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Land Mark Essays
on Rhetoric and the
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Earth First! and the Rhetoric of Moral Confrontation

by Brant Short

In 1981, a small group of disgruntled environmentalists unfurled a 300-foot long black plastic ribbon on the Glen Canyon Dam at the Arizona-Utah border. Creating the visual image of a huge crack in the dam, the plastic ribbon represented the first major act of Earth First!, an unknown group at the extreme philosophical edge of the national environmental movement (Japenga, 1985). Founded in 1980, Earth First! has been a constant thorn in the side of land developers, oil companies, logging operations, cattle ranchers, the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and even other environmental groups. Members of Earth First! allegedly have placed metal spikes in trees to prevent logging, pulled up survey stakes on land development sites, sat in trees scheduled for timber harvest, and paraded in bear costumes in Yellowstone National Park to protest lack of grizzly habitat. Basing their actions on a philosophy called "deep ecology," leaders have attacked mainstream environmentalists for being too cautious and too open to political compromise. Members of Earth First! perceive a clearly defined mission for their group. According to Howie Wolke, a founder of the group, "If you look at any social reform movement, there has always been a radical arm of that movement. We want to push the traditional environmentalists back into the roots, away from the political establishment that governs it and further toward the extreme" (White, 1984, p. A11).

The rhetoric of any social movement must create, order, and define a view of reality that enables the movement to sustain itself in times of confrontation, crises, or complacency. Members at the extremes of a movement's ideology, in efforts to articulate their unique vision of reality, often create an internal tension that either can threaten or energize the social movement. This study examines Earth First!'s agitative rhetoric and its impact on the contemporary environmental movement. Guerrilla theater, physical obstruction, and threats of sabotage, combined with more traditional forms of persuasion, provide the foundation for Earth First!'s rhetoric

of confrontation. By understanding the function of agitative rhetoric¹ in the context of a social movement, this study will illuminate the continuing rhetorical events that foster, sustain, and change social movements.

Three topics guide this analysis. Initially, the rhetorical dimensions of agitation and the rhetorical characteristics of social movements will be reviewed. Next the history, philosophy, and rhetorical practices of Earth First! will be discussed and the relationship between Earth First! and the mainstream environmental movement will be considered. Finally, Earth First!'s public communication, both discursive and nondiscursive, will be examined in order to evaluate its relation to the form and structure of the environmental movement and to identify implications for the study of social movement rhetoric.²

Rhetorical Dimensions of Social Movements

The explosion of confrontational political behavior in the 1960s shook not only the political base but also the foundations of the academic world. Scholars of rhetoric and public address were challenged to reexamine prevailing conceptions of reasoned discourse in light of the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, the free speech movement, and so on. As a result, a plethora of essays examining the function of confrontational rhetoric appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s (see, for example, Andrews, 1969; Bailey, 1972; Bowers & Ochs, 1971; Gregg, 1971; Haiman, 1967; Jefferson, 1969; McEdwards, 1968; and Scott & Smith, 1969). Although critics acknowledged the rhetorical aspects of confrontation, protest, and agitation, these studies suggest that theoretical accounts of seemingly *nonrational* discourse remained linked to traditional notions of logic, rationality, and artistic proofs.

In his seminal study of the "rhetoric of the streets," Haiman (1967) reports that some observers rejected agitation as rhetoric on two grounds: It "exceeds the bounds of rational discourse" and the "new rhetoric is 'persuasion' by a strategy of power and coercion rather than by reason and democratic decision-making" (p. 102). Although reluctant to endorse "nonrational strategies of discourse," Haiman urges scholars to understand the inequalities in the balance of power that help explain the emergence of confrontational discourse. McEdwards (1968) stresses the functional aspects of agitative rhetoric and attempts to counter the pejorative connotations of agitation. Claiming that agitation is designed to gain the attention of the public, McEdwards focuses on the language used by protesters. Only when agitation arouses public attention, concludes McEdwards, "will it [the public] respond to intellectual argument" (p. 38). In a 1969 paper, Bailey (1972) argues that confrontation "represents an extension of communication not a form of anti-communication" (p. 182). Agreeing with McEdwards that confrontation is a precursor to rational interaction, Bailey concludes that confrontation "is designed to bring about bargaining, not nonnegotiable demands" (p. 191). In his study of student protests at Columbia University, Andrews (1969) agrees with Haiman that viewing rhetoric as primarily a rational process is too restrictive. Arguing that

rhetoric can be viewed as persuasive or coercive in nature, Andrews suggests coercive rhetoric does not give audiences a rational choice, that it uses a rhetoric of polarization, and that it gives audiences only two choices, "one of which was consistently distorted" (15).

Only with the appearance of *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control* did scholars fully embrace agitation and confrontation as rhetorical artifacts that were more than the attention-getting devices of protest movements. According to the authors of that book, Bowers and Ochs (1971), "We think that the central element in a persuasive attempt, if we are to call it agitation, should be the exercise of extra-discursive means of persuasion. . . . Hence, we have made our primary concern the analysis of instrumental, symbolic events that are largely nonverbal, or extra-verbal" (pp. 5-6). Their definition of rhetoric as "the rationale of instrumental, symbolic behavior" (p. 2) expands the boundaries of what constituted appropriate topics for rhetorical criticism and paved the way for a deeper understanding of nondiscursive forms of persuasion.

Study of the social movement provided a natural extension for scholars interested in the rhetorical analysis of political agitation. While social movements provide significant, numerous, and rich case studies of rhetoric in action, they also present issues of complexity, definition, and explanation. "Political movements are massive, impassioned, and ineluctable," write Simons and Mechling (1981). "Their sheer size and duration make them difficult to comprehend . . . their amorphousness and diversity render them resistant to coherent theoretical accounts" (p. 417). Because of such complexity, this study will isolate a part of a social movement, analyze its rhetorical dimensions, and assess its relationship to the movement in general.

Observing that political movements are "long-term, collective efforts in behalf of a cause," Simons and Mechling (1981) conclude that the typical movement is a "loosely coordinated collectivity consisting of one or more core organizations" (p. 418). From both perspectives, environmentalism has been an active social movement in the United States since the 1960s. It represents at least 10 million Americans who hold widely divergent political beliefs, with groups such as the National Wildlife Federation, the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, and others developing their own particular environmental agenda.³ Multiple organizations form the core of the movement and articulate environmentalist positions on political action and legislation. In a recent review of the major environmental groups in the United States, Weisskopf (1990) of the *Washington Post* concludes: "Once on the political fringe of 1960s activism, environmental groups have become an integral part of the American political process, key players in the nexus of regulatory action, congressional lawmaking and executive decision-making" (p. 10). The work of Cathcart presents a useful way to identify and evaluate the function of agitative rhetoric within a social movement.⁴

Claiming that a social movement can be identified by its "*confrontational form*," Cathcart (1978) writes that "movements are a kind of ritual conflict whose most distinguishing form is *confrontation*" (p. 235). While many critics recognize confrontation as a form of communication, Cathcart (1980) believes they view it as "an extension of communication in situations where confronters have exhausted normal (i.e., accepted) means of communication with those in power" (p. 268). As a result, confrontation has been viewed by many as primarily a way to gain attention, an instrumental function, and not as communication itself, a consummatory form

(Cathcart, 1978, p. 236). For Cathcart, confrontational rhetoric challenges the values of a political system, producing a counterrhetoric that in turn recognizes movement protesters and their potential threat to the established order. From this counterrhetoric "emerges the dialectical enjoinder which defines a collective as a social movement in the public mind" (Cathcart, 1980, p. 268). In this way, confrontational rhetoric enables the movement to define itself to its members as well as to the outside world. Agitative rhetoric also appears to serve a consummatory function within the social movement. "To study a movement," observes Griffin (1969), "is to study a striving for salvation, a struggle for perfection, a progress toward the 'good'" (p. 460). Noting that movements "begin in the stasis of indecision, and they end in the stasis of 'decision persevered in,'" Griffin concludes, "They begin with guilt and the dream of salvation. They end with the achievement, and maintenance, of a state of redemption" (p. 461). The extreme, agitative rhetoric of one element within a social movement provides an internal dialectic that forces a counterresponse *within* the movement as well as outside the movement. Such discourse demands that the movement faithfully acknowledge that salvation and redemption have not been achieved and that guilt still should drive members to act. In this manner *true believers* have a vehicle to critique and motivate other members in the social movement who seemingly have accepted the state of redemption.

For members in the social movement, agitative rhetoric serves as a touchstone for measuring their individual level of commitment to the movement and how far they will go to purify the system. According to Cathcart (1980), social movements evolve through their struggles with the establishment *and* struggles within the movement: "Confrontation involves movement members in questions about their own morality and their contribution to the evils of the existing system. Decisions over tactics raise questions about ends as well as means" (p. 271). As a result, agitative rhetoric encourages supporters to reexamine their ideological roots as well as their commitment to the movement itself. As Simons and Mechling (1981) observe, "Ideologies are expressed in the person of symbolic leaders, in symbolic acts of protest and defiance, and in legends and myths about founding fathers, martyrs and sages, and cowards and traitors" (p. 424). Such rhetoric draws attention to the movement and forces supporters either to accept or reject the extreme view of a given controversy. In either case, the larger social movement must respond to agitative discourse because silence could be interpreted as tacit approval of confrontation and coercion. An examination of Earth First! and its rhetorical practices will demonstrate that agitative rhetoric serves an important function in the life of a social movement, forcing the movement to redefine itself to its membership as well as to those in the established order.

Earth First! And Environmental Politics

History of the Movement

Starting with thirteen members, Earth First! has grown significantly as additional sympathetic followers have found the group. Seventy-five people attended a rally

in 1981, and more than 400 attended a similar affair in 1982 (Kane, 1987). By 1985, more than 6,500 readers were receiving the organization's newsletter (Japenga, 1985). Throughout the 1980s the group maintained a high profile in environmental politics while politicians, developers, bureaucrats, and environmentalists attacked the radical agenda of Earth First!. To demonstrate their dissatisfaction with mainstream environmental groups and their hierarchical structure, Earth First! claims to maintain no official records, has no membership lists, operates without annual dues and officers, and refuses to be designated a nonprofit organization (Setterberg, 1986). Because subscriptions to the Earth First! journal do not clearly reflect the group's total membership, a good estimate comes from former member Fayhee (1988), who believes about 12,000 people consider themselves to be Earth Firsters (p. 21).

The narrative history of Earth First!, told by group members and published in various newspapers and magazine articles, stresses the necessity of confrontational action to save the environment from development. By supporting agitation and condoning sabotage in public forums, Earth Firsters help construct an extremist image that is an important part of the group's self-identity and mission. Without such an image, it is doubtful that Earth First! would be a regular feature in the nation's popular and environmental press.

In 1979, three disillusioned members of the mainstream environmental movement, Foreman and Koehler of the Wilderness Society and Wolke of the Friends of the Earth, resigned their staff positions in Washington, D.C., and headed for the American West in Foreman's Volkswagen van (see "For the members," 1984). Each had lost faith in the environmental movement and set off to find a different way to preserve the environment. Decrying the moderate nature of the environmental movement, Foreman claims that land developers had gained control of the wilderness debate: "The anti-environmental side had been extreme, radical, emotional. . . . Their arguments had been easily shot full of holes. We had been factual, rational. They looked like fools. We looked like statesmen. Who won? They did" (Setterberg, 1986, p. 23). Foreman believed the environmental movement had been duped by the Carter administration. Only 15 million acres of wilderness (out of more than 66 million under study) were recommended for preservation by the administration in 1979. "This was from the administration that was supposedly our friend," observes Wolke (White, 1984, p. A11). Environmentalists were losing the battle to save the environment, Foreman (1985a) charges, because they were being corrupted by the system. "While in Washington," he recalls, "I came to realize that, because of the rules we were playing by, we were *being* lobbied more effectively than we were lobbying" (p. 17). Indeed, Foreman argues that in their attempts to be "reasonable and credible and politically pragmatic," the environmental movement would "come out of those meetings having *made* all the concessions" (p. 18). The "emotional, hard-line, no-compromise approach taken by the mining, timber, and livestock industries, and by the off-road vehicle people" taught Foreman a significant lesson about environmental politics (p. 18). As a result, he offers a radically different alternative to save the ecosystem from destruction.

Foreman and the other founders of the group envisioned confrontation and agitation as a primary means of persuasion in order to shake the environmental movement out of its doldrums:

It was time for a new joker in the deck. Something more than commenting on dreary environmental-impact statements and writing letters to members of Congress. Politics in the streets. Civil disobedience. Media stunts. Holding the villains up to ridicule. Using music to charge the cause. . . . All that would be required to join us, we decided, was a belief in Earth first. ("For the members," 1984, p. G8)

A consistent theme running throughout Earth First! discourse stresses the need for militant activity to counter the softening of the mainstream environmental movement. "I sensed that we were becoming bureaucrats in gray-flannel suits, more interested in saving our jobs than in saving the environment," Foreman reports (Taylor, 1986, p. 70). The influx of new members into the mainstream environmental groups, suggested some Earth Firsters, caused in large part by the prodevelopment policies of the Reagan administration, actually hurt the movement. Arguing that most of the new members "are soft," Foreman reasons that they forced some groups to take a "more cautious attitude toward environmental activism out of fear of alienating the membership" (Baumgartner, 1986, p. 4). Besides being soft on the issues, environmentalists appeared to be out of touch with movement concerns. Roselle claims that most environmental leaders had not even seen the old growth forest in Oregon, a major political battleground in the 1980s: "Most of them are in D.C., doing lunch in their designer khakis and working out their retirement bennies. The problem is, the environmental movement isn't a calling anymore, it's a job. They think wilderness is some Disneyland you check into after you shut down your computer and lock up the condo" (Kane, 1987, p. 98).

To counter the moderate and subdued image associated with environmentalism, Earth First! promulgated a radical personae. "It was ridiculous that off-roaders were macho men and backpackers were considered wimps," Foreman observes (Taylor, 1986, p. 70). Roselle, one of the original members of Earth First!, echoes this vision and concludes, "Not all environmentalists are granola-crunching hippies. Some of us are rednecks and cowboys" (Setterberg, 1986, p. 20). Indeed, one of the group's best means of raising money is through the sale of t-shirts, caps, and bumper stickers with the logo: "Rednecks for Wilderness" (Setterberg, 1986, p. 22).

Philosophical Foundations of the Movement

The philosophical foundation of Earth First! comes from two quite different sources: *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, a novel by Edward Abbey, and the theory of deep ecology. Each source provides an integral part of the group's ideology as well as its specific political agenda. There is no doubt that *The Monkey Wrench Gang* served as a combination battle plan, manifesto, and spiritual guide for Earth First! in its origins, philosophy, and rhetoric.⁵ The novel inspired Foreman and his colleagues to create a new and radical environmental group that placed wilderness protection above all else (see McKibben, 1989, pp. 177-182, and Nash, 1989, pp. 191-194). Abbey spoke at Earth First! rallies and encouraged the group to be true to its calling. He also wrote the forward to Earth First!'s controversial book, *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching* (*monkeywrenching* being the term for industrial sabotage that was borrowed by Earth First! directly from Abbey's

novel).⁶ Although not an active member of Earth First!, Abbey supported the group in many ways.⁷ Speaking at the Glen Canyon Dam (a target for destruction by the fictional *Monkey Wrench Gang*), Abbey tells an Earth First! rally: "Oppose! Oppose the destruction of our homeland. . . . And if opposition is not enough, we must subvert" ("For the members," 1984, p. G9). In describing his support for Earth First!, Abbey tells one reporter, "When the only alternative is to give up and lose the battle outright, I'm in favor of active resistance. Even sabotage. . . . If your conscience demands it of you, then do it. And don't get caught" (McBride, 1983, p. 71).

Published in 1975, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* detailed the fictional adventures of four individuals in the American Southwest who wreaked havoc on numerous wilderness-development schemes.⁸ The characters burned billboards, derailed trains, and plotted to destroy the Glen Canyon Dam. In the confines of the novel, Abbey details in precise terms the process of "ecotage," the destruction of machinery and equipment designed to develop the wilderness. The characters in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* justify their illegal actions by reasoning that nature needs a guardian to stop human assaults upon the ecosystem. Ecological sabotage, or *monkeywrenching*, is justified by Earth Firsters through arguments almost identical to those made by characters in the novel. Believing that monkeywrenching is required morally, Foreman (1985a) argues that the "all-out war being waged against ecosystems all over the world" forces environmentalists to consider "any and all means of resisting that destruction" (p. 21). For Earth Firsters, the only *moral* response to wilderness development is active resistance. Wolke, who served a six-month sentence in Wyoming for pulling up survey stakes, concludes, "When all legal remedies have been exhausted someone has got to be there to continue the fight and use tactics that the establishment won't use, such as civil disobedience" (White, 1984, p. A12).

Earth Firsters describe monkeywrenching as a nonviolent response to the excesses of industrial and urban growth. "It's directed toward inanimate objects, and never toward people or any other life-forms," observes Foreman (1985a, p. 21). Moreover monkeywrenching is not considered to be an act of mere vandalism: "While monkeywrenching is undertaken with purpose and respect, and with the highest moral standards in mind, vandalism is senseless and hurtful" (p. 21). In the opening chapter to *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*, Foreman (1985b) presents a rationale that distinguishes "strategic monkeywrenching" from crime and vandalism. Among other features, monkeywrenching should be nonviolent, not organized, the act of individuals, targeted, timely, simple, dispersed among all regions, and fun. Most important, monkeywrenching must be "deliberate and ethical" and respect the importance of the act itself. "It is not a casual and flippant affair," concludes Foreman. Monkeywrenchers must "keep a pure heart and mind about it. They remember that they are engaged in the most moral of all actions: protecting life, defending the Earth" (pp. 11-12).

The concept of *deep ecology*, which serves as a second philosophical ground to monkeywrenching, stems from the writings of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (see Nash, 1989, pp. 146-150) and holds that "human beings should participate in but not dominate the natural world" (Setterberg, 1986, p. 26). Devall, co-author of

a 1985 book examining the philosophical implications of deep ecology, suggests that nature should be seen as “a relationship, not an entity.” According to Devall, “Deep ecologists rearticulate a minority position that envisions human beings as stewards, not masters, of the earth” (Setterberg, 1986, p. 26). As a result, Earth First! members believe nature has an inherent right to exist and should not be exploited by humans. Earth Firsters demonstrate an abiding commitment to deep ecology in their public communication. Robert Brothers, also known as “Bobcat,” claims, “We have no business cutting the forests. Some places are sacred. Some places have value in their own right” (Nokes, 1987, p. A7). In a speech delivered in Sacramento, California, Foreman invokes images of deep ecology in describing his conversion to the cause:

Why preserve a wilderness area? Because it's a nice place to go and relax? Because you can make pretty books of pictures of it? To protect a watershed? No. You protect a river because its [sic] a river. For its own sake. Because it has a right to exist by itself. The grizzly bear in Yellowstone Park has as much right to her life as any one of us has to our life. Each of you is an animal and should be proud of it. (McKibben, 1989, p. 180)

Deep ecology demands that humans reject the self-centered role that has guided wilderness management for generations. Recalling the age of primitive humans, in a 1984 speech, Foreman (1985a) concludes: “In those days, a person would have been laughed out of the tribe for inventing such a bizarre philosophy as the one that drives Western thought today—the belief that the world was created just for us, and that we are meant to have dominion over everything in it” (p. 19).

Ecodefense has served more than an instrumental function for members of Earth First!. Because of the book's wide availability (it has appeared in at least two editions), critics of Earth First! regularly quote lengthy passages from *Ecodefense* to substantiate the group's danger to society. Popular media sources that have cited the book include the *Denver Post* (Grelen & Sinisi, 1989), *Beef Today* (Mooney, 1989), *Smithsonian* (Parfit, 1990), *The Progressive* (Vanderpool, 1989), *The Nation* (Russell, 1989), and the *New York Times* (Robbins, 1989). This practice reinforces Earth First!'s public image as the radical wing of the environmental movement and provides opponents with the group's apparent blueprint of sabotage.

Easy access to Earth First!'s agenda (through its publications) has spawned a number of counterresponses from different groups. Appearing on Cable News Network's *Larry King Live* (1990), Troy Reinhart of Douglas Timber Company was asked what kind of evidence he had to prove that Earth First! had engaged in sabotage and terrorism. “Well,” he responded, “they—they publicize it in all their publications, they admit it openly . . . they justify it in every publication that they do” (pp. 12-13). In a direct response to the Earth First! newsletter, the Utah Farm Bureau and the Arizona Game and Fish Department sent letters to farmers and ranchers urging them to protect their cattle from Earth Firsters who might kill the cattle and blame deer hunters (“Eco-terrorists,” 1990).

Although the group never has officially sanctioned ecotage, Earth First! claims such activity may become necessary in the battle to save the wilderness. Stressing

the symbolic message in tree-spiking, the practice of putting a metal spike in a tree to prevent its harvest, Foreman concludes, "These things say 'Stay out of this place. If you come in here with your machines and your industrialization . . . bulldozers are going to be decommissioned and trees will be spiked for their own protection'" (Slocum, 1985, p. 35). Even when there is no evidence of Earth First! involvement in an act of sabotage, the group maintains a high profile in the debate over development. In May 1987, for example, a logger in California was injured by a spiked tree. While timber officials suspected Earth First! of the sabotage, the group claimed that their supporters would have sent a warning letter or spray painted a large "S" on the tree. Without such warning, noted Greg King of Earth First!, tree spiking "would be worthless. They would still cut down the tree" (Stammer, 1987, p. 22). Exploiting the news coverage associated with the injured logger, Foreman uses the occasion to attack the timber industry for being the real "eco-terrorists" in the woods and to express his concern for the forests, spotted owls, wolverines, and salmon (Stammer, 1987, p. 22).

Rhetorical Practices

In its ten years of existence, Earth First! has used a variety of methods to present its message to other environmentalists as well as the general public. The group combines traditional forums for persuasion (calling press conferences, issuing news releases, presenting speeches at meetings, and appearing on television and radio programs such as CNN's *Larry King Live* and ABC's *Primetime Live*) with nontraditional methods (creating the visual crack on the Glen Canyon Dam, draping a banner on Mt. Rushmore to protest acid rain, sitting in trees intended for logging, and physically blocking land-development operations). In most cases, the two forms of persuasion merge in the group's public agitation. For example, to protest Yellowstone Park's decision to retain motel units in grizzly bear habitat, two dozen Earth Firsters and a television crew "invaded" the office of park superintendent Robert Barbee. Two members, one dressed in a bear outfit, awarded a buffalo chip to Barbee for being "Conservationist of the Year" ("Earth First! protesters invade," 1986). While such confrontations draw attention to the group's political agenda, the message of confrontation is symbolic in itself. By using acts of extremism, Earth First! calls attention to what it believes is a lack of conviction and passion in the mainstream environmental movement.

In terms of actually using monkeywrenching tactics such as tree-spiking, destruction of machinery, bombings, and so forth, Earth Firsters blur the distinction between condoning such actions and engaging in their own eco-defense of the planet. For example, *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*, which details the spiking of trees, the sabotaging of construction equipment, and the burning of billboards, has sold more than 20,000 copies. Earth Firsters maintain that use of the book is a personal choice. "While Earth First! doesn't officially engage in monkeywrenching," writes editor Foreman (1985b), "or even officially advocate it, we also don't *not* advocate it. It's an individual decision" (p. 21). When asked directly on *Larry King Live* (1990) if he supported violence and sabotage, Earth Firster Mark Williams responded in a typically ambiguous manner:

As far as pulling up survey stakes, disabling—I think individuals who would undertake those actions with sober forethought with a commitment to not injure any living thing, I think that is a prerogative, and I would not take any stand against them doing that to save wild places. (p. 15)

While several Earth Firsters have served jail sentences for pulling up survey stakes and trespassing, they had avoided prosecution for monkeywrenching until 1989 when Foreman and three others were arrested for conspiring to sabotage a power plant in Arizona (Grelen, 1989). Foreman's arrest came at time in which Earth First!'s public image, an important part of its overall mission, was in a transition worthy of note.

Between 1980 and 1987, Earth First! represented the bit player in environmental politics, often more ignored than repudiated. National attention placed greater attention on the group's antics than on its public lands agenda. Followers of environmental politics probably knew more about the parading in bear costumes than Earth First!'s plan to repopulate grizzly bears in California, create a huge Great Plains buffalo preserve, and increase the amount of wilderness in the United States by fully one-third.⁹ However, the stakes in the debate changed in 1988 when Earth First! found itself under concerted attacks from not only industrial interests but also law enforcement agencies, the federal government, and even other environmental groups.

While most critics have demanded that Earth First! stop its activity, environmentalists have felt forced to reject the actions but not necessarily the explicit goals of Earth First!. Agreeing that many environmental crises face the world, Michael McCloskey, chairperson of the Sierra Club, argues, "But this means it is time for responsible, serious world strategies to deal with them. Protests have their place, but they are not enough" (Stein, 1987, p. 11). Many environmentalists have feared that the general public might link their specific groups to Earth First!, thereby harming the larger environmental movement. John Charles of the Oregon Environmental Council warned that an injured logger might make the public decide "all environmentalists are irresponsible and the movement would be hurt" (Slocum, 1985, p. 35). Decrying the perception among some observers that Earth First! represents the environmental community, Jay Hair, chief executive officer of the National Wildlife Federation, announced:

I don't even consider Earth First! part of the environmental community. They accuse us of being ineffective, of selling out. Well, we have over 80 court cases pending right now. That, in and of itself, is a far cry from anything Earth First! has done. How many acres of wilderness has Earth First! had designated? None. Through our lobbying efforts, we've helped designate millions of acres. (Fayhee, 1989, p. 21)

Although many environmental groups would like to keep Earth First! on the fringe of publicity, the group has found itself the target of an organized counterresponse in the private and public sector. In 1988 Senator James McClure of Idaho added a tree-spiking provision to a major congressional antidrug bill. Spiking a tree became a federal crime that could result in fines of \$500,000 and prison sentences between five and ten years (Gamerman, 1988). In addition, Earth First! was

infiltrated by an FBI agent in 1988 who was instrumental in the arrest of Foreman and three other group members in June 1989 for attempting to cut down power lines to a nuclear power plant in Arizona (see Feldman & Meyer, 1989, and Tolan, 1989). The FBI warned cattle ranchers in 1989 to be aware of potential attacks from extremist groups like Earth First!. "It's a case of ecological terrorism," notes FBI agent Richard Whitaker. "Their basic goal is to eradicate the rancher" (Macy, 1989, p. B6). The *New York Times* reports that the FBI spent two years investigating Earth First!, believing the group to be part of a "domestic terrorism network." The investigations "yielded a flurry of charges and prosecutions, no convictions and few substantive results" ("FBI steps up pressure," 1990, p. A2). Three conservative legal groups—the Wilderness Impact Research Foundation, the Mountain States Legal Foundation, and the Pacific States Legal Foundation—sponsored a conference on "Sabotage-Ecotage: The Legacy of Edward Abbey and his Monkeywrench Gang." Planners of the conference, which was held in Salt Lake City in March 1990, wanted to help ranchers, loggers, and farmers understand the potential menace of "ecotage, or the sabotage of our resources and private property in the name of preservation" ("Wilderness conference," 1990). In addition, articles attacking Earth First! have appeared in diverse publications such as *Beef Today* (Mooney, 1989), *Livestock Market Digest* (Black, 1989), *Barron's* (Brody, 1990), and *Reason* (Postrel, 1990).

Editorials in regional and national newspapers also have taken Earth First! to task. The *Missoulian* ("New species of tree slime," 1989) called tree-splikers "no more than rural versions of the valueless human vermin that have recently terrorized New York City and shocked the nation with sprees of random violence" (p. A4), the *Idaho State Journal* ("This will be no picnic," 1990) called Earth First! the "skunk at the picnic" (p. A4), and the *Idaho Statesman* (Morgan, 1989) called tree-splikers the "eco-equivalent of neo-Nazi skinheads" (p. A4). Representing the Natural Resources Defense Fund, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. (1990) used the editorial pages of the *Los Angeles Times* to repudiate Earth First!'s actions and refute claims that the group was simply an extension of the protest movement of the 1960s. Calling civil disobedience a time-honored and legitimate response to political and economic exploitation, Kennedy argues that it requires "nonviolent tactics, including the willingness to endure the blows of the oppressor . . . and the willingness to endure imprisonment" (p. B7). By contrast, Earth First! activists "attack at night, destroy property and machinery, endanger human life and then flee." The tactics of Earth First!, concludes Kennedy, "must be condemned as must the tactics of anyone who favors force over democratic principles" (p. B7).

In a little more than one year, from March 1989 to May 1990, Earth First! suffered a series of setbacks that threatened the group's existence. The death of Abbey, the group's infiltration by the FBI, and the arrest of Foreman and three other Earth Firsters had the group reeling (see Tolan, 1989). In May 1990 two members of the group were injured when a bomb exploded in their car in Oakland, California. Although the two said that the bomb was planted by enemies of Earth First!, the police arrested the Earth Firsters and claimed the bomb was being transported for an illegal act (Bishop, 1990). The charges were dropped later, and to date investigators have not determined how the bomb got into the car.

Although such crises could have dealt a death blow to other small and extreme groups within a social movement, Earth First! pushed ahead with its political program. The decentralized nature of Earth First! allowed the group to function even with threats to jail key leaders. According to Foreman, "The FBI thinks that if they can knock me out—since they think of me as the leader of Earth First!—then they can knock out the entire movement. But I'm not important to Earth First! in its day-to-day functioning" (Vanderpool, 1989, p. 15). More importantly, Foreman uses his arrest to warn followers that their cause may demand more than six months in a county jail for trespassing: "It ain't junior high anymore. They don't just send you to the principal's office. Some of us are going to spend a lot of time in jail. Some of us are going to die" (Parfit, 1990, p. 184).

Earth First! continued to pursue its rhetoric of confrontation after the various crises. In August 1989 Earth Firsters in six states at fifteen sites sat in trees to interrupt logging and force Americans to reconsider their consumption of forest products (Stein, 1989, p. 114). In April 1990 twelve Earth Firsters attempted to unfurl a banner reading "Save the Planet" on the Golden Gate Bridge ("Earth First! climbs," 1990, p. A21). Most important, the group continued plans for its 1990 "Redwood Summer," designed to call attention to the destruction of old-growth Redwoods in California. The goal of the summer-long protest was to recreate an equivalent of the civil-rights movement's "Mississippi Summer" of 1964. Approximately two hundred volunteers planned to spend the summer camped in the woods in an effort to disrupt logging by Louisiana Pacific (Barol, 1990, p. 60).

Agitative Rhetoric in the Social Movement

Goals and Transformations

The agitative rhetoric of Earth First! promotes the cause of environmentalism in two ways. First, agitation and confrontation draw public attention to many concerns of the larger environmental movement. In 1983, for example, Earth First! staged seven blockades in the Kalmiopsis Forest in Oregon, provoking citizen reaction to the proposed development and forcing the Forest Service to reconsider its actions (Foreman, 1985a, p. 20). In many cases, Earth First! claims to have been on the cutting edge of critical issues that gained attention from mainstream environmentalists only after Earth First! confrontation and protest. Arguing that Oregon's 1985 wilderness bill had "a couple of hundred thousand more acres of wilderness in it" because of Earth First! protests, Foreman concludes, "By taking a moral stand and facing the consequences, we have turned more people into supporters of preserving old-growth forests than any other environmental group has done by issuing press releases and making statements" (Berger, 1986, p. 21).

A second way in which Earth First! activities promote the cause is by agitation that pushes mainstream environmental groups to respond to controversial issues. According to Roselle, "Our tactics and our philosophy force the mainstream groups to answer a lot of questions that they have not typically had to answer" (Fayhee,

1989, p. 21). This counterresponse helps the movement set limits on how far it will go in opposing establishment plans as well as justifying the movement's course of action. Fayhee (1989), a former member of Earth First! who left because of the group's extremist views, claims that mainstream environmental groups are forced to respond to Earth First! in two ways: "They have to take a stand one way or the other when it comes to ecotage, plus they must articulate that stand in a way that doesn't sacrifice the moral high ground to a bunch of self-proclaimed radicals" (p. 21). In both cases, members of the social movement must reexamine their commitment to the cause as well as their particular means of achieving such goals. By responding to Earth First! and in presenting their own agenda to the general public, environmental groups may gain greater public legitimacy because of the contrast between their apparent moderate approach and the activities of Earth First!. Bradlee Walton, former leader of Friends of the Earth, observes, "Earth First! makes us look a lot more reasonable" (Setterberg, 1986, p. 23). David Brower, former leader of both the Sierra Club and the Friends of the Earth and one of the central leaders of the environmental movement in the United States, perceives Earth First!'s radical rhetoric to be part of the natural evolution of a movement. "I founded Friends of the Earth to make the Sierra Club look reasonable," he observes. "Then I founded the Earth Island Institute to make Friends of the Earth look reasonable. Earth First! now makes us look reasonable. We're still waiting for someone to come along and make Earth First! look reasonable" (Postrel, 1990, p. 22).

Ironically, in 1990, its tenth year of existence, Earth First! started to show signs of division within its ranks. Some members have made specific moves to reconceptualize the group's mission and find a place more in line with the mainstream environmental movement. In April 1990 Earth First! chapters in Oregon and California repudiated tree-spiking. According to Karen Wood of Oregon Earth First!, "we feel it is no longer effective or appropriate as a tactic" ("Are Earth First's rowdies," 1990, p. A10). At the group's annual meeting, held in July 1990 in Montana's Beaverhead National Forest, leaders announced several dramatic changes in Earth First!'s agenda. "We want to expand our horizons from dealing strictly with wilderness issues to dealing with systematic change," observes Darryl Cherney. "We have to change the way corporations do business in the world. That's the way to save rain forests and to aid natives who are displaced when the forests are logged." In addition, the group reported that it was going to expand its recruitment of minority members, that it had increased the Earth First! journal staff from four to fifteen members to "better reflect the organization's majority," and that some radical slogans ("AIDS is a cure to the population problem" and "Let Ethiopians Starve") did not reflect the group's "opinions on how to deal with the world population problems" ("Militant environmental group," 1990, p. B2). Most significant in the transformation of Earth First! was Foreman's resignation from the group in August 1990. Disagreeing with the direction the group was taking, Foreman tells one reporter, "I'm not needed. They're better off without me" (Talbot, 1990, p. 79). It remains to be seen what role Earth First! will play in the environmental movement in the 1990s.

Earth First! has succeeded in forcing the federal government, the news media, business interests, ranchers, loggers, mineral companies, and major environmental

groups to acknowledge its agenda. Even when the group is not directly linked to wilderness sabotage, it remains newsworthy because of its radical image. For example, after a logger in California was injured by a spiked tree, the *Los Angeles Times* editorialized:

One official guessed that the vandalism was the work of Earth First!, a group that conducts guerrilla warfare against those it views as enemies of the environment. Perhaps Earth First! was not responsible, but it is logical for Earth First! to come to mind. The group openly advocates the sabotaging of logging and other development in alleged defense of the environment. ("Environmental terrorism," 1987, p. 124)

Whether members of Earth First! spiked the tree becomes secondary in terms of the group's larger mission. They have succeeded in forcing a counterresponse from powerful institutions in society and have found a way to promote their views in national and regional forums.

Earth First!'s confrontational tactics are clearly rhetorical efforts designed to call attention to environmental concerns, to identify friends and foes in the public sector, and to promote action by others in the larger social movement. Earth Firsters regularly call for ecological sabotage (labeled earlier as "monkeywrenching" to demonstrate a connection to the group's collective values) to symbolize the importance of their agenda and the commitment and passion they bring to the cause. By combining the perception of supporting monkeywrenching with other acts of civil disobedience, Earth First! has found a vehicle to gain serious and sustained attention from audiences inside and outside the environmental movement. Commenting on attacks from cattle ranchers, Mike Roselle observes, "As long as [cattle ranchers] continue to profile us as a threat to their livelihood, other people will perceive that our momentum is building. If they just ignored us, we wouldn't have any effect" (Mooney, 1989, p. 13).

Implications from the Study of Earth First!

For those who study the rhetorical dynamics of social movements, the case of Earth First! and its relationship to the larger environmental movement generates at least three conclusions. First, agitation has both instrumental and consummatory dimensions when examined as a strategic and recurrent form of persuasion. By viewing Earth First's agitation in the context of its other forms of persuasion, it appears that sit-ins, pranks, and threats of *ecotage* are symbolic on their own merits. Agitation is not simply a vehicle to draw attention to rational appeals. Instead, agitation becomes a critique of the social movement and its *failure* to achieve its fundamental goals. To ensure that the movement and the public understand the message inherent in confrontation and agitation, Earth Firsters justify monkeywrenching in public meetings, media interviews, and other sources offered for public consumption. In this way, talking about agitation and actually engaging in confrontation combine to create Earth First!'s image as extremist element within the environmental movement.

Second, scholars who examine the rhetoric of fringe groups should recognize that the impact and significance of agitative discourse must be interpreted within the framework of the larger social movement. Interestingly, the moderate image of one group may be the result of the agitation of another group. The apparent failure of extremist groups in achieving their public goals may be a misleading standard in seeking to understand the group's importance within a movement. For example, although the New Right failed to enact much of its agenda in the 1980s, the rhetoric of the New Right energized the conservative movement in the late 1970s and helped Ronald Reagan become president in 1980.

Third, agitative rhetoric generated for audiences outside the social movement is received and interpreted by individuals and groups within the movement. As a result, agitation may serve dual purposes in creating a counterresponse inside as well as outside the social movement. For the agitator, the essence of being part of the social movement is confirmed through the *dialectical enjoiment* of the counterresponse. Without a specific response from moderate groups in the movement or individuals and groups outside the movement, agitative rhetoric would have no purpose beyond self-expression and self-gratification. After Senator McClure assailed Earth First! on the floor of the United States senate, calling the group's tactics "no more noble than those of hostage-takers and kidnappers," Foreman tells one reporter, "For someone like Jim McClure to acknowledge our existence and then condemn it, he couldn't give us a nicer compliment" ("McClure blasts," 1987, p. C7).

The small but vocal "Rednecks for Wilderness" have altered the terms of the wilderness debate in the United States and have demonstrated the power of confrontational rhetoric as a way to help shape public attention and attitudes. They also have shown that small groups with little public or financial support can be a significant force within a social movement. Although Earth First! probably lacks respect in most quarters of the mainstream environmental movement, the group certainly has the attention of movement leaders.

Notes

1. For the purpose of this paper, *agitative rhetoric* will be considered synonymous with Bowers and Ochs' (1971) notion of *agitation* ("Agitation exists when (1) people outside the normal decision-making establishment (2) advocate significant social change and (3) encounter a degree of resistance within the establishment such as to require more than the normal discursive means of persuasion") and *rhetoric* ("the rationale of instrumental symbolic behavior"), pp. 4, 2. Social movements typically employ confrontational rhetoric that falls within the tradition of *normal discursive behavior*. On the other hand, some elements within a social movement may employ an agitative style of rhetoric, which may involve physical actions, nonverbal messages, and other nondiscursive forms of persuasion.
2. This study evaluates the *public communication* of Earth First! and its relationship to the environmental movement. In collecting data for analysis, I have reviewed all available sources of Earth First!'s public communication, which include statements and actions intended for public consumption. To accomplish this purpose, newspapers, general and specialized periodicals, and television programs that discuss Earth First! have been reviewed and evaluated. Examples of internal communication (Earth First! newsletters, a songbook for members, and group meetings) have not been reviewed and are considered only when they have been cited in external sources of communication (newspaper and magazine

- descriptions of the group). Other studies have evaluated Earth First!'s internal communication. For a study of the group's internal communication and the cultural implications related to that discourse, see Jonathan I. Lange, "Refusal to compromise: The case of Earth First!," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 54, (1990): 473-494. For an analysis of the group's newsletters as a means of supporting group cohesion in a time of crisis, see Robyn Croft, "The rape of Earth First!: A metaphor for crises," unpublished manuscript, Department of English, Idaho State University, Pocatello.
3. For example, the Sierra Club uses local chapters as well as the national office to address a full host of environmental issues. The Wilderness Society focuses specifically on protecting the public lands. The Izaak Walton League supports the interests of hunters and anglers. The National Audubon Society stresses preservation of wildlife and clean air. For other descriptions of the size, budget, and mission of the leading environmental groups in the United States, see Weisskopf (1990), p. 11.
 4. Some theorists have questioned whether Cathcart has presented a rhetorical definition unique to the social movement (see, for example, Zarefsky, 1980, and Smith & Windes, 1976). However, I agree with Lucas (1980) that a distinct genre of social movement rhetoric need not be found "in order to construct generalizations of a theoretical order about the nature and functions of the rhetoric employed in social movements" (p. 263). Cathcart's perspective provides an approach that is useful in understanding the dynamics of rhetoric in a social movement, both internally and externally. Whether Cathcart can demonstrate a unique theory of social movement rhetoric is not necessary for this analysis.
 5. According to Donald L. Rheem (1987), "'The Monkey Wrench Gang' was much more than an action novel. It became the handbook of radicalized environmentalists who had tired of writing letters or waiting for Washington to act. 'Monkeywrenchers' took their protest to the field, putting spikes in trees to damage chain saws, pouring sugar and corn syrup into bulldozer fuel tanks, and chaining themselves to trees and rocks. Although not a formal organization, a loose-knit group of monkeywrenchers called Earth First! now has supporters all over the United States. One of Earth First!'s founders edited 'Ecodefense: A field guide to monkeywrenching'" (p. 16).
 6. Endorsing the content of the book, Abbey concludes: "No good American should ever go into the woods again without this book and, for example, a hammer and few pounds of nails. Spike a few trees now and then whenever you enter an area condemned to chainsaw massacre by Louisiana Pacific and its affiliated subsidiary, the U.S. Forest Service. You won't hurt the tree; they'll be grateful for the protection; and you may save the forest" (Foreman, 1985b, pp. 4-5).
 7. When Abbey died in 1989, Foreman eulogized the writer, observing, "He represented what the country could have been if it hadn't turned its back on its ideal 200 hundred years ago. Every book of Ed Abbey's, every essay, every story has launched a thousand deeds" ("Some 500 gather," 1989, p. C2). Abbey's death presented a spiritual crisis for many Earth Firsters who found solace in a special issue of their group's journal devoted entirely to Abbey and his life.
 8. For a rhetorical analysis of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, see Brant Short, "Saving the wild and the free: The 'monkey wrench' rhetoric of Edward Abbey," in Richard J. Jensen & John C. Hammerback, Eds., *In search of justice: The Indiana tradition in speech communication*, pp. 285-301, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987.
 9. For example, in a 1983 article that examined the "Real Monkeywrench Gang," McBride concluded: "As the ecological Crown Prince, Earth First! has taken on the task of goosing those penny-loafed drudges back in conservation headquarters who think all there is to life is writing Congressmen about the melting polar ice caps or the latest Love Canal effluence. At first blush it is hard to take Earth First! too seriously, perhaps because they don't" (p. 37).

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