

TREE SPIKING AND MORAL MATURITY

By George Wuerthner

This past spring the George Washington National Forest in Virginia received a letter which read:

Speaking on behalf of the trees, rocks, and wildlife of the George Washington National Forest, this is to inform you that approximately 40 pounds of spikes have been inserted in the trees at various locations in the Big Schloss Roadless Area. Good luck finding them. Good riddance to any saws that ever do find them.

Just a little insurance in case you had any plans to manage this roadless area in any way other than a wilderness.

The letter was signed by a group calling itself Rednecks for Wilderness.

Direct action is a new twist in the environmental movement. Rednecks for Wilderness spiked the trees to prevent the Forest Service from logging what is presently a roadless area. Basically, they feel the Forest Service has subverted its legislatively directed responsibility, and more importantly, its moral obligations to fairly evaluate the wilderness suitability of the nation's roadless lands and to protect those areas which deserve preservation. A similar incident of tree spiking occurred in Oregon's Willamette National Forest this past fall. The Forest Service offered a \$5000 reward for information leading to the capture and conviction of the culprits. The agency considers tree spiking a felony offense, ostensibly for "destroying government property" — in this case trees than were scheduled to be cut down in a proposed timber sale.

To the spikers, the real criminals were the logging companies and their lackeys, the Forest Service, who were destroying more than "government property"; they were cutting down a rich and diverse ecological heritage — the old growth forest ecosystem. Yet within the narrow definition of the law, tree spikers were clearly the law breakers.

There is a bit of absurdity in this situation. People who want to maintain an intact ecosystem are accused of "destroying property" by people who want to cut down the trees. These people, the Forest Service and lumber companies, see themselves as the sane, rational ones who are protecting the forest from crazy vandals like the Rednecks for Wilderness group.

viewpoint. These six stages are universal — you can find people of all six stages in all cultures. Growth depends upon intellectual development since the ability to discern subtle qualitative differences in motives and actions is necessary before a person can understand the rationale used for making any value judgments. But intellectual development alone will not necessarily result in a person of high moral standards.

Kohlberg's research involved presenting an imaginary moral problem to a cross section of people from different ages, education, and cultures. For example, one moral dilemma posed by Kohlberg involved asking people to imagine their wife or husband dying from a disease. The sole supplier of the drug which can cure the disease will only sell it for a large sum of money — more than the spouse can afford. Kohlberg then asks what the spouse should do and more importantly, why. Most people say the drug should be stolen, but depending upon their stage in intellectual and moral development, their reasons for stealing the drug differed substantially. In Kohlberg's first two stages, fear of punishment or selfish needs, dictates moral behavior. Intermediate levels, stages 3 and 4, show a progressive shift to a conformity with traditional roles and the preservation of social and legal order — even if the law is clearly unjust. This is the basic flag-waving law and order man. A man like Ronald Reagan. Most religions operate at this level. Morality is determined by an outside authority — God, in the case of Christianity. A person at the fifth stage of moral maturity is usually regarded as a standard liberal. He or she believes that unjust laws must be changed, but stops short of breaking a law. A stage five person works within the system and many of the leaders of national conservation groups would fit into this category. To an individual at the sixth and highest level, universal truths transcend any personal profit motive, adherence to a man-made law or outside authority. A stage six person holds her/himself accountable for his or her personal decisions. They believe unjust laws should be broken. They spike trees.

Ever since Henry David Thoreau wrote *Civil Disobedience*, there has been a stream of conservationists who have said, in one fashion or another, that legislative laws and selfish needs are

in our society. Next rights were conferred upon women and other minorities. A wife was no longer thought of as a man's property to do with as he pleased. This recognition of rights has even been extended beyond the human species. Family pets are now protected from inhumane treatment. The next major extension of rights is to the land. Such an extension does not necessarily involve a belief in mysticism. I have too much of the scientific background in me to genuinely believe that trees, rocks, and rivers have souls. But this is unimportant. What is important is that we treat these objects with the same degree of respect we extend to humans. (Perhaps judging from the way humans treat each other, we should hope for a greater degree of respect.) Land beaters should be no more tolerated than wife beaters.

Nonetheless, tree spiking, like the Boston Tea Party, Civil Rights sit-ins, and other forms of direct action, upset many people. Spiking trees not only upsets loggers, but even many environmental groups speak out harshly against such action as a threat to their credibility.

Most environmentalists fit Kohlberg's stage five level and feel that unjust laws should be changed but that until they are one is obliged to honor them. Kohlberg found that the actions of both stage one or two individuals and those at the highest level, six, could be remarkably similar. Thus tree spiking is either a rebellious action — just for the kicks — at a very low moral level (down with the actions of dirt bikers) or it is an act of the highest moral development. Which it is depends upon the motives of the individual. And because a person from a lower level of moral maturity can not understand the reasoning of a person from a higher level, a law and order stage four person will frequently lump the selfish motivations of criminals with the idealism of a stage six person. To a law and order man, tree spiking is no different than if a person cut down the trees and stole them from the Forest Service.

This leads to one of the greatest dilemmas facing the environmental movement and especially those of the highest levels of thought. If you argue for preservation of wilderness, wildlife, and natural ecosystems because you feel they deserve preservation in and of themselves, regardless of their utilitarian value to humans, you will be invit-

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What this exemplifies is the split in the values of conservationists and development interests. Frequently the two parties do not communicate. It is not that they don't try. But differences in their stages of moral maturity as defined by Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg may prevent the two sides from communicating effectively their respective views. Kohlberg's theory seeks to explain people's apparent evolution of moral growth which begins during youth and progresses to higher stages sometime in the late teens or early twenties. During the entire progression a person from a lower stage of maturity finds it impossible to understand the reasoning of individuals from a higher level. Most individuals never reach the highest two levels of Kohlberg's scale since it requires a willingness to accept responsibility for actions and decisions. (This is risky.)

As a result, the moral decisions of those at the highest stages are incomprehensible to the vast majority of people who never progress past the mid levels of moral maturity. I believe Kohlberg's theory nicely explains the almost complete lack of understanding that exists between those who wish to develop and control the earth's resources and those who advocate a slower, more careful, sensitive approach to any land/human relationship.

Kohlberg found that people go through a gradual growth in their ability to discern shades of gray or the complexity of any value judgment. This growth is sequential and has, according to Kohlberg, six fairly well defined stages from a primitive idea of justice to a sophisticated and complex moral

thority. A stage six person holds her/himself accountable for his or her personal decisions. They believe unjust laws should be broken. They spike trees.

Ever since Henry David Thoreau wrote *Civil Disobedience*, there has been a stream of conservationists who have said, in one fashion or another, that legislative laws and selfish needs are less significant than universally perceived truths. (Obviously, universal here does not mean that a large percentage of any society perceives these truths, but rather these truths are recognized by some individuals in all cultures and that they go beyond the "socially correct or culturally influenced values." A good example is that almost everywhere there is a recognition of some variation of the "golden rule.") One of which is the extension of "rights" to objects not usually thought to have rights. Many tree spikers would argue that the US Forest Service does not and can not "own" the old growth trees any more than a southern plantation owner could own slaves. They would argue that the Forest Service has an obligation to protect, not destroy, the forests whose fate they control. This is the essence of Aldo Leopold's essay *The Land Ethic*, where he calls for a land relationship which entails not only privileges, but also obligations. With the recognition of rights we treat these things with respect. Other conservation writers such as John Muir, Sigurd Olson, Robert Marshall, Olaus Murie, and David Brower all have written eloquently of the "rights" of trees, rivers, grizzly bears, mountains, meadows, and flowers to exist — regardless of their perceived value to human uses.

As there is a general progression in moral maturity within an individual, there can also be a gradual progression in the overall moral maturity of a culture. At the time of the American Revolution, not all men were as equal as was implied by the Declaration of Independence. It took a civil war to extend certain inalienable rights to all people

cut down the trees and stole them from the Forest Service.

This leads to one of the greatest dilemmas facing the environmental movement and especially those of the highest levels of thought. If you argue for preservation of wilderness, wildlife, and natural ecosystems because you feel they deserve preservation in and of themselves, regardless of their utilitarian value to humans, you will be inevitably talking only to yourself or to someone else who basically agrees with you. You will do nothing to convince a person from a lower stage in moral maturity that your proposal makes any sense unless you can show how it might benefit him or her, or at least humans in general. So we find environmentalists trying to protect roadless areas by arguing economics (deficit sales) or appealing to self interest or a wide spectrum of society (your elk hunting or fishing will decline), or even pointing out that allowing species to become extinct is irrational because one never knows what value it might have to humanity in the future. A person of the highest moral levels feels distinctly uncomfortable with these arguments, although I'm sure all of us have used them. Yet, it means sinking to their level. It falls far short of really expressing the values and ideals of those people with the highest moral values.

If my application of Kohlberg's theory is correct, then environmentalists will have to re-evaluate their long term goals and their expectations. If you expect to persuade anyone to preserve an area or animal, or to forego development, there may be no choice but to argue economics, self interest, and human use. This does not mean we should lose sight of our ideals or what we are after. In the long run, only a major philosophical shift in values will end up saving anything.

There is also a built-in contradiction in the values of people at Kohlberg's highest stages of development. Since the vast majority of any nation's people operate at lower levels of moral matur-

ity, any action which requires self motivation, self discipline and self direction will usually fail. People of high moral standards are inevitably surprised by this failure. The problem is that they expect the the same self restraint in behavior from all people as they impose upon themselves. They don't expect cheaters. (If this sounds like elitism, it is. Except that high moral character is available to anyone — if they are willing to accept the risks and make the effort.) A simple example of this can be seen in something trivial like littering. To most people of a high moral level, the idea of purposefully cluttering up a landscape with garbage is unthinkable. No matter how much inconvenience it may entail, a person has an obligation to pack out their garbage and not leave it lying around. This is not done out of fear of punishment or fines. It is not done because friends might disapprove. It is done out of respect for the land and the people who might follow, and a feeling that it is each person's responsibility to leave an area in as good or better condition than found.

One dilemma for people who would to apply universal truths to all situations is that not all people will act in a socially mature manner. Ideally, each individual, not some government or other outside authority, should be responsible for determination of one's own value system. But too few people are willing to formulate their own system of values. Instead they rely upon other authorities (hey, I don't make the rules), or religion (the devil made me do it), or social pressure (everyone else did it too), or just don't care how they may be infringing on the rights of others (go to hell, buddy).

I have no right to force someone to accept my vision of land and human relationship to it. On the other hand, I have an obligation to protect the land from misuse, just as a person has an obligation to protect their family from abuse or mistreatment. Tree spiking may be one way to fulfil this obligation. Yet, tree spiking does infringe upon the desires of the loggers to harvest trees. It may cost some people jobs just as the spouse who steals the drug to save their lover costs the druggist his profit. A tree spiker risks a felony offense to save the forest, not so much for their personal profit, but to preserve the "rights" of trees.

Tree spiking is only a last minute measure: a stalling tactic used to preserve options in the hope that an enlightened citizenry will one day appreciate more fully the need for the conservation of natural ecosystems. Tree spiking may be against the law, it may not be a rational response, but it may be the right thing to do. The right thing to do is to work towards the preservation of wilderness, wildlife, natural ecosystems and freedom. For without any one of these, all the others will be lost.

George Wuerthner is a student of forest ecology, a professional outdoor photographer, wilderness explorer and longtime conservation activist. He is currently crossing the Brooks Range of Alaska.