

The Feminization of Earth First!

It is impossible to live in the redwood region of Northern California without being profoundly affected by the destruction of this once magnificent ecosystem. Miles and miles of clearcuts cover our bleeding hillsides. Ancient forests are being strip-logged to pay off corporate junk bonds. And bee-lines of log trucks fill our roads, heading to the sawmills with loads ranging from 1,000-year old redwoods, one tree trunk filling an entire logging truck, to six-inch diameter baby trees that are chipped for pulp. Less than 5% of the old growth redwood is left, and the ecosystem is disappearing even faster than the more widely known tropical rainforest.

So it is not surprising that I, a lifetime activist, would become an environmentalist. What is surprising is that I, a feminist, single mother and blue-collar worker, would end up in Earth First!, a "no compromise" direct action group with the reputation of being macho, beer-drinking eco-dudes. Little did I know that by combining the more feminine elements of collectivism and non-violence with the spunk and outrageousness of Earth First!, we would spark a mass movement. And little did I know that I would pay for our success by being bombed and nearly killed, and subjected to a campaign of hatred and misogyny.

I was attracted to Earth First! because they were the only ones willing to put their bodies in front of the bulldozers and chainsaws to save the trees. They were also funny, irreverent, and they played music. But it was the philosophy of Earth First! that ultimately won me over. This philosophy, known as biocentrism or deep ecology, states that the Earth is not just here for human consumption. All species have a right to exist for their own sake, and humans must learn to live in balance with the needs of nature, instead of trying to mold nature to fit the wants of humans.

I see no contradiction between deep ecology and eco-feminism. But Earth First! was founded by five men, and its principle spokespeople have all been male. As in all such groups, there have always been competent women doing the real work behind the scenes. But they have been virtually invisible behind the public Earth First! persona of "big man goes into big wilderness to save big trees." I certainly objected to this. Yet despite the image, the structure of Earth First! was decentralized and non-hierarchical, so we had the leeway to develop any way we wanted in our local Northern California group.

Earth First! came on the scene in redwood country around 1986, when corporate raider Charles Hurwitz of Maxxam took over a local lumber company, then nearly tripled the cut of old growth redwood to pay off his junk bonds. Earth First! had been protesting around public land issues in other parts of the West since 1981, but this was such an outrage that it brought the group to its first "private" lands campaign.

For years the strategy of Earth First!, under male leadership, had been based on individual acts of daring. "Nomadic Action Teams" of maybe ten people would travel to remote areas and bury themselves in logging roads, chain themselves to heavy equipment, or sit in trees. There were certainly brave and principled women who engaged in these actions. And a few of the actions, notably the Sapphire Six blockade in Oregon, even had a majority of women participants. But by and large, most of the people who had the freedom for that kind of travel and risk-taking were men.

I never consciously tried to change Earth First!, I just applied my own values and experiences to my work. I have nothing against individual acts of daring. But the flaw in this strategy is the failure to engage in long-term community-based organizing. There is no way that a few isolated individuals, no matter how brave, can bring about the massive social change necessary to save the planet. So we began to organize with local people, planning our logging blockades around issues that had local community support. We also began to build alliances with progressive timber workers based on our common interests against the big corporations. As our successes grew, more women and more people with families and roots in the community began calling themselves Earth Firsters in our area.

But as our exposure and influence grew, so did the use of violence to repress us. And in this far-flung, rural, timber-dependent area, it was easy to get away with. At one demonstration an angry logger punched a 50-year-old non-violent woman so hard that she was knocked cold and her nose was broken. In another incident, my car was rammed from behind Karen-Silkwood style by the same logging truck that we had blockaded less than 24 hours earlier. My car was totaled and my children and I and the other Earth Firsters who were riding with us ended up in the hospital. In both these cases, as in other incidents of violence against us, local police refused to arrest, prosecute, or even investigate our assaulters.

Earth First! had never initiated any violence. But neither did we publicly associate our movement with an overt non-violence code. After all, that would contradict the he-man image that Earth First! was founded upon. Yet I did not see how we could face the increasingly volatile situation on the front lines without declaring and enforcing our non-violence. And, considering the rate at which the trees were falling and the overwhelming power of the timber corporations, I did not see how we could save the forest with just our small rural population and the small group of Earth First!

So, drawing on the lessons of the Civil Rights Movement, we put out a nationwide call for Freedom Riders for the Forest to come to Northern California and engage in non-violent mass actions to stop the slaughter of the redwoods. We called the campaign Redwood Summer, and, as it became clear that we were successfully drawing national interest and building the infrastructure to handle the influx, the level of repression escalated again.

As Redwood Summer approached, I began to receive a series of increasingly frightening written death threats, obviously written in the interest of Big Timber. The most frightening of these was a photo of me playing music at a demonstration, with a rifle scope and cross-hairs superimposed on my face and a yellow ribbon (the timber industry's symbol) attached. When I asked the local police for help they said: "We don't have the manpower to investigate. If you turn up dead, then we'll investigate." When I complained to the county Board of Supervisors they replied, "You brought it on yourself, Judi." Finally, on May 24, 1990, as I was driving through Oakland on a concert tour to promote Redwood Summer, a bomb exploded under my car seat. I remember my thoughts as it ripped through me. I thought "This is what men do to each other in wars."

The bomb was meant to kill me, and it nearly did. It shattered my pelvis and left me crippled for life. My organizing companion, Darryl Cherney, who was riding with me in the car, was also injured, although not as seriously. Then, adding to the outrage, police and FBI moved in within minutes and arrested me and Darryl, saying that it was our bomb and we were knowingly carrying it. For eight weeks, they slandered

us in the press, attempting to portray us as violent and discredit Redwood Summer, until they were finally forced to drop the charges for lack of evidence. But to this day, no serious investigation of the bombing has been conducted, and the bomber remains at large.

There were indications in advance that the attack on me was misogynist as well as political. For example, one of the death threats described us as "whores, lesbians, and members of N.O.W." But soon after the bombing, a letter was received that left no doubt. It was signed by someone calling himself the Lord's Avenger, and it took credit for the bombing. It described the bomb in exact detail and explained in chilling prose why the Lord's Avenger wanted me dead.

It was not just my "paganism" and defense of the forest that outraged him. The Lord's Avenger also recalled an abortion clinic defense that I had led years ago. "I saw Satan's flames shoot forth from her mouth her eyes and ears, proving forever that this was no Godly Woman, no Ruth full of obedience to procreate and multiply the children of Adam throughout the world as is God's will. 'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence (Timothy 2: 1 I).'"

Other misogynist hate literature about me was also distributed while I lay devastated in the hospital. The worst was from the Sahara Club, an anti-environmental group that wrote in its newsletter: "BOMB THAT CROTCH! Judi Bari, the Earth First! bat slug who blew herself halfway to hell and back while transporting a bomb in her Subaru, held a press conference in San Francisco. ... Bari, who had her crotch blown off, will never be able to reproduce again. We're just trying to figure out what would volunteer to inseminate her if she had all her parts. The last we heard, Judi and her friends were pouting and licking their wounds."

Meanwhile, out in the forest, Redwood Summer went on without me. Before the bombing I was one of a very few women who had taken a prominent leadership role in Earth First! But after the bombing, it was the women who rose to take my place. Redwood Summer was the feminization of Earth First!, with 3/4 of the leadership made up of women. Our past actions in the redwood region had drawn no more than 150 participants. But 3,000 people came to Redwood Summer, blocking logging operations and marching through timber towns in demonstrations reminiscent of those against racism in the South. And despite incredible tension and provocation, and despite the grave violence done to me, Earth First! maintained both our presence and our non-violence throughout the summer.

Being the first women-led action, Redwood Summer has never gotten the respect it deserves from the old guard of Earth First! But it has profoundly affected the movement in the redwood region. It brought national and international attention to the slaughter of the redwoods. The 2,000-year-old trees of Headwaters Forest, identified, named and made an issue of by Earth First!, are now being preserved largely due to our actions. The legacy of our principled and non-violent stand in Redwood Summer has gained us respect in our communities, and allowed us to continue and build our local movement. And our Earth First! group here, recently renamed Ecotopia Earth First!, is probably the only truly gender-balanced group I have ever worked in, now equally led by strong women and feminist men.

I believe that the reason I was subjected to such excessive violence was not just what I was saying, but the fact that a woman was saying it. I recently attended a workshop in Tennessee on violence and harassment in the environmental movement. There were 32 people in the circle, drawn from all over the country. As we each told our tale, I was struck by the fact that the most serious acts of violence had all been done to women. And of course this is no surprise. Because it is the hatred of feminine, which is the hatred of life, that has helped bring about the destruction of the planet. And it is the strength of women that can restore the balance we need to survive.