by the Wilderness Society as one of its field staff, becoming one of the first members of a group that some consider the best single bunch of wilderness advocates ever assembled by one organization. He was also the first of the group to quit the Wilderness Society, which he did on his birthday in 1979; within months the entire brilliant bunch was fired or was run out by a dictatorial executive director.

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Mike Roselle, San Francisco, California, July 28, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Howie Wolke, Darby, Montana, November, 13, 1989.

Koehler became fast friends with Foreman, another of Wilderness' field staffers, soon after they met in the summer of 1973. Foreman was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1945, a direct descendant of American rebels, the ones who fought the Revolutionary War. An Air Force brat, Foreman grew up as something of a "Redneck for Wilderness," as one of the favorite Earth First! bumper stickers reads. He was an Eagle Scout who joined the Marines during the Vietnam War and was kicked out after two months for going AWOL. Freedom. The Marines guard it, but they don't tolerate it within their own ranks. And it is freedom, the call of the wild, that courses through Foreman's veins, an indelible nucleus in every corpuscle. (He often expounds on his theory of the "wilderness gene," which he says separates lovers of the wild from the rest; to demonstrate it he literally growls and howls when prowling the stage before an audience.) After graduating from the University of New Mexico, where he worked hard for the election of right-winger Barry Goldwater for president, the anthropology/history major bummed around, trying his hand at a variety of cowboy and outdoorsy pursuits. He finally found a home with the Wilderness Society. But between the backstabbing of the environmental movement by the government and the general nature of big-time environmentalism, Foreman realized he had to get out.

The fifth Earth First! founder, Ron Kezar, met Foreman when the Wilderness Society rep visited Kezar's local Sierra Club chapter in El Paso, Texas, to fill them in on the struggle for wilderness in the desert southwest. Kezar was born and raised in Stockton, California. Although the Sierra Nevada mountains were only a short drive away, and on a good day their white-capped purple form showed above the San Joaquin Valley farms, the wild held no allure for him. It was not until a friend from high school took him on a Sierra Club mountain climbing trip in his early twenties that Kezar's wilderness gene was tapped. Initially his activism was limited to writing letters to legislators. After his discharge from the Army he settled in El Paso and soon became the conservation chair for the local Sierra Club chapter. He worked for passage of various wilderness bills and helped with a successful effort to stop a tramway from being laid to the top of Guadalupe Peak, Texas' highest point. In 1977, he went in with Foreman to buy land near the Gila Wilderness in New Mexico, took a 125-mile backpack trip with Foreman and Wolke in 1979, and was a natural to join the Penacate party.

Earth First! mythology has it that Kezar and the others created Earth First! while in the desert or while reveling in a whorehouse. That mythology is vitally important, as essential to Earth First!ers as founders' resumes are to mainstream environmental organizations. Cynics might say that myths cover up lies or unpleasantness. But for Earth First!ers they are concentrated truths, mixtures of reality, fantasy, and wisdom. The Earth First! creation myths are flavorful, rich and evocative of the sort of image that the macho cowboys wanted to propagate.

Although portions of the "real" story behind the founding have been lost, enough remain to clarify that the true genesis of Earth First! did not come in a wild, romantic desert or a cheap, bawdy brothel. Quite simply, Earth First! got started in Foreman's VW bus on the road to Albuquerque. After leaving Mexico, Wolke says the group

dropped off Koehler in Tucson “to have an affair with a lady lawyer” he had met earlier in the trip, then they deposited Kezar at his place in New Mexico. Emulating *The Monkeywrench Gang’s* wild-eyed leader, Wolke and Foreman were in the front seats polishing off a case of Budweiser, Roselle sprawled out in the rear, as they drove toward Albuquerque and Foreman’s mother’s famous chicken-fried steak. There was more ranting and raving about the emasculated mainstream and fantastic talk of a group that would fight to set aside multi-million acre ecological preserves in Ohio, South Texas, and other forsaken places across the nation. “We were closing roads in Yellowstone and re-uniting the Absaroka wildernesses” in Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana, says Wolke. “The next thing you know, we were setting up a massive system of ecological land preserves in every bioregion of the United States.”<sup>6</sup>

Suddenly, Foreman called out “Earth first!” “The next thing you know,” Wolke says, “Roselle drew a clenched-fist logo, passed it up to the front of the van, and there was Earth First.”<sup>7</sup> The exclamation mark was added later that year. With a tremendous amount of enthusiasm and no money, the Founding Fathers began plotting. “We identified all the ecosystems in the U.S.,” Roselle recalls. “Then we identified areas within each of those that would have to be protected in order to maintain biological diversity so that no matter what happened outside of those, there would still be genetic material to reconstruct the biota.”<sup>8</sup> They put together a mailing list of seventy-five influential contacts, sent them the biodiversity listing, and wondered what to do next.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Roselle interview.

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Essay titled "Myths and wilderness" from the book Eco-Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement. Republished in the Earth First! Journal's 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. <[archive.org/details/earth\\_first\\_2000/page/n233](http://archive.org/details/earth_first_2000/page/n233)>

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