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OPINION

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 pin-striped operation capable of enlisting corporate and conservative America into the environmental cause. The second at times preaches ecotage, the clandestine destruction of the tools of corporate America.

When asked, "responsible" environmentalists disown support for spiking trees and other acts of ecotage. But we usually add that such acts are understandable given the rage which the unceasing 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 over-zealous FBI. But faked 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 see electric transmission towers toppled?

The question can be phrased in a variety of ways. Some see it as strategy. They see the sabotaging of equipment used in 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 uncontrollable toxics 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 cheer on those who do. The assault on the natural world by the logging, mining, oil and gas, livestock and development industries, to say nothing of the military, is so mindless, so short-sighted, 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 inland West because the split between man and nature is easiest to imagine here, where a few million people living mainly in small settlements are scattered over 1 million or so square 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, no doubt, 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 never more than today, 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 altered 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 hodgepoded, to a low level.

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 strengthen the human society, or the human society will pull the environment (as it has been doing) down to the same low level as the society.

Once we admit — surely it is obvious to all — the unbreakable bonds between the health of the human society and the health of nature, the folly of ecotage becomes plain. Ecotage is a new word, but it is not a new phenomenon. It is the same natural, gut reaction our society has to every problem. You can see a form of ecotage on television each night. A nation in search

of justice, but despairing of its ability to achieve justice, satisfies itself with cop shows, in which the men and women in blue shoot their way to instant justice.

Ecotage is environmentalism's cop show. It is our cowboy movie. It is understandable, but it won't do what has to be done. Civil disobedience and principled protest, typified by the people who chain themselves to old growth trees, are one thing. But actions that take place at night, and which are not acknowledged by those who commit them, can only put off the day when the West's people turn to restoring the land we have degraded.

Restoration seems far off. As a society and as a user of the land, we have not yet hit bottom. More rage-inducing destruction — of old growth forests, of free-running streams, of clear skies — lies ahead.

Rage is understandable, it is natural. People who do not feel rage at the ongoing destruction of the natural world are either dulled by so much destruction or are less than human. But if we simply act out our rage, we add to the problem. The rage must be used to stop the destruction — not to destroy in a different way. Ecotage will only further corrupt and brutalize a society which is already sufficiently corrupt and brutal.

These are degenerate times. There is little light, there is much darkness. It is easy to lose faith, to declare the game lost or about to be lost, and to lash out in anger and despair.

To divert our anger into more effective channels, we must believe that there is still hope for both nature and society. There is no logical way to prove that nature and mankind can still be saved. It requires a leap of faith. Each person will have to reach that point by their own path, just as the Polish people and then the Chinese people somehow decided that they could topple their repressive and corrupt regimes without themselves becoming violent and destructive.

If we can make that leap of faith, and again believe in our future, then the choice of tools will be obvious. Those tools will not be cutting torches, metal spikes and molasses poured into diesel engines. The tools we must create and use are far less exciting and quick acting. They are the traditional tools decent, progressive, constructive societies have always used: good schools, citizen reform groups which act in public, competent and honest communications media, just laws and practices and an enlightened citizenry.

Because of its ambiguity, silence or quiet support, environmentalism as a whole has to accept some responsibility for what has gone before. But the time for ambiguity is now passed. The environmental movement must decide whether it is a reform effort, working within society to improve society, or an apocalyptic movement not subject to ordinary rules.

—Ed Marston