



# THE GRIZZLY DEN

# Thoughtful Radicalism

by Howie Wolke

author's note: The description below of a felony is pure fiction and is for entertainment purposes only. For the discussion that follows, "radicalism" means monkeywrenching (ecological sabotage), various forms of civil disobedience (road blockades, illegal occupations, tree sitting, etc.), and even legal demonstrations that promote protecting all remaining wildlands and restoring much that has been degraded.

Three men in a rusty foreign car drank a warm sixpack of Pabst as they drove down the Limestone Creek Road in Wyoming's Bridger-Teton National Forest. Behind them were the peaks of the Gros Ventre Range, glowing the later afternoon sun. Earlier, the three men and a 7 year old boy had stood among those peaks baked by the intense June sun in a world of wet snowbanks, meltwater, bare rock and glacier lilies: a "Sierra Club Calendar wilderness" of glaciated brilliance, one that even the Forest Service concurred to protect.

The driver, a slightly overweight university professor, was a thoughtful man whose son it was that had succumbed to sleep. As the pitiful machine lumbered down the gravel road, all three were admiring the adjacent rich habitat of Mountain Sagebrush, grass, Douglas-fir, Subalpine fir, Lodgepole Pine, and Quaking Aspen. This was the unprotected roadless country beneath the peaks; the land of multiple use where the Forest Service proposed logging, oil rigs, and new roads.

In 1980 the blasting of seismic crews was ubiquitous in western Wyoming. Roads and oil rigs followed the seismic crews deep into the wilds; the rigs pierced the earth by pulverizing thousands of feet of sedimentary rock. Big oil was looking for natural gas in the Wyoming wilds. But this day was Sunday and local seismic workers were off, hungover from a typically drunken Saturday night in Jackson.

At once, the two young men noticed the "Doghouse" a hundred or so yards from the road. The small building contained a seismic crew's "nerve center," where high tech devices recorded the rumblings of a bruised Earth and translated those rumblings to a potential bottom line calculated in some sterile boardroom hundreds or thousands of miles distant: in horrible places such as Houston, New York, and Casper. The devices inside the locked building were worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. The young men told the professor to stop the car, let them out, continue down the road and then return to pick them up in a half hour. With little hesitancy, he obliged. In broad daylight with little forethought and no planning, with stealth but no tools, the two men committed a felony. They broke into the building and attacked the computers, switches, dials and data with the appropriate available technology: rocks. Within minutes, the damage was done; the ecoteurs crossed the shadowed sagebrush meadow, met the nervous professor along the road, and were in the tourist mecca of Jackson by dark.

As ecological calamity unravels the living fabric of the Earth, environmental radicalism has become both common and necessary.

But if lacking a sound ethical and biological basis, environmental radicalism can be a double-edged sword: a threat to the enemy, yes, but a danger to its wielder, too. In order to avoid self-defeating radicalism, I suggest a commitment to what I simply call "thoughtful radicalism." The 4 cornerstones of thoughtful radicalism are: 1) Thwart. 2) Protect. 3) Restore. 4) Educate.

It is admittedly impossible for all radical actions — legal or not — to always build upon all 4 cornerstones. Sometimes, all you can hope for is to thwart, or perhaps to contribute to long-term protection for an area. But it is possible to always avoid regression. That means we should consider both the short and long term consequences of our actions. For instance, generally avoid monkeywrenching a project if a legal victory to stop it seems at hand. Monkeywrenching in that situation might impair public support for long term protection. Don't damage any cornerstones.

Education is the most fundamental of the cornerstones, and it's the one most important when we look beyond the short term crises that so often co-opt our efforts. It's also the easiest cornerstone to neglect or subvert. Any action, however radical or illegal, should avoid unnecessary, juvenile or thoughtless acts that might prevent open-minded people from heeding our message. Remember, we want to convince the populace (70% of whom now consider themselves to be "environmentalists," according to pollster George Gallup), or at least elicit their sympathies. The stupidest thing that radical activists can do is to appear as common criminals. That's the fastest way to negate education.

For instance, when carrying out civil disobedience or monkeywrenching, don't dilute your message by committing extraneous illegal acts. There are great philosophical differences among radical environmentalists regarding laws and lawbreaking in general. Regardless of those differences, though, getting busted for grass, getting stopped for DUI, or getting caught shoplifting will only convince the public that radical activists are a bunch of anarchist hoologans with no sense of decency or respect for others. Regardless of how badly you'd like to rip off that store with the anti-wilderness sign; regardless of how badly you'd like to slip out of the Exxon Valdez station with a full tank and a full wallet, do it on your own time if you must; avoid such temptation when carrying out or preparing to carry out radical environmental defense. Consider the impact upon those we're trying to reach. Focus.

Moreover, we want the public to focus not on our style but on the substance of our message. With substance in mind (not the controlled kind), it is often good strategy for radical activists (this generally does not pertain to monkeywrenchers) to wear fairly conventional attire. Again, the public needs to learn about the ecological atrocity; we don't want undue attention diverted to the unusual dress or lifestyle of action-participants. Swallow your pride and leave your hippie or 1830s mountain man duds at home. Ecosystems are more important than your personal identity. Again, focus.

Furthermore, since we want the public to get the message, don't confuse the issue at hand with other issues, no matter how dear to your heart they may be. In Earth First! the issue is wilderness/biodiversity/planetary survival. At radical actions promoting natural diversity, don't confuse the issue by promoting legalization of dope, the right to burn a flag, women's rights, racial equality, tax protests, nuclear disarmament, or anything else extraneous to the particular issue. Do we have legitimate feelings about these things? Certainly. Are nuclear weapons, unfair taxes, and racism symptoms of a thoroughly corrupt and destructive system? Of course they are. Nonetheless, do we want those who might politically differ from us but agree with us on wilderness and planetary survival to jump on our bandwagon? Emphatically yes! Once more, just say "No" to your ego. Focus.

Thoughtful radicalism means that spokespersons (and ideally all who are involved) must be knowledgeable. Quoting biologists is often effective. Even better is to include a reputable biologist as a spokesperson. Publicize the "why" as well as the "what." Prepare an informative packet for demonstrations. Thoughtful radicalism will create public support for wildness and natu-

ral diversity. Occasionally that will contribute to thwarting a project or to gaining long term protection for an area. Thoughtful radicalism can also lay the groundwork for future restoration of damaged wild places. Again: Thwart, Protect, Restore and Educate. Whenever and however we decide to break the law in defense of the planet, we must do so without egocentrism, and with clarity of purpose. That is, focus. Understand the issue and leave your baggage at home.

How does the episode at the beginning of this essay relate to the 4 cornerstones of thoughtful radicalism? On that June afternoon the three radical activists (thwarted, at least for a while, destruction — oil exploration in roadless habitat. Moreover, monkeywrenching in general can thwart many destructive but economically marginal projects by adding significantly to their costs (read *Ecodefense* for a discussion of this topic). In itself, the men's act of planetary defense was probably neutral regarding long term wilderness restoration. The action, however, certainly helped incite a polarized atmosphere which contributed to the eventual designation of an incomplete but substantial Gros Ventre Wilderness. Moreover, social polarization regarding wilderness in the Jackson Hole area has created at least some diffidence in the Forest Service's desire to wreck habitat. Regarding protection, I give the monkeywrenchers a slight plus. Unfortunately, though, the local media reported the act as "vandalism." The ecoteurs should have carefully and anonymously publicized why they demolished the "Doghouse." Crudely put, seismic exploration had opened the door for the throbbing organ of an industrial dragon planning to rape the Gros Ventre roadless area. Though they could have said it more gently, the saboteurs failed to educate.

The monkeywrenchers who thwarted the seismic operation acted spontaneously. They had simply been hiking. There was no planning and little consideration of the potential consequences. But the men knew the intent of the industrial dragon, and they acted with a focused purpose: to damage a vulnerable appendage of the monster; to emasculate its lust for unprotected wilderness. Spontaneous monkeywrenching is ok. Dragonian claws are everywhere, suddenly emerging at unexpected times and places. Occasionally, ecodefenders have little choice but to seize the moment and act.

Should illegal acts of environmental defense be undertaken only as a last resort when all methods of legal resistance fail? Not just no, but *Hell no!* Again, the claws of the mutated beast are everywhere. To neutralize opposition, a primary strategy for agencies such as the Forest Service and BLM is to wear us out with process. Assaults on natural diversity are so overwhelmingly common, so multidimensional that it is impossible for activists to monitor — let alone resist — more than a tiny fraction of threats to wildlands. Hearings, negotiating sessions, EISs, appeals, lawsuits, and informational (propaganda) workshops are time consuming and expensive for volunteer activists, yet represent bread and butter for bureaucrats and corporate officers. Remember that Thursday night when you wanted to read at home after a hard day's work or maybe watch your kid play basketball, but instead you went to that wilderness meeting? You got the shaft, but the Freddie got overtime pay. And you wrote the check!

By submerging ourselves in the process; indeed, by making an effort to exhaust the process prior to conducting illegal but moral resistance, we guarantee more fodder for the dragon. Yes, we need more people working within the system because occasionally that succeeds. But we also need more focused monkeywrenching and more civil disobedience to fend off the dragon, even when the individuals involved make little or no attempt to spar with the beast in its own arena.

Also, there's an inherent danger in committing civil disobedience or monkeywrenching after staggering through the confusing maze of the "legitimate" process. Chances are, after you've spent time, energy and money on meetings, phone calls, and appeals *ad nauseum*, all to no avail, you'll be quite justifiably angry. If you're like me, you'll be thinking *REVENGE*. Such a mindset, though natural and occasionally stimulating, is not conducive to clarity of purpose: that is, to conducting a well-focused effort to thwart, protect, restore, and educate. Though I'm not certain of this, I suspect that serious radical activists — monkeywrenchers in particular — should generally avoid work-

ing within the system altogether.

In 1986 I spent 6 months in a county jail. I was a convicted remorseless monkeywrencher who had gone through all available legal channels in a futile attempt to thwart an oil drilling and logging project in Wyoming's Grayback Ridge roadless area. The final straw was a meeting at which Bridger-Teton National Forest Supervisor Reid Jackson refused Chevron Oil's offer to restore and reclaim the new road and drillsite if the well proved dry. The supervisor wanted access for future below cost timber sales in the wildlife-rich area. This situation illustrates the pitfall of "frustration monkeywrenching." On the day I got busted, my cohort and I had spotted the full-time guard (the project had already been de-surveyed twice, though, of course, not by me) before he spotted us. Nonetheless, we unwisely decided to continue to monkeywrench. We should have waited until night. Or until Sunday, when the guard's hangover would have impaired him. Or until we had another cohort to monitor the guard. But I was angry. I remembered the time consuming sessions, the paperwork, the late night phone calls, and the Forest Service's stubborn refusal to compromise. Pure anger can result in a lack of focus on the 4 cornerstones of thoughtful radical activism, and that can be dangerous. A pissed off monkeywrencher can be careless. That mindset cost this one 6 months.

There is, of course, a bigger question that I've thus far avoided. Implicit in my plea for thoughtful radicalism is an assumption that there are limitations on what ecodefenders can accomplish. If, however, we see ourselves as a rising power capable of bringing the industrial system to its knees before it squelches all that remains wild, then perhaps we should do as follows: Lash out at every offensive aspect of society at once. Decry all laws as unjust and blatantly break them. Be wild and radical to encourage rebellion for its own sake. Dress like punks, hippies, or Neanderthals at demonstrations because conventional attire is worn by land-raping pillagers. Most important, because everything is connected to everything else, and because planetary demise is the result of a complex tangle of greed, injustice and overpopulation, lash out at everything — attack the whole enchelada because it's all equally rotten. That's one way of emphasizing our disgust with the insanity of a world paradigm based upon consumption, greed, and growth for its own malignant sake.

But if we assume, as I do, that for a while at least we're stuck with the dragon, an insatiable force that can be slowed but not entirely subdued, then focus where it is occasionally vulnerable, and where its slime-encrusted claws are directly assaulting nature. Convince our fellow humans by being thoughtful yet unyielding that we must radically alter the way our species treats its embryonic home, the wilderness, and the rest of this beleaguered planet.

Quite honestly, I doubt that anything, including thoughtful radicalism, can bridge the gap between saving some wilderness today and creating a society that lives within its ecological means: humans as members, not outlaws, of the biotic community. I doubt even more strongly, though, the ultimate effectiveness of unfocused organized tantrums. Thoughtless radicalism will save little that remains wild now. Despite the insanity of modern consumerism, shopping mall "puke-ins" don't educate; they alienate. A bunch of naked anarchists smoking dope at a wilderness demonstration will neither speed the demise of the industrial dragon nor save a besieged roadless area. Neither will militant vegetarians who won't work with us omnivores to save wild country.

The demise of the beast will, I venture, occur via the ungodly weight of its own momentum. Education today will increase the chance of creating an ecologically sustainable society after the inevitable demise of today's biological aberration. What will eventually replace today's dragonian madness is anybody's guess. It's my guess, though, that thoughtful radicalism will save some biotic diversity in the short term, and allow more to be saved and restored for the longer run. Then, when the floundering beast finally, mercifully chokes in its own dung pile, there'll at least be some wilderness remaining as a seedbed for planet-wide recovery. Maybe even some Griz; some Flat-paired Three-toothed Land Snails, some Pallid Bats; some man-eating Tigers; some wild humans; and some living canyons like the Colorado's Glen. Some hope. And maybe even some human wisdom.

