

## *Eco-apocalyptic*

**By Brian Tokar** - author of *The Green Alternative: Creating an Ecological Future*

Greens have not escaped the tendency to offer simplistic solutions to complex problems. *Brian Tokar* explores the excesses of eco-fundamentalism.

The environment is not just another issue.' suggested the *New York Times* after April's Earth Day celebrations. 'It has become a modern secular religion.' And like other religions, environmentalism has spawned its own brand of fundamentalism. For every carefully reasoned and questioning account of the growing ecological crisis and the social and political changes it demands, one can find an equally striking display of strident alarmism, received truth, denunciation of heresy and all manner of apocalypics.

Environmental issues have become increasingly complex and global in scope, as the future of life on earth hangs on civilization's ability to profoundly change its ways. Faced with such overwhelming threats, people are ever willing to embrace easy formulas, slogans and recipes for salvation, to avoid the big issues and remain certain that they are in the right.

'Everyone must stop eating meat before anything else can change,' animal-rights enthusiasts exhort us. 'There are too many humans - cut the population in half,' say other activists. 'We are doomed as a species, but Gaia will make sure that life continues.' Such pronouncements often bring intelligent discussion to a close, leaving the speaker feeling righteous in the knowledge that they alone know the right answer. This, of course, is the key to fundamentalist thinking.

Earth First! (always spelled with a '!') is the most militant of the new environmental formations in North America. Under the slogan 'No compromise in the defense of Mother Earth!' Earth First! is the leading proponent of 'monkeywrenching' - tree spiking, disabling heavy equipment and militant civil disobedience - to prevent further intrusions of industrial civilization upon the wilderness. Such tactics have significantly raised the stakes for wilderness preservation and the protection of biological diversity. At times, however, Earth First!ers have fallen into a nasty form of eco-fundamentalism.

A major controversy began when Earth First! co-founder Dave Foreman was quoted in an interview by deep ecologist Bill Devall making some shockingly misanthropic statements in the name of deep ecology and Earth First! Deep ecologists claim overpopulation as the underlying cause of ecological crisis and advocate population reduction. Foreman took this one step further, advocating forced sterilizations, ending food aid to starving people (particularly, at the time, in Ethiopia), and sealing US borders against refugees from the wars in Latin America. To Foreman, such measures were ways to 'let nature seek its own balance', and prevent 'more destruction of our wilderness, more poisoning of our water and air.

*their own words...*

***'The human race could go extinct, and I  
for one would not shed any tears.'***

DAVE FOREMAN OF US DEEP  
ECOLOGIST GROUP EARTH FIRST!

The emphasis was clearly on the 'our'. Forget industrial pollution. Forget capitalism's growth imperative and the relationship between nationalism and militarism. Forget the political and social reasons for hunger and immigration, and the vast discrepancies in wealth and resource use among the world's peoples.

Devall's interview with Foreman was published in 1987 in the Australian magazine *Simply Living* and was widely reprinted and quoted around the world. It became the primary basis for an all-out attack against deep ecology by the social ecologist Murray Bookchin, who characterized it as a 'black hole of half-digested, ill-formed and half-baked ideas' and an 'ideological toxic dump'. Bookchin condemns deep ecologists for ignoring the social and historic basis of ecological crisis in favour of a distorted biological determinism with quasi-fascist implications.

The now-famous deep ecology/social ecology debates raged on - raising some important issues but rapidly degenerating into name calling. Writers in the *Earth First!* journal resorted to outrageous and increasingly misanthropic claims in defense of their notion that overpopulation was to blame for all the earth's ills. Starvation and disease were merely 'Gaian' solutions to overpopulation. Even the AIDS virus should be welcomed while eradicating smallpox was a violation of biodiversity. It was impossible for humans to aspire to live in harmony with nature.

Like religious fundamentalisms this 'eco-brutalist' thinking has its own apocalyptic notions of the 'last days' and of wilderness warriors as 'chosen people'. Yet global phenomena such as the thinning of the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect make it increasingly far-fetched to predict that any of the earth's ecosystems will survive a total environmental collapse. Either we create new ways for people to live on this earth or the civilization we live in will likely bring everything down with it. No form of eco-survivalism is likely to help.

Tired of Earth First! being characterized as a racist and reactionary organization, local activists began to speak out. Internal discussions became increasingly intense. Then, on a summer night in 1989, Foreman's home was raided by an armed FBI team. He was indicted for conspiracy and jailed, accused of loaning money to an undercover agent who had roped several Arizona Earth First! activists into an elaborate scheme to topple power lines. Faced with the intense criticism from his own compatriots and the full force of the police apparatus, Foreman began to reconsider some of his earlier views.

In articles and public appearances since his arrest, Foreman has displayed far greater sensitivity to the underlying causes of ecological destruction. He has expressed open solidarity with black and Native American activists who have been victimized by similar FBI sting operations and disruption tactics. In a joint appearance in New York City with Murray Bookchin, he called for

reconciliation: 'We have the same enemies, we are fighting the same battle no matter what we emphasize'. Other prominent Earth First!ers, like co-founder Mike Roselle, have taken it a step further: 'The enemies of wilderness are also the enemies of freedom and democracy... We can't save the wilds without confronting them.' Chalk one up for the power of thought and experience to cut through the dogmas of fundamentalism.

However, eco-fundamentalism lives on, not only in the pages of the *Earth First!* journal but in many sectors of the environmental movement. There are animal-rights activists who would suspend discussion of all other environmental issues until they have done away with meat eating. They dismiss the rights of indigenous tribal peoples, who have been stewards and protectors of local eco-systems for thousands of years, because they engage in hunting for some of their food.

They are only the most vocal and widespread of single-issue fanatics attempting to sway Greens in the US. There are people who insist that fertilizing soils with tons of ground rock dust is the only solution to deforestation and the greenhouse effect. There are self-described Henry Georgists who seek to solve all of society's problems through a pre-industrial tax policy based solely on land values. Each of their positions holds some grains of truth but in each case fundamentalist thinking and 'born-again' certitude only serve to limit meaningful discussion.

The fundamentalism of a few leaves many other political ecologists open to an uncomfortable guilt by association. Yet the most alarming brand of fundamentalism comes not from the ranks of radical environmentalists but from the unquestioning believers in industrial progress. For if environmentalism is the up and coming new religion, industrialism and scientism are surely the established one.

For sheer audacity the claims of growth fundamentalists are striking '... the nature of the physical world permits continued improvement in humankind's economic lot... indefinitely,' writes economist Julian Simon, a Reaganite favorite. This dogma of technological optimism has also found its way into the environmental movement. One of the better known US ecologists, Barry Commoner, postulates an almost limitless growth based on the capture of solar energy. Commoner's underlying faith in growth and progress leads him to ignore the impact on non-energy resources (minerals, forests, water, soils) and the grotesque proliferation of waste products - not to mention the consequences for human culture if we are driven by the growth imperative to increasingly sever our ties with nonhuman nature.

James Lovelock, the inventor and atmospheric scientist who first elaborated the Gaia Hypothesis of atmospheric self-regulation, is another unlikely believer in the cult of unlimited progress. He forecasts a bright future of techno-fantasies like ocean travel by whale power and space colonies on Mars because 'when urban industrial man does something ecologically bad he notices it and tends to put things right again'.

This faith-in-the-name-of-science is peppered with unsupported and self-contradictory ideas. Such notions derive their power and persistence from the force of status-quo ideology that lurks behind them. Compared to true believers in technological progress, the excesses of the more unconventional environmental zealots are proving to be surprisingly open to reason and change.

