

# Dave Foreman: Wise Guy<sup>o</sup>

by

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## ***The wild life and living legacy of Dave Foreman***

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In two ways, Dave Foreman was a wise guy.

Adversaries and devotees alike knew him as charismatic gang leader of a criminal conspiracy.

The same was said of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., but today, their lawbreaking is widely considered to have been morally justifiable and socially salutary. So will much of lawbreaking by environmentalists trying to prevent the collapse of Earth's living systems.

Foreman was as wise in another sense. He was a student of history, politics, ecology, and environmentalism, which led him to think deeply, strategically, and provocatively, but also in nuanced ways, about our place in the world and responsibilities to it.

For me, he has been an exceptionally important muse. So has the movement he inspired.

Something struck a chord in me when, about 1987, I first noticed Earth First! law-breaking its way into the news. I soon found and began devouring, *Earth First!*, the movement's tabloid, which Foreman edited.

At the time, I was in graduate school focusing on anti-authoritarian, social-justice movements around the world. I had become frustrated, however, that these movements typically ignored the exploitation of the natural world. The dearth of such concern was also evident among academicians.

I did not yet, however, have a language to describe my own moral intuition: that the entire world has value apart from its usefulness to our own species. As when Foreman and the founders of Earth First! discovered, in the notion of 'deep ecology,' a linguistic expression for their own moral intuitions, I also immediately 'grocked' with such moral sentiments, whether they were called deep ecology, biocentrism, or ecocentrism.

My own felt affinity for such moral sentiments was not, however, the only reason I became interested in radical environmentalism.

I knew that social movements inspired by religion, including those that deploy disruptive and illegal tactics, sometimes precipitate dramatic, positive, social transformations – and reading the journal – I could see that that there was something deeply spiritual animating many movement activists. Moreover, I thought, if the movement's projected 'rednecks for wilderness' image was accurate and mobilizing rural, working-class individuals, this could be a game changer, dramatically empowering America's environmental movement. I considered such a possibility intriguing and hopeful.

But as I learned more, I was unsure how I felt about perspectives advanced by movement intellectuals and activists.

I knew there were serious environmental problems but were they exaggerating when they claimed humankind was precipitating massive species extinctions and even the collapse of industrial civilizations? Was the American political system so entangled with voracious capitalism that it was unable to respond to this crisis? Was this system entirely illegitimate, and therefore, revolutionary responses were necessary? Were anarchistic and bioregional social philosophies the only way forward? Were illegal strategies beyond civil disobedience, such as equipment sabotage, tree-spiking, arson, and even lethal violence, morally permissible and potentially effective? Did conservation biology provide scientific guidance for creating and connecting wild lands and lives, and thus preventing further erosion of Earth's genetic and species variety?

Foreman and other movement architects also looked backward to understand how we arrived at this crisis point, proffering theories about the roots of the devastation. Were their ideas compelling? Did the destructive turn begin with the domestication of non-human organisms and the advent of agriculture, and the concomitant explosion of human numbers? Did this lead humans to exceed the carrying capacities of the habitats they previously depended upon, which then led to expansionist and imperial agricultural civilizations, forcibly assimilating, exterminating, or otherwise driving small scale foraging societies from their homelands? Were

anthropocentric, monotheistic, otherworldly, patriarchal, pro-natalist religions, and Western philosophies and sciences, deeply complicit in these processes? Did animistic, indigenous traditions, religions originating in Asia, or revitalized or newly invented Paganisms, provide worldview alternatives compatible with the flourishing of life on Earth?

During the 1980s, these unsettling claims were often advanced and debated within the movement. As I was confronted by them, I was skeptical.

Then, as fate would have it, in April 1990, only a few months after I assumed an academic position at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, I learned that Dave Foreman was scheduled to give a talk on campus. This was, of course, only about a year after his 1989 arrest for, the FBI and Department of Justice alleged, supporting monkeywrenching in the Southwestern U.S.

I was keen to discuss the sorts of claims I had encountered in *Earth First!* so I arranged to interview him and, since I seemed to know more about the movement than others on campus, was asked to introduce him before his public talk. During it, I saw first-hand his ability to rile up a crowd as well as how bright and thoughtful he was one-on-one.

During the interview on that occasion, and in a longer one at his home in New Mexico in 1993, he was much like a professor mentoring a graduate student. (Indeed, in his areas of expertise I was a relative neophyte.) He pointed me to a number of writers who had been formative for him.

I already knew about Aldo Leopold, having been introduced to him during the 'ethics' segment of interpretive training that all California State Park Rangers and Lifeguards went through. Foreman also mentioned Louis Mumford (on the destructiveness of technological systems), William Catton (on how humans keep exceeding the carrying capacity of their habitats, causing ecosystem collapses or forcing migrations) and Stanley Diamond and Paul Shepard (whose overlapping arguments asserted that foraging societies and their animistic spiritualities were superior to the imperial agricultures that have destroyed or displaced most such small-scale societies).

Foreman also gave me a primer on the history of wilderness conservation; the revolving-door of corruption between resource managers, extractive industry plutocrats, and politicians; how he saw the failures of the conservation movement (too careerist and compromise-prone to stand up to 'wise-use' fanatics). He fleshed out what he thought was needed for what his compadre Howie Wolke called, a 'thoughtful radicalism,' namely, one that would not be so counter-cultural as to immediately alienate regular folk. One that would be conservation-biology informed, focused on connecting and biological reserves in networks that could maintain the continents' genetic, species, and ecosystem variety. We also discussed restoration ecology and the hopeful prospect of rewilding of the world.

When one considers from where in the cultural landscape of America Foreman emerged, the kind of ideas he contemplated and advanced, were more than a little surprising.

The sociology of knowledge powerfully explains the power of socialization, why (to speak metaphorically) an individual human apple rarely falls far from their social tree. Such sociology also describes the processes by which some individuals manage to break out from the worldviews they inherit from those who initially socialize them.

Despite its explanatory power, however, such sociological analysis does not adequately explain why one, similarly situated individual, follows the herd, while only a few become contrarians. Foreman wondered that too, I think, speculating about whether there was a 'wilderness gene,' a nature-gifted affinity for wild places and wildlife that some people have that others do not.

Do some have a stronger innate biophilia, as biologist E.O. Wilson put it, than others? Or is a contrarian nature rooted more in one's experiences in the world? Many radical environmentalists, I know, describe difficult childhoods and how, in various ways, this has led them to seek companionship and healing beyond human communities. I can relate, and I've wondered whether that played a role in Foreman's own contrary nature.

Whatever accounts for a contrarian tendency, I know that I also have one. I am disinclined to adopt any perspective without subjecting it to careful scrutiny, whether it is mainstream or countercultural. My default skepticism applied, as well, to the perspectives advanced by Foreman and the eclectic, and sometimes contentious and troubled activists, who were drawn to the radical environmental movement. And although I had been moved by the civil rights and various liberation movements around the world and believed there was a time and place for civil disobedience designed to arouse the conscience of wider publics, before I became an academic, I was a California State Park Lifeguard/Peace Officer, not a hippy or anarchist. I was not about to easily accept claims that environmental degradation was so grave, and the American political system so corrupt or inept, that tactics beyond civil disobedience were morally permissible, let alone effective. Indeed, I saw the law and its enforcers as necessary bulwark against violence and environmental harm, both in and beyond Park boundaries.

In more than three decades since I first met Foreman and began my explorations of the diverse subcultures of radical environmentalism, therefore, I have sought to tease out where I agree and where I depart from the various perspectives I found within the movement. Far more often than not, I have come to agree with Foreman. Where I demur, I understand there is a reasonable basis for the other point of view, and sometimes, I wonder, whether my understanding of Foreman's understandings might be outdated.

People who think critically and recognize complexity, as Foreman clearly did, often revise their views over time based on new information. Indeed, the historian in me thinks it is important to assess how the minds of major figures have changed or remained the same over time. This is one of the reasons I was very sad when in September 2022 I learned of Foreman's passing. I was planning to visit him again the Spring of 2023 and ask him how his mind had changed or remained the same over time. Now, I will have to ask his closest confidants how they think he would have answered such a query.

For my part, I have long felt a deep connection to nature, that all species are kin and deserve respect, and so, I deeply resonated with Foreman when he told me in the in 1990, “I agree with Aldo Leopold about virtually everything. A thing is right when it tends to advance the beauty stability and integrity of the natural community” and we should “protect the earth because we love it,” noting that this was what Leopold was expressing when he wrote, “there are those who can live without wild things and sunsets and there are those who cannot.” After quoting Leopold, Foreman added, “I think that’s fundamentally the key. When you really love wild things you recognize that your own life does not have meaning apart from those things.”

Foreman also recognized that for our species, the love of nature is typically connected to one’s spirituality. During the 1980s he expressed clear affinity with Paganism. In 1987, writing under his pen name, Chim Blea, he wrote that after rejecting Christianity he

flirted briefly with eastern religions before rejecting them for their antiEarthly metaphysic. Through my twenties and early thirties, I was an atheist – until I sensed something out there. Out there in the wilderness . . . So, I became a pagan, a pantheist, a witch, if you will. I offered prayers to the moon, performed secret rituals in the wildwood, did spells. I placated the spirits of that which I ate or used (remember, your firewood is alive, too.) . . . For almost ten years, I’ve followed my individualistic shamanism (no, organized paganism smacks a little too much of a Tolkien discussion group, or of a rudimentary “great religion” for one like me who never quite fits in). (Chim Blea, “Spirituality,” *Earth First!*, 1987, v. 7, #7, p. 23).

Despite his ambivalence toward organized religion and even toward pagan ritualizing, Foreman concluded, “Nonetheless, we do seem to have a spiritual sense. Perhaps our fatal flaw, that which sunders us from Earth, is our ability for abstract thinking. To think of things as *things*. And spirituality, ritual, is that which attempts, albeit imperfectly, to reconnect us. Maybe I’ll talk to the moon tonight.” A year later, writing under his own name, he praised Starhawk’s 1979 book, *The Spiral Dance*, which influentially promoted Wicca, and reverence for nature, in America and beyond, writing, “this isn’t some weird eco-la-la tract, it’s the best religious book since the burning times.” (Dave Foreman, “Review of *The Spiral Dance*,” *Earth First!*, 1988, v. 9, #1, p. 35). Foreman also had learned from and respected indigenous societies (while studiously avoiding universalizing and romanticizing indigenous people into a noble savage caricatures), and often argued that we need to “resacralize” our perceptions of the Earth.

When I interviewed him in 1993, I asked him about his experiences and the intellectuals and activists he variously drew on for his affinity with Paganism, which was also evident via his insistence that the journal publish according to a (Celtic) Pagan calendar. He responded that he had become a little embarrassed by some of that enthusiasm. Perhaps he was already ambivalent about this, and this accounts for why he wrote his most personal reflections about his own pagan ritualizing under his pseudonym. I continued by mentioning how he often spoke of the Earth as sacred, and asked him what he meant by that. He answered,

It's very difficult in our society to discuss the notion of sacred apart from the supernatural, I think that's something that we need to work on, a non-supernatural concept of sacred; a non-theistic basis of sacred. When I say I'm a non-theistic pantheist it's a recognition that what's really important is the flow of life, the process of life. . . [So] the idea is not to protect ecosystems frozen in time . . . but [rather] the grand process . . . of evolution. . . We're just blips in this vast energy field . . . just temporary manifestations of this life force, which is blind and non-teleological. And so I guess what is sacred is what's in harmony with that flow (23 February 1993 interview, Tucson Arizona).

This revealing statement shows that Foreman's spirituality evolved in an entirely naturalistic way. These words reminded me of Edward Abbey's own naturalistic pantheism. As is the case for scores of people around the world today who have left behind the metaphysical truth-claims of the world's predominant religions, myself included, Foreman expressed a spirituality of belonging and connection to nature, which provides meaning and environmentalist purpose.

Foreman also thought about sacrality in another way, recognizing that for many Americans, the American flag was sacred, or at least, it reflects a sense that there was something exceptional about "the republic to which it stands." And although he was a harsh critic of American politics, and he was a person who had, like Abbey, confessed to anarchist sensibilities (writing in the masthead of *Earth First!*, for example, that the movement "does not accept the authority of the hierarchical state"), he was angry at the burning of the stars and stripes at the 1987 EF! Rendezvous. As he told me later, he recognized the power of that symbol and that the right wing, wise use movement, which wraps itself in it, ought not to be able to claim it. Foreman understood, I think, that the flag need not represent virulent religious nationalism, but instead and at its best, it can represent the kind of *we feeling*, and *place feeling*, that can provide an affective basis for peaceful coexistence between all members of the land community.

When Foreman noted in the previously quoted passage that he 'never really fit in' with the more 'woo woo' factions of the movement, the same thing was true with regard to those from the anarchist or socialist left, as well as from the libertarian right. He was a radical in many ways, but this was a kind of moderate radicalism, if that notion is not too oxymoronic: Foreman's views were moderated by recognition of ambiguity and complexity, and even, I think, by intellectual humility. Ecosystems are more complex than we will ever know and so are the social systems that evolve from them, and the path to making them healthy and resilient is never as clear as a given slogan or ideology might suggest. Moreover, Foreman recognized, as do so many other conservationists, even those who have had their anarchistic phases and sentiments, that whatever tactics might lead to the protection of an ecosystem, or the rewilding of it, it will take scientific expertise, good laws, enforcement mechanisms, as well as authentic democratic political space and citizen vigilance, to protect movement victories and secure future ones.

This does not mean that Foreman outgrew his conviction that extra-legal tactics have been and can be morally permissible and effective.

It is, in my view, incontrovertible, that he and the best of the movement he inspired, through civil disobedience, tree spiking, and creative, sacrality-evoking neologisms, put the desecration of the America's ancient forests into public ferment in a way they would not have been otherwise.

It is inconceivable that in the absence of this movement that there would be an Option 9 (which protected at least some old growth forest in the Pacific Northwest and), or a Roadless Rule (which Bill Clinton established due largely due to radical environmental resistance to deforestation in wilderness areas, Trump overturned, but under the current Biden administration has been restored). Although inadequate, they give a number of species a fighting chance of long-term survival, including the Northern Spotted Owl.

The more scientifically inclined branch of the movement that Foreman led also played a unique and salutary role in bring the very notion of biodiversity and its importance out from scientific journals and into public awareness and debate. This was also the case for restoration ecology, which began to get off the ground in the mid 1980s, and Foreman cleverly dubbed 'rewilding' in the early 1990s. That brilliant, memorable trope, has helped to catapult the idea into a global movement, which is deeply informed by the discipline of conservation biology. Foreman likewise championed the importance of such sciences during the 1980s while still editing *Earth First!*, continuing this focus during the 1990s with the Wildlands Project and *Wild Earth*, and in more recent years via the Rewilding Institute.

It is a remarkable legacy to all those who developed such models, including Michael Soulé and Reed Noss, as well as Foreman, Howie Wolke, and others who popularized them such approaches, that all over America and beyond, conservationists are working to create, restore, and connect critical the habitats needed for a host of endangered species.

Without Foreman and those he learned from and inspired, none of these salutary trends would be nearly as far along as they are today. In an age of characterized by a 'great acceleration' of negative anthropogenic environmental change, which can be both depressing and disempowering, it is important to recognize that for many, ideas and practices once considered radical if not also fanciful, now seem obvious and necessary. These ideas and practices may even be on the way to becoming mainstream views within the global, environmental milieu.

When I first met him during his visit to Wisconsin, Foreman mentioned that there were many ways to contribute to the movement to protect life on earth, including via 'paper monkeywrenching,' such as filing lawsuits and by writing in ways that educate publics about the ecological crisis, including its philosophical and religious roots, and salutary alternatives. Before he left town, I handed him a copy of his book, *Ecodefense*, and asked him if he would sign it. In it, he scrawled, "Keep wrenching those young minds." I've done my best.

Indeed, in these efforts, Dave Foreman, and the intellectuals and activists he variously drew on and inspired, and to whom he introduced me, deeply influenced me. With so many others, I am exceptionally grateful for his wild life.

## Resources

One way I have sought to give back for what I learned from Foreman and those he inspired and battled is by writing about them and also letting them speak for themselves. With Forman's permission, for example, and with the generous support of the Rachel Carson Center in Munich, Germany, I curated a virtual exhibition that digitized all the issues of *Earth First!* published with Dave Forman at the helm (including after John Davis took over), and after they departed, as well as the journal *Wild Earth*. See: Bron Taylor, "Radical Environmentalism's Print History: From *Earth First!* to *Wild Earth*." Environment & Society Portal, *Virtual Exhibitions* 2018, no. 1. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. [doi.org/10.5282/rcc/7988](https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/7988).

My first book about the movement was [\*Ecological Resistance Movements: the Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism\*](#), which I edited and was published by the State University of New York Press in 1995. I have published many more articles about radical and grassroots environmentalism, deep ecology, and ecocentric philosophy and spirituality; these are searchable and downloadable at <http://brontaylor.com/102-2/publications/published-by-subject/>. For a book that pays significant attention to Dave Foreman and other radical environmentalists, and shows the growing cultural traction of what I have elsewhere called 'spiritualities of belonging and connection to nature,' see [\*Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future\*](#), which was published by the University of California Press in 2010. The quotations from Dave Foreman are cited in my previously published work.