Politics of Environmental Issues

Liberating nature

I. Environmentalists tend to be divided into two camps

A. Those who argue that it is in the best interests of humankind to protect the environment.

B. Those who argue that nature has rights which humans, as both the primary violators and moral agents on earth, should respect and uphold.

II. Those who live in the second camp have sought both a moral philosophy and a justification for attacking the legal and legislative instruments of what they consider the oppression of nature.

III. Many environmentalists have looked to Thoreau for their justification of civil disobedience.

A. Thoreau's refusal to pay Massachusetts tax and his willingness to go to jail for it is looked on as one of the classical gestures of the American tradition of nonviolent civil disobedience.

B. However, on at least one occasion, Thoreau seemed to endorse what today's radical environmentalists would call ecological sabotage.

1. Thoreau objected to a new dam on the Concord river that prevented shad from completing their annual spawning run.

2. He was apparently angry enough to contemplate violent action writing 'I am one with thee, and who knows what may avail a crowbar against that Billerica dam?'


A. In this book he argues that "the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human.

B. He suggests that with rise of Western civilization has also given rise to an obsession with hierarchy and the mechanisms of power politics and power economics. These mechanisms have made possible the domination, oppression and exploitation of women by men, of the young by the old, one ethnic group by another and the poor by the rich.
C. As early as 1965, Bookchin linked anarchism and ecology. He believed that both stressed the equal value of every part of the community and the necessity of maximizing individual freedom so that every component can reach its potential.

D. Bookchin, like the "deep ecologists" he preceded, criticized the American Conservation and environmental movements. He was one of the first radical environmentalists and a self-professed revolutionary.

E. He specifically rejected those who thought that they could save the world by banning aerosol cans or sponsoring Earth Day cleanups. He felt that anti-pollution campaigns did not address the real problem.

F. He argued that environmentalism does not bring into question the underlying notion of the present society that man must dominate nature; it seeks to facilitate domination by developing techniques for diminishing the hazards caused by domination.

G. The only meaningful, long-term solution for Bookchin was a holistic, environmental ethic that has as its basis respect for all people and all nature. Given this new environmental ethic, 'ecoanarchists' could tear down the old order and erect the new.

V. Herbert Marcuse was the one of the first to decry nature as humanity's slave and to use the phrase 'the liberation of nature'.

A. He argued that capitalism reduces both nature and people to raw materials with strictly utilitarian values.

B. He believed that capitalism was on its way out and that the coming revolution would bring about universal liberation.

C. He also believed that everything existed first and foremost for its own sake.

VI. Edward A. Abbey was perhaps the most visible spokesman for the liberation of nature in the 1970's and 80's.

A. He wrote a book entitled 'Desert Solitaire' in 1968, largely a group of essays about his experiences as an employee of the National Park Service in lonely outposts in the desert Southwest. The book attracted attention because of its resolute defense of the wilderness.

B. In 1975 Abbey wrote a novel called "The Monkey Wrench Gang". It is the source of the term 'monkeywrenching'. The book (a work of fiction) chronicled the activities of a small group of desert-lovers who try to throw a monkey wrench into the gears of modern American environmental
exploitation. They attack bulldozers, railways and contemplate blowing up the Glen Canyon Dam to liberate the Colorado River.

C. The characters in the book resolved not to kill people, but their commitment to the rights of nature bring them to the brink of killing.

D. Abbey clearly fantasized about pro-environment sabotage himself because he felt that it was the only effective way to stop what he regarded as morally wrong.

E. He argues that "the logical extension of the traditional Christian ethic goes beyond the narrowly human to include the living creatures that share the planet with us and to the nonliving, the inorganic, to the springs, streams, lakes, rivers and oceans, to the winds and clouds and the air, to the very rocks which form the foundation of the land, to the hills, mountains, swamps, deserts, plains and seashores.

F. Abbey also believed that humans have no right to use more than a portion of the planet and that they are already using more than their share. He defended reasonable levels of human impact on the environment but placed nature on a moral par with (if not above) human beings, who had "multiplied to the swarming stage" and become "Man the Pest".

VII. Peter Singer is perhaps the most outspoken supporter of animal liberation.

A. In 1979 in his book "Practical Ethics", he asks what an ethical person should do when confronted with the abuse of animals.
   1. He argues that law and ethics are distinct
   2. The abuse of animals for example may be legal but morally wrong.
   3. Yet the law carries moral weight, particularly in government by the majority, the deliberate violation of the law can not be taken lightly.

B. He suggests that the first recourse should be to try to change offensive laws or enact new, protective ones.

C. If this is not possible he argues "we must assess each case on its own merits, in order to see if the reasons for disobeying outweighs the reasons for obedience"

D. In effect Singer argues for ethical relativism, in which the context of an action determines its moral status.

E. He believes that some situations justify nonviolent civil disobedience arguing that passive resistance, and the willingness to accept punishment for it, dramatizes an evil while at the same time acknowledging the prevailing political system. Situations in which illegal action is morally appropriate he
suggests are few and far between.

F. Specifically addressing the issue of abuse of animals in laboratories and on farms. Singer contends that violence against property, as when groups break into labs to free captive animals, can only be justified if the liberators regard animal oppression as an intolerable moral wrong; if no human was killed or injured during the raid; and if, as a consequence of the action, significant pressure could be applied to public attitude and governmental policy.

VIII. Paul Watson is described as the "most famous eco-radical in the world"

A. Watson participated in the formation of Greenpeace and in the mid-1970s led open-ocean demonstrations against Russian whalers.

B. In 1976 and 77, he turned his attention to the hunting of harp seals off Labrador.

1. he sprayed dye on the pups
2. covered pups with his body to prevent their clubbing
3. he handcuffed himself to a winch cable used to lift the pelts to the factory ship
   a) for this the sealers doused him in the icy waters, dragging him through piles of seal carcasses, leaving him unconscious on the ice.

C. He was then voted out of Greenpeace for violating Canadian laws and for allegedly engaging in violent activities

D. He formed his own organizations, Earthforce (1977) and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (1979).

E. At the end of 1978 he acquired a ship which he named Sea Shepherd. In 1979 he used the Sea Shepherd to ram a pirate Whaling Ship.

F. In 1983 he was arrested by the Canadian Coast Guard, fined and jailed

G. In 1986, members of his Sea Shepherd organization sabotaged and Icelandic whale processing center and sunk two whaling ships at Reykjavik.

IX. Cleveland Amory is a well known social historian with many friends among the rich and powerful. He formed Cleveland Amory's Fund for Animals in the 1970's.

A. Amory funded Watson's Sea Shepherd expeditions

B. He used the influence of female entertainers to change people's attitudes concerning the wearing of furs.
X. John C. Lilly, was a neurophysiologist who began studying dolphins in 1955. He came to some startling conclusions regarding the dolphins brain.

A. One of Lilly's books mad the point explicit: he considers dolphins the "humans of the sea".

B. He came to the conclusion in the early 1960's that ethical principles, such as the Golden Rule only made sense when the "others" include other species and parts of the universe.

C. By 1967 Lilly had stopped his research, believing that his captivity of the dolphins amounted to a concentration camp.

D. He proposed a laboratory tank with free access to the open ocean, so that the dolphins could come and go as they pleased, making them voluntary collaborators with humans in the research process.

XI. Henry Spira was a New York high-school teacher who had worked in the civil rights and labor movements of the 1960's. After reading Peter Singer's essay on animal liberation he became an eco-activist.

A. In 1976 he challenged the American Museum of Natural History's research program involving the behavior of deliberately maimed cats. (the feds ultimately withdrew support).

B. He next protested the Draize Ophthalmic Irritancy Test, in which cosmetics are dropped into the eyes of rabbits to assess irritability which, in many cases causes blindness. He took out a full page ad in the New York Times showing a blinded white rabbit with the caption, "how many rabbits does Revlon blind for beauty's sake?"

C. His next target was the LD (lethal dose) 50 test which took the lives of an estimated five million laboratory animals annually. The US FDA withdrew its requirement for the data the test provided.

XII. Alex Pacheco, was co-founder in 1980 of the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). He gained entrance as a volunteer to Dr. Edward Taub's Institute for Behavioral Research in Silver Springs MD. His testimony and photographs convinced Maryland authorities to act under the state's Animal Cruelty law. Taubs monkey's were confiscated and convicted on minor charges. Taub ultimately lost his funding and his institute.

A. Pacheco and PETA also released sixty hours of videotape documenting research conditions at the University of Pennsylvania's Head Injury Lab. The
tapes depicted improperly anesthetized primates writhing in pain and researchers casually smoking as they operated on fully conscious subjects. NIH withdrew funding and the lab was closed.

XIII. Dave Foreman is one of the most influential members of Earth First! and leaders of the "no-compromise environmental movement".

A. Foreman attempted in 1985 to systematize environmental militancy in a book entitled "Ecodefense: A field Guide to Monkeywrenching". In the book he gives detailed instructions on treespiking, destroying roads, decommissioning heavy equipment, pulling survey stakes, trashign billboards and other skills.

B. He argues that monkeywrenching not only can be morally justified but is morally required.

C. Foreman has also argued that everything alive defends its vital interests, violently if necessary. One hundred percent non-violence denies the most vital animal instinct to fight back.

D. The Earth Firsters have:

   1. thrown themselves in front of logging an mining trucks
   2. joined hands around trees to prevent them from being cut down
   3. sponsored sit-ins in the top of 250 foot virgin fir trees in Oregon.
   4. driven thousands of steel spikes into trees scheduled for cutting
   5. diverted liquid toxic waste from a U.S. Steel plant to the CEO's office.
   6. destroyed roadside bill boards
   7. dismantled electrical powerlines

D. Earth First has also had to come to grips with the legitimacy of violence against property and against their human opponents

   1. Several Earth Firsters were almost killed when they were purposefully buried in a pile of dirt by a bulldozer operator.

   2. In 1987, the operator of a sawmill in northern California, was almost decapitated when a spiked log caused a fifteen foot section of blade to break off and strike his face.