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Radical Environmentalism: From an Ethnographic and Historical Study to an Assessment of its Political, Ecological, and Moral Claims

In 1980 a small group of environmental activists in the United States established a radical movement they called “Earth First!” to capture their radical and biocentric moral vision. They believed that mainstream environmentalism was mired in anthropocentric values and had utterly failed to slow the global erosion of biological and cultural diversity. They argued that radical, illegal tactics were warranted. In the early years, some deployed civil disobedience and equipment sabotage in an effort to directly halt practices they considered environmentally destructive, while others sought to build a radical mass movement. They managed to focus public attention on issues they cared deeply about, and they even achieved some discrete victories. They also engaged in creative cultural work, seeking to provide an alternative, green culture, that would be attractive to prospective allies, and empowering for movement activists. This work had both religious and ethical dimensions that can be traced to the religious countercultures of the Western world, which in turn, not uncommonly, drew on non-Western religious and philosophical traditions. Yet they were also vilified as terrorists by their adversaries, increasingly convicted of crimes (including under post 9/11 terrorism statutes), and by 2010, seemed to have become moribund. For over twenty years I have researched this movement, publishing numerous articles that have sought to understand its continuities and discontinuities with militant environmental and environment-related social movements globally. I now seek to pull together this research in a wide-ranging ethnographic and historical study, focusing on radical environmentalism in North America, and especially, on its political, ecological, and moral claims, as well as on its influence and prospects.

Specifically, I plan to

- illuminate the religious, ethical, and political dimensions of radical environmentalism, and how the movement changed over time, splintering into front groups that did not carry the negative associations that Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front had come to have among the majority of Americans.
- consider whether and to what extent the movement has had success, including, whether it has played a significant role in elevating within the demos at large a concern for biological diversity.
- engage the issue of whether deep ecological values and ethics have had staying power within the movement or have been supplanted by more anthropocentric and anarchistic ideologies, and evaluate whether the movement has succeeded in promoting deep ecology and similar perspectives beyond its borders.
- assess whether and under what circumstances radical environmentalists have in the past and are likely in the future to engage in violence in pursuit of their ends, and whether their spiritual beliefs and perceptions make this more or less likely.
- evaluate the ethical and ecological claims typically made by movement activists, including with regard a presumed anthropogenic extinction crisis; which tactics to arrest this crisis are morally permissible and under what circumstances; and what sort of social philosophy is warranted if humanity is to arrest and ameliorate environmental decline and the suffering that accompanies it.