Ecotage isn’t a solution, it’s part of the problem

The environmental movement has had it both ways when it comes to sabotage of bulldozers, logging equipment, powerlines and other tools used to destroy and alter the natural world.

This paper has been part of the ambiguity toward ecotage. It was on display here in the April 25, 1988, issue, which had two long articles: one on the Nature Conservancy and one on Earth First!

The pairing carried an implicit message: Here are the two wings of the environmental movement. One is a powerful restoration force, trying to preserve our wilderness and conservate America into the environmental cause. The second at times preaches ecotage, the clandestine destruction of the tools of corporate America.

When asked, “responsible” environmentalists downplay support for speaking trees and other acts of ecotage. But we usually add that such acts are understandable in the rags which the uncorrected destruction of nature generates in all who care about earth and their own survival.

Until now, an ambiguous attitude toward ecotage seemed acceptable. Why spell things out when we could have it both ways. In my view, the time for ambiguity passed with the announcement of the arrests in Arizona and the allegations of a plan to attack the Rocky Flats nuclear arsenal.

It may be that these charges have been manufactured or blown out of proportion by an overzealous FBI. But failed or real, this event transforms what had been small and romantic and rhetorical into a different creature. Ambiguity, especially in our own minds, will no longer do. Environmentalists must now answer, at least to ourselves, some specific questions: Do we want to blow a hole in Glen Canyon Dam? Do we want to destroy logging equipment? Do we want to sabotage electric transmission towers today?

The question can be phrased in a variety of ways. Some see it as strategy. They see the sabotaging of equipment as the extraction of natural resources and the general destruction of nature as an effective way to protect the natural world.

Others come to ecotage out of an apocalyptic vision — they believe we have gone over the edge, into an abyss of unacceptable nausea and a damaged atmosphere. Ecotage is their way of expressing rage and contempt for the system that has doomed us. Those who, can’t bring themselves to perform destructive acts can see in those who do. The assault on the natural world by the logging, mining, oil and gas, livestock and development industries, so nothing of the military, so mindless, so shortsighted, so vicious and so destructive that it is natural to cheer when someone strikes a blow against this assault.

And ecotage is made for cheering. At heart, they are romantic acts in the oldest Western tradition. A group of people take upon themselves the responsibility of defending nature, the victim, against mankind, the aggressor. Implicit in this defense is the idea of a split between man and nature. Ecotage has taken root in the inside West because the split between man and nature is easiest to imagine here, where a few million people living mainly in small settlements scattered over 1 million sq. miles. In these wide open spaces, it is possible to imagine the separation of man and nature, with a handful of committed people defending nature from man.

But that is illusion. We — the grizzlies, the old-growth forests, the whales, and man — are in this together. The only hope for nature, and the only hope for man, is change in human society. The role of the environmental movement isn’t to build barricades behind which nature can huddle. Its role is to help build a world in which man and nature form a healthy whole.

The environmental movement is many things. It contains, of course, as Earth First! charges, an element that sees environmentalism as simply a way to make a living. And it is possible that some in the large national environmental groups have fallen prey to the malady said to afflict those who live too long within the Washington Beltway.

But whatever its failings, environmentalism is still, and more than that, a moral movement. It is telling humanity, with a thousand voices, that we are destroying what we should be cherishing, that we must change our ways, and that unless we change, we will make of the earth a hell for all living things. And like any moral movement, environmentalism holds out a paradise. In our paradise, the air is clear, the water pure, and the wildlife plentiful.

In the rural West, at least, we are a long way from achieving that paradise. Westerners may be no more destructive today than 100 years ago, but 100 years have taken their toll. The land has been trashed, the landscapes of thousands of valleys have been scarred for the worse, and the grasses and forests are largely gone, along with the species they once sustained.

Inevitably, the West’s communities mirror the land. In trashing the land, the people and communities of the West have damaged themselves.

One hundred and fifty years ago, this region was rich with natural beauty and resources. Today, in both its human and its natural aspects, it has declined, or been degraded, in a way.

But that is not an argument for conservationists to separate nature from mankind, and then appoint themselves defenders of nature. There can be no hope for the West’s natural world without the rejuvenation of the human communities which make up the West. The West’s natural world and human world can only come back together. We cannot save the natural world unless we can reform ourselves, our communities, our society.

So when ecotage occurs, any short time gain for nature is lost in the further weakening of the West’s democratic and humane impulses. These impulses, marginal though they may be, are our only hope for creating, in Wallace Stegner’s words, a society to match the scenery. There can be no intact, healthy environment without an intact, healthy human society.

Either we are the human society, or the human society will past the environment (as it has been doing) down to the same low level as the society.

Once we are in the world, it is difficult to imagine how we can move our society back to a point where we can imagine other acts of ecotage. We have no choice — it is clear that people are using the land. Our only hope is to find a way to make it a living for all.

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