

Postcards from the Dark Divide

How I spent my summer vacation as an apprentice eco-warrior

By Andrew Engelson



Fearless Andrew Engelson prepares to enter the woods. (His white badge of disclosure warns: "I AM PRESS.")

By the second day of my camp-out with environmental radicals near the slopes of Mount Adams, I had already acquired that distinct, feral odor that is shared by homeless men, wilderness campers and urban bohemians throughout the world.

At least in appearance, I was on my way to becoming something of a radical. And the contagious energy of the activists assembled here was making me wonder if I might be becoming more radical on the inside as well.

The dawn was cold and clear. The flanks of Mount Adams were already blazing white in the early-morning sun. As I sipped a tepid cup of instant coffee, cooked on a backpacking stove powered by fossil fuels imported from the Persian Gulf, I thought to myself how lovely it was in this clear-cut.

Certainly the clear-cut itself was ugly. A great multiacre scab had been carved out of the hill, courtesy of the U.S. Forest Service, and the original old-growth forest had been reduced to an eyesore of gray stumps and burned slash. But the views here were tremendous. Whoever had picked this spot to assemble the annual gathering of the radical environmental group Earth First! had been inspired. Here two extremes were in vivid contrast.

We were camped upon a ridge just above the clear-cut. To the north, across the valley

below, loomed the roadless Dark Divide region. Range upon range of mountains, carpeted in a thick green shag of untouched forest, spanned the horizon. In the distance, a slender waterfall plunged. These mountains—part of the largest surviving roadless area in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest—are the supposed stomping grounds of the Sasquatch.

If bigfoot is alive, those dark woods seemed the perfect spot to find it lurking.

I had come to this clear-cut forest in southwestern Washington to observe what is known as the Round River Rendezvous. Held every year in a different location by the national organization Earth First! (EF!), the rendezvous is an annual weeklong confab of eco-radicals from across North America: a celebration, a pagan ritual, a chance to network among fellow activists, a time to howl like a wolf and an opportunity to learn tree-sitting skills and attend a seminar on civil disobedience.

Several hundred activists, unwashed as I was, had come for the weeklong camp in early July. Among these Earth Firsters were shaved-headed anarchists dressed in black, barefoot earth mothers with Rasta dreadlocks and tie-dyed dresses, and neatly dressed Sierra Club types in button-down shirts and Gore-Tex. It was a motley bunch—everyone from vegan co-op employees to high-minded attorneys—all united in a

common determination to defend the continent's last remaining old-growth forests.

Not surprisingly, having a freelance journalist (especially a writer from a publication called *Law & Politics*) poking about didn't sit well with some of the anarchists; thankfully, Tim Ream, the Earth First! publicist, was supportive. At a meeting entitled "Protecting Biodiversity," Ream assured the group that I wasn't an agent provocateur or a wingnut. "He's down," he said simply. They nodded and agree to let me sit in. But it was also agreed that I should display a press pass.

Scrawled by hand and pinned to my sweaty shirt, it read: "I AM PRESS. TALK TO ME IF YOU WANT TO."

The camp was incredibly well organized, contrary to the stereotype of inept ecological anarchists. At a welcome station near the gathering's entrance, I had been dutifully advised to either filter or boil my water. In a makeshift medical facility, volunteers bandaged scrapes and gave seminars on the medicinal uses of native plants. A cardboard sign advertised "FREE PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING FOR FOREST SERVICE EMPLOYEES." A communal kitchen nearby served up bland vegan food.

The whole area was divided into a series of camps, and each group of tents had, like a



A helpful tree marker to the campsite's "facilities"



The stubbleheaded mountains of Gifford Pinchot, post clear-cutting

summer camp for revolutionaries, assumed a name and a tribal identity. I set my tent up amid the Pirate Camp, a group of mostly urban punk-rocker anarchists who wore black, smoked pot and talked late into the night. In my synthetic REI fleece and hiking boots, I wasn't your typical pirate, but the anarchists didn't seem to mind.

Interspersed between the camps, the environmentalists had dug common latrines, and each was named in honor of a member of the Bush administration: one for George W., one for Homeland Security czar Tom Ridge and one for Interior Secretary Gale Norton.

As I savored the morning view of Mount Adams, I heard someone yell out, "Freddy on the trail!" The anarchists in Pirate Camp scurried for cover.

This game had become a daily ritual. The Earth Firsters had refused, as they always do, to submit a permit to the Forest Service. When federal rangers—or "Freddies," as they are pejoratively known—walked through camp, those activists who feared being noticed by law enforcement would quickly put on bandanas or retreat deeper into the woods.

But despite the disagreements over permits, things seemed to be going forward without conflict. The rangers would occasionally tramp through the camps, filmed by activists

wielding digital cameras. Once the Freddies had left, the activists' powwow resumed.

These aren't exactly the best of times for the extremist environmental movement. The radical left received a jolt of energy during the heady days of the Seattle WTO protests in 1999, when anarchist groups like the Ruckus Society demonstrated that noisy, active protest could be effective and earn your cause TV airtime.

But after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the radical environmental left became marginalized and quiet. In addition, a secretive and even more extreme group called the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) came to prominence in the late 1990s, overshadowing the work of Earth First! An outgrowth of the animal liberation movement, the loosely connected ELF engages in arson and vandalism to oppose biotechnology and human development in forests. ELF's torching of a ski resort in Vail, Colorado, in 1998 and the May 2001 bombing of the University of Washington's Center for Urban Horticulture seized headlines and further discredited the radical end of the environmental movement. It also gave rise to a new word in the lexicon: eco-terrorist.

In the American public's mind, there's little perceived difference between ELF and Earth First! Though there are undeniable similari-

ties—such as engaging in civil disobedience in the defense of the environment and the "deep ecology" belief that gives equal rights to flora and fauna—the two groups differ in their tactics and methods. Founded in 1979, Earth First! was conceived by Dave Foreman (who, in the late '70s, was working as the Southwest regional director of the Wilderness Society) and several other activists who were unsatisfied with the progress of mainstream environmental organizations. They envisioned a loosely knit, uncompromising group of forest defenders who would employ a combination of civil disobedience, lawsuits and selective acts of sabotage to halt what they saw as increasingly destructive results of logging.

Though their critics and many mainstream environmentalists would never admit it, Earth First!'s tactics turned out to be remarkably effective. During the Reagan and first Bush years, Earth First!—organized blockades, tree-sits and vocal protests generated intense media coverage of the Western timber wars. Photographs of protesters chained to bulldozers gave the environmental movement a tree-hugging, weird-fringe reputation, but carefully selected tree-sits were often quite successful in stalling and sometimes ending specific timber sales.

The most controversial Earth First! tactic involves sabotage, or "monkey wrenching," a

term inspired by Edward Abbey's 1975 novel about a group of ecological freedom fighters, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Though Earth First!'s organizers never actively condone or admit to such acts, some of its members and affiliated activists have taken to vandalizing logging machinery or hammering sawmill-damaging spikes into trees in order to halt timber sales.

Tree spikes are a hot-topic debate in the radical environmental community. An employee of a Louisiana-Pacific sawmill in Cloverdale, California, was seriously injured in 1987 when a

resource damage by a group of environmentalists camped in a huge clear-cut?

"Well, no, I never thought of that."

As I watched, the two public-relations mavens sparred on various Forest Service policies, from the definition of the term "old growth" to the charging of trail access fees.

"The fee demo project is industrial recreation," said Ream, his voice rising as he gesticulated with narrow-fingered hands. "They haven't put gates in yet, but the rich and middle class can use the woods while the poor can't.

charge you with, not the police. They may tell you that resisting an officer's orders is a felony offense.

"Of course, that's total bullshit. But that's within their authority. It's totally within their authority to lie.

"The idea is to make yourselves so much a pain in the ass that you're too much of a problem for them to deal with. Twenty people is a pretty big group for the Freddies to deal with."

An activist asked Paul if protesters should always go along with the booking.

"We don't recommend one course of

Sitting in trees and handcuffing oneself to logging trucks are all part of the glamorous side of being an Earth First! activist. But much of the group's most effective work is more quotidian. Like gathering rodent poop.

tree spike shattered a mill blade. A faction within Earth First! has sworn off the practice since it can be potentially deadly for millworkers. Other, more radical activists accuse the non-tree spikers of being wimps.

Monkey wrenching may be an integral part of Earth First! lore, but it is by no means the only tactic associated with the group. At the rendezvous, a quick survey of the events scheduled on a huge whiteboard at the crest of the hill made this clear: In forest clearings, Earth First! activists met to talk about legal appeals to timber sales, how to conduct wildlife surveys and even how to power a car on vegetable oil.

Nothing on tree spiking.

On my first day at the rendezvous, I had observed a spirited debate between Earth First! spokesman Tim Ream and Linda Turner, a public affairs specialist for the Gifford Pinchot National Forest.

The two PR spinners couldn't be more different. Ream is a wiry coil of energy with spiky hair and goatee. He often pontificates with the self-assurance of someone who's born again (he once worked for the Environmental Protection Agency and voted for Reagan twice before "splitting" the mainstream working world).

Turner, the Forest Service publicist, spoke with measured words and wore a pair of huge wraparound sunglasses that rendered her strangely expressionless. I asked her if the Forest Service had had any problems with the unpermitted event.

"They've been just fine," said Turner. "We just want to make sure there's no resource damage. We're monitoring that."

Wasn't it slightly ironic, I asked her, that the Forest Service was monitoring for

Family camping trips are where you learn to love all this."

"Well, if you don't like it," said Turner curtly, "get the laws changed."

At nine o'clock each morning, the activists gathered in a circle for coffee and talked about the day's upcoming events. At the meeting's conclusion, the Earth Firsters would let out a communal howl that echoed off the mountains of the Dark Divide. It was the sound of wildness personified: playful and a little bit spooky.

Perusing the day's offerings, I decided to attend a legal seminar on civil disobedience. After asking permission to observe and take notes, I watched as a group of activists acted out an arrest. They then received critiques from three Earth First! legal volunteers.

Paul, an attorney and one of EF!'s legal advisers, assumed the role of a police officer, brandishing a tree limb as a nightstick.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way," he said in his best gruff voice.

The group of protesters fell to the dirt, uncooperative and yelling.

"Who's your leader here?" demanded one "policeman."

"We're all leaders here!" one of the protesters yelled out.

"I can't take fingerprints from a broken finger," Paul growled, doing his best to intimidate the protesters.

Soon the little skit was over and Paul debriefed the group.

"You did a good job," he said, still brandishing his twig and pacing the cutover slope. "Cohesiveness of the group is important. And make sure their threats are realistic: A prosecutor decides what to

action," he said. "And if someone doesn't want to go through with noncooperation, that doesn't mean they're less militant."

"Define your negotiating terms. Know what penalties you would be willing to accept—what's your absolute bottom line? Is it jail? Fine? Probation? Community service?"

"I know of someone who got just 10 hours of community service for throwing a pie at the mayor of San Francisco."

Disobedience school was over, and it was on to the ropes courses, where one could learn practical eco-radical skills such as tree climbing.

The instructors, decked out in hemp clothes and sporting shaggy dreadlocks, were outfitted in a tangle of climbing ropes, carabiners, rappelling rings and seat harnesses. They looked like a bizarre cross between rock climbers and juice bar employees.

One activist demonstrated how to use a crossbow to launch a rope over a tree limb. Another, who called herself Trencher, set me up with a harness. She'd grown up in New York and first became involved in Earth First! this year during the Eagle Creek tree-sit in the Mount Hood National Forest east of Portland. She wore wire-rimmed glasses and her head was shaved except for a braided mohawk on top.

She and a volunteer who called himself Thac-o helped me rig up two prusik knots for ascending a rope suspended from high in a Douglas fir. I struggled to get my boots inside the loops.

Thac-o patiently instructed this novice tree-sitter. "It's important to have three points of safety at all times," he said.

Soon I was 30 feet up in the tree and sway-

ing in the wind. Thac-o then instructed me on how to rappel down to safety.

"That was great," I said, back on the ground, slightly giddy.

"Yeah, you should come tree-sit someday," Trencher said.

"Maybe I will." It was an intriguing thought.

I am, as most Seattleites are, a passive urban environmentalist. I write occasional e-mails to my elected representatives. I once volunteered on a trail repair crew. I give money to environmental organizations such as the Wilderness Society. And on weekends I hike in the forests and mountains I love. But how much have I really sacrificed for them? Would I be willing to spend a night, a week or a year camped in an old-growth cedar to save it from the chain saw?

I'm not sure. Maybe so.

The safety of tree sitters has been high on the minds of many Earth First! activists.

In April 2002, a tree sitter named Beth O'Brien (who went by the activist name Horehound) died after falling 150 feet from the Eagle Creek tree-sit, the same tree-sit Trencher had been involved in. The tree-sit had been undertaken by the Cascade Forest Alliance (CFA), a group with ties to Earth First!

Tim Ream, the EF! publicist, told me the story of one Forest Service ranger who had been belligerent during the first days of this year's rendezvous. The officer, Ream claimed, verbally taunted a few of the gathered activists and asked them if they knew what CFA really stood for.

"Caution: Falling Anarchists," the ranger told them.

"That woman's boyfriend is here," said Ream, indignant. "It was completely insensitive. That guy's a total wingnut."

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Like gathering rodent poop.

Just as other, more mainstream environmental groups do, Earth First! uses existing environmental regulations to challenge timber sales in court. Filing appeals according to the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act, Earth First! activists regularly seek out and document evidence of endangered species in the depths of the forests. In place like the Gifford Pinchot National Forest (GP), EF! activists have been busy hunt-

ing for signs of endangered species like the red tree vole.

This cute little critter is elusive and hard to photograph, so EF! activists are being trained to look for signs of the tree vole—anything from hairballs to feces.

At the "Protecting Biodiversity" seminar, a volunteer who goes by the name Asante briefed activists on how to collect, document and submit such evidence. He also talked about the difficulties of getting good legal help on timber sale appeals.

"We often work with new attorneys coming out of law school," he said. "And we've had law students writing some of our appeals. Of course, they're just cutting their teeth, and there's some risk in that. You have to sort out the reliable from the flaky."

After the seminar was over, I asked Asante, who is a big, quiet bear of a man in his 40s with long blond dreadlocks, how it feels for someone who obviously loves being in the woods to spend so much time in offices poring over dreadfully dull Forest Service documents.

"It's like playing chess on a demented chessboard where the agency keeps changing rules," he said, letting out an almost inaudible sigh. "Sometimes you wish you could just drop the paperwork and take the judge or the prosecutor

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Dark Divide

out for a day to look at the forest.”

The forest we were standing in is rapidly becoming a battleground in the new timber wars. The 1.3-million-acre Gifford Pinchot, the largest of Washington state’s national forests, stretches from the Columbia River to Mount Rainier, and was named in honor of the founder of the modern Forest Service. Pinchot was a conservationist who believed that government lands should be managed, as he described it, “for the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run.”

For a long time the “Giff” has been a workhorse timber forest. Unlike the other national forests of western Washington, where timber extraction is generally being replaced by recreation, the Gifford Pinchot is still very much the realm of the chain saw rather than the hiking boot. It contains a densely packed maze of 4,000 miles of roads that are well traveled by logging trucks.

“The GP has been heavily logged for the last hundred years,” I was told by an Earth First! activist from Portland who goes by the name of Jackson and who wore a black wide-brimmed hat that made him look like an environmental desperado. “We’re trying to protect the last remaining pieces. A high estimate is that only 10 percent of the Pacific Northwest’s old growth is left.” By most definitions, an old-growth forest is one that has been left in its natural state for a minimum of 120 years, though depending on whom you ask, what qualifies as “old growth” ranges from 80 to 150 years old.

According to the Gifford Pinchot Task Force—a mainstream environmental group not affiliated with Earth First!—the GP is the only national forest in western Washington where old-growth trees are still being logged. The task force estimates that as much as 50 percent of logging planned for the GP in the next few years will be old growth. The Forest Service, under the leadership of Undersecretary of Agriculture Mark Rey, a former timber

lobbyist, has been anxious to boost the targets set in the Clinton administration’s 1994 Northwest Forest Plan. That agreement, which was supposed to end the spotted owl–timber wars once and for all, optimistically predicted that the national forests of Oregon, Washington and northern California would supply 1 billion board feet of timber to the region’s mills each year. The actual harvest has been less than a third of that amount.

The Bush administration wants that number to increase, and the GP is a big part of those plans. This year, according to the Northwest Old Growth Campaign, a Bellingham-based environmental organization, the U.S. Forest Service approved and offered for sale 20 different timber parcels on the GP that contain substantial stands of old growth. (For some reason, foresters always refer to things happening “on” a forest: If you’re a ranger employed by the Gifford, you don’t work “in” it, you work “on” it.) With whimsical names like Swell, Papa Bare, Gnat and Goose Egg, these 20 parcels will open 1,824 acres of mature forest to cutting by timber companies. That’s equivalent to mowing down a forest six and a half times the size of Seattle’s Washington Park Arboretum.

Earth First! may be radical in its tactics, but its position on old growth is becoming decidedly mainstream. A telephone survey of 600 residents of Oregon and Washington in the spring of 2001 by the Portland-based market research firm Davis & Hibbits indicated that 50 percent of respondents “strongly support” protection of old-growth forest from logging on national forests and another 25 percent “somewhat support” the same statement.

“What is the purpose of these sales?” Tim Ream wondered. “To provide jobs? There’s a glut of timber on the market. Less than 4 percent of the country’s timber comes from Forest Service land; it’s a tiny blip. The agency has just become geared toward putting out timber.” (Most Americans aren’t aware that most of the trees that end up

Dark Divide

as split-level homes, this magazine and toilet paper come from privately owned lands farmed by companies like Weyerhaeuser.)

The lonesome chords of a harmonica floated out over the clear-cut as participants in the Warrior Poets Society began to gather in the fading dusk. The poetry event is one of the highlights of the rendezvous—a time when activists and poets gather to share their love of the forest and their anger at its destruction. Though some of the poems were sappy and amateur, and some were polished, their combined effect in this woodland setting was sincerely moving. Optimism was in the air. So often the environmental movement is plagued with nay-saying—they're so busy saying "no" to development, there's little time for affirming what they're passionate about protecting.

Later that evening activists gathered around a fire to the music of drums, violins and a mandolin. Several barefoot Earth Firsters danced and twirled batons set aflame with kerosene. I'm pretty certain no Forest Service permit had ever been

written that covered such rituals.

You could call these activists naive, radical, misguided or just plain weird. But there was no mistaking they were happy in what they were doing.

Soon after the completion of the Round River Rendezvous, Earth First! engaged in several coordinated acts of civil disobedience. A group of noisy activists occupied the office of Oregon's U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden. Another group dumped wood chips on the steps of Umpqua Bank (which Earth First! claims sponsors old-growth logging). A third group handcuffed themselves to drilling equipment to protest a gas pipeline through the Capitol State Forest near Olympia.

A banner displayed during the Olympia protest proclaimed Earth First!'s mantra: "NO COMPROMISE IN DEFENSE OF MOTHER EARTH." **L&P**

—When he's not hanging out in the woods with eco-activists, Andrew Engelson writes for the Seattle P-I, Seattle Weekly, Backpacker magazine and High Country News. He is a frequent contributor to Law & Politics.

ELVES ACTING OUT

On August 15, 2002, the press office of the Earth Liberation Front published on its Web site a letter it had received anonymously several days before.

The letter began, "Hundreds of metallic and non-metallic spikes have been placed in units 28 and 29 of the Kirk Timber Sale in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. The spikes were placed in all levels of the trees. Most of the trees have both metallic and non-metallic spikes."

After describing what it deemed were the destructive effects of industrial logging on the Gifford Pinchot, the brief communiqué ended with the words: "This action seeks to keep

these old-growth trees from ever being cut. It is not intended to put any timberworkers at risk. This message is being sent out before any trees are felled."

The spiked trees were located in a timber parcel about 12 air miles away from our campsite overlooking the Dark Divide. According to Linda Turner, public affairs specialist with the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, two decking screws were found in one of the trees in the timber parcel, but she could not verify that there was an actual spiking.

Earth First! could not be reached for comment on the alleged ELF tree spiking.

—Andy Engelson

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