

Monkeywrenching:

BY CM

(This article excerpted from The Earth First! Reader: Ten Years of Radical Environmentalism.)

Our duty is to destroy billboards.

—DOC SARVIS

Over the past year or so, a number of groups and individual activists associated with Earth First! have distanced themselves from the radical environmental banner, ostensibly over the issue of ecotage. They argue that they can more effectively inform and influence the public if they don't have to bear the spike-ridden cross of vindicating this controversial practice. There is no point in disputing this reasoning. The field of environmental activism is broad enough to let each plow his or her own plot (though some of us would rather put the farm out of business and encourage natural succession). No one is quarreling with the goal of informing the American public on the environmental cataclysm now taking place, and doing so without getting bogged down in arguments about property rights, law and order, and violence, if this is possible.

Nevertheless, the fact that monkeywrenching looms so large in these considerations calls for an appraisal of its effectiveness, a report card to compare with less direct methods of expressing environmental discontent.

The controversy over monkeywrenching is nothing new. In 1982 the editor of *Earth First!* (then the mildly named *Earth First! Newsletter*) resigned over EF!'s sympathetic coverage of monkeywrenching. Gary Snyder, an early supporter of EF!, also criticized ecotage. Over the years disputes have flared up intermittently during particular campaigns between those committed to civil disobedience and those using ecotage. The controversy is likely to stay with us until industrial society crashes to the ground and happily makes the question moot.

Meanwhile, it's fair to ask: What has monkeywrenching accomplished? The answer is a great deal more than is obvious.

Bad accounting aside, reliable estimates do exist for the cost of ecotage to the industries and government agencies now in control of our public lands. A forest policy analyst for the Association of Oregon Loggers and its unintentionally self-defining alter ego Prevent Ecological Sabotage Today (PEST) estimates that the average monkeywrenching incident causes \$60,000 in damages, including equipment loss and downtime (but not law enforcement investigation and insurance). This accords with what most newspaper accounts, Forest Service special agents and ecoteurs say.

According to a timber industry

spokesman, an average tree-spiking incident costs about \$15,000 assuming the spikes are found and removed, or, more likely nowadays, marked with tape to allow loggers to cut around them (thus many small nails placed in a helix pattern around the tree are more effective than a few large ones). The above estimate also includes the value of the wood in the larger stumps the loggers have to leave to avoid the spikes. The cost goes up astronomically if a spike hits a bandsaw in the mill. The saws themselves typically cost \$1,500-5,000. A damaged saw can be changed in an hour or so (assuming a replacement is on hand). The big expense comes if the saw shatters and shrapnel flies into the head-rig. Head-rig repairs can cost \$20,000.

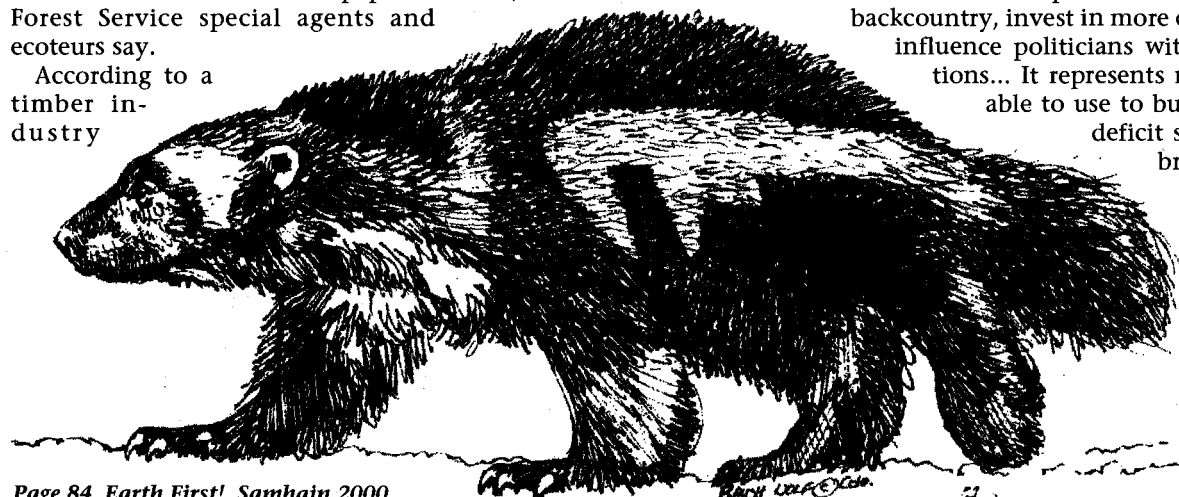
The actual cost of an average monkeywrenching incident climbs to well over \$100,000 when you figure in police investigation, private security, insurance hikes and the fatuous efforts of groups like the Mountain States Legal Foundation (whose lawyers, if they follow the usual practice of double billing, will run up an account of over half a million dollars on this public-spirited project, subsidized in part by taxpayers). When you consider that the typical monkeywrenching incident probably costs the ecoteur no more than \$100 and a night's sleep, this is a remarkably cost-effective way to register one's disapproval of present resource industry practices.

Timber industry spokesmen suggest that one out of every two monkeywrenching incidents goes unreported. These tend not to get into the papers since monkeywrenchers realized a while back that once the incident reaches the media the Forest Service will stop at nothing to go through with the sale in order to show that it is in control of the public lands. And, of course, this estimate doesn't include incidents on private and state lands.

Taking all this into consideration, ecotage in the United States today is probably costing government and industry \$20-25 million annually. This represents money industry was not

able to use to deforest public lands, sink oil wells in the backcountry, invest in more destructive equipment, influence politicians with campaign contributions... It represents money the FS was not able to use to build new roads, or hire deficit sales or hire more brutal special agents.

People argue that corporations can simply pass this cost on to their customers and continue their destructive practices. Since no market is completely elastic, this isn't entirely true. But even if



An Appraisal

is substantially so, a higher cost for wood products will inevitably mean that fewer wood products are bought—according to the vast and sublime free-market paradigm we are all withering under—which is ultimately the point. Furthermore, sometimes monkeywrenching as an economic weapon is completely effective: When in 1985 ecoteurs firebombed the \$250,000 wood-chipper in Hawaii that was grinding rainforest into fuel for sugar mills (without a permit and in violation of a court order), the company went bankrupt.

Thus if the sole purpose of ecotage is to make an adverse financial impact on government agencies and their resource industry clientele, it must be judged a success. This is true even if it is looked at in isolation from a larger strategy involving civil disobedience, legal remedies and public outreach.

Now that the risk of ecotage is publicly known, we can also speculate that timber company CEOs are taking the cost of ecotage into consideration when a sale of old growth or other controversial ecological matter comes before the board. Failure to do so could get them in trouble with their stockholders. The ability of monkeywrenching to intimidate and unnerve the bureaucratic and the plutocratic mind cannot be measured but likely is significant.

Where ecotage isn't saving biological diversity directly, it is at least making biodiversity an issue. It can therefore be an important part of a larger campaign. The radical environmental message, whether concerning old growth or dolphins, would not be receiving the widespread coverage it is today were it not for the "publicity value" of monkeywrenching. Most of the coverage EF! has received over the years in *Esquire*, *The Amicus Journal*, *The Nation*, local newspapers, etc., has concentrated on ecotage, often favorably or at least without overt condemnation.

Monkeywrenching seems to strike a cord with many modern Americans who, for different reasons probably, would also like to get back at the arbitrary powers that dominate their lives.

Regardless of sentiments pro and con, by its very controversial nature, ecotage makes biodiversity a matter of public interest and debate. It takes seemingly obscure environmental issues out of the dark of scientific calculations into the limelight of individual passion and commitment. Even when the media distorts ecotage by emphasizing its unlawfulness rather than its motives, it has been, like civil disobedience, an important element in the broader campaign to rally public opposition to wilderness destruction. For instance, in news coverage

of the old-growth controversy, the subject of ecotage inevitably comes up, along with civil disobedience, and this activism clearly attracted the coverage in the first place.

This is what monkeywrenching is doing right now. Whether it should be doing more or less or something different is another topic. Unquestionably it has over the past 10 years revolutionized the way public lands policy is made in this country. It has upset the unhealthy *modus vivendi* that had developed among industry, moderate environmental groups, and the government agencies in charge of our wildlands. No longer can the Forest Service or BLM act like a band of medieval forest meisters without fearing the bad publicity (a bureaucrat's one unforgivable sin) of a tree-spike or a de-flagging.

The timber industry is now criticizing the FS for not acting even more one-sidedly for the corporations' interest. The mainstream environmental organizations are beginning to be embarrassed into addressing issues their professional leaders would never have broached if left to their own devices (martini glass, three-piece suit, and half a loaf).

What monkeywrenching isn't doing is hurting people, despite its media image. Whether ecotage is "violent" in itself is an ethical question best left to an individual's own conscience. The ethical rationales for ecotage have been thoroughly discussed by others, so I won't repeat them. But it is a fact that there has not been one authenticated incident in which ecotage caused significant injury to a person. The case inevitably reported as the evil fruit of ecotage is the infamous spike that seriously injured a Louisiana Pacific mill-worker in Northern California two years ago [1981]. There is, however, no evidence monkeywrenchers were involved. On the contrary, ecoteurs would have notified the company, and no notification was given. Possibly a disgruntled LP employee—and there are many of them—put the spike in; or possibly LP itself did to get publicity, which it

certainly got, often of the most exaggerated kind (I talked with a woman who said the spike killed five people). Or, ironically, as one newspaper suggested, a radical Republican, whose libertarianism was outraged by logging near his property line, may have done it. How many bad motives can dance on the head of this problematical spike? No one knows.

Jay Hair, executive director of the National Wildlife Federation, once said he couldn't tell the difference between destroying a river and destroying a bulldozer. Blessed with a more conventional sense of values, ecoteurs can, and as the record indicates, they have also fastidiously respected the difference between destroying property and hurting innocent people.

This isn't to say ecotage is a panacea, or that we don't need other people doing other things. No one knows for sure what it will take to save the natural world from the juggernaut of industrialism. But one thing is sure: If we fail and the fragile web of the biosphere unravels, it will not be because there were too many ecoteurs pounding spikes into trees, burning bulldozers and making the guilty squirm.

