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‘Ecocentrism’: A Brief History of The Radical Environmental Movement

In his book ‘The Ecocentrists,’ historian Keith Makoto Woodhouse traces the 1970s radical environmental movement in the U.S.



Gavin Lamb, PhD · [Follow](#)

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“No compromise in defense of Mother Earth”

– The slogan of [Earth First!](#)

Ecocentrism is a key discourse taken up and developed by the radical environmental movement in the U.S., especially by activists during the 1970s and 1980s. In his 2018 book *[The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism](#)*, environmental historian [Keith Makoto Woodhouse](#) traces this fascinating history. He gives the following definition of ‘ecocentrism’ as a starting point:

“Ecocentric thought assumed that trees, bears, fish, and grasshoppers should receive as much consideration as humans in decisions large and small about the shape of modern society. An ecocentric outlook granted no more value to people — at least in terms of a basic hierarchy of existence — than it did to plants, animals, and ecosystems...[the ecocentrists] believed, fundamentally, that as modern human society gradually destroyed wild nature it veered toward catastrophe, and that its self-destruction would take much of the planet with it.”

Woodhouse writes that “The simplicity of radical environmentalism’s claims made them elegant and inspiring if taken as rallying cries, but dangerous and malevolent if taken as unqualified truth.”

In other words, for radical environmentalists, embracing the discourse of ecocentrism often went hand in hand with embracing a discourse of antihumanism: “To reject ecocentrism, radical environmentalists argued, was to embrace anthropocentrism — human-centeredness. Beyond those two positions lay only equivocation.”

Woodhouse tells the story, in particular, about the radical environmental group Earth First! founded in 1980. He examines the language and activism of ‘direct action’ they embraced in an effort to protect wilderness areas from logging operations in the Western U.S. in the 1980s. For Earth First!ers, direct action meant chaining themselves to trees, blocking bulldozers with their bodies, living in tree-tops to prevent loggers from cutting trees down, and even using ‘tree spikes’ to break loggers’ chainsaws.

(On a side note, Richard Powers fictionalized some of these efforts by Earth First!ers in his recent novel The Overstory)

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From tree-sits to tree-spikes, radical environmentalists brought direct action to the fight to save nature. Kassia Shaw reviews Keith M. Woodhouse's *The Ecocentrists*, a nuanced history of Earth First! and its lasting legacy.

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For ecologists and environmental communicators, Woodhouse's *The Ecocentrists* offers a rich and complex history of the language and activism of ecocentrism. As Woodhouse writes,

“Environmentally minded scholars and activists have exposed the many ways an ecocentric environmentalism, originating in and privileging the United States, can gloss over social difference, cultural complexity, and economic inequality, and how it can draw a too-stark line between the human and the natural. By pushing green ideas to their extremes, radical environmentalists risked stripping those ideas of the sort of nuance and malleability that might help them fit into a diverse and complicated world.”

Confronting Econcentrism's Nasty Past

In the 1970s and 80s, for many mainstream conservation organizations like The Sierra Club, the direct action tactics of radical ecocentrists were viewed as extreme and deeply counter-productive as a method in garnering broader public support for the environmental movement.

In part, direct action tactics such as sabotaging dams, lumber operations, or oil infrastructure led the professionalized wing of the environmental movement (political lobbies, law firms, and non-profit organizations such as the Sierra Club and the Nature Conservancy) to distance themselves from radical activists.

But perhaps more concerning was a tendency among some radical ecocentrists to express fears of overpopulation and sympathy for authoritarian forms of mass control over populations in order to save nature. This is because “For radicals,” Woodhouse writes, “the central concern of environmentalism was always with limits: to natural resources, to industrial expansion, and to human population.”

This last idea — limiting human population — has always been the most dangerous idea to take root in certain strands of the radical environmental movements in the U.S and Europe.

This concern with overpopulation, especially among nonwhite populations in the developing world, reveals the dark side of the environmental movement in its racist history, argues the environmental law professor Jedidiah Purdy.

The idea of population limits especially finds expression in so-called ‘lifeboat politics,’ as the journalist and professor Christian Parenti powerfully shows in his book *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*. As Parenti writes,

“another type of political adaptation is already under way, one that might be called the politics of the armed lifeboat: responding to climate change by arming, excluding, forgetting, repressing, policing, and killing. One can imagine a green authoritarianism emerging in rich countries, while the climate crisis pushes the Third World into chaos.”

We are already seeing versions of this lifeboat politics with its ‘green authoritarianism’ popping up in eco-conscious right-wing movements around the world. Sociologist Ajay Singh Chaudhary calls this emerging faction radical environmentalists ‘right-wing climate change realists.’ Examples include the *Front National* in France, or the growing ecofascist movement in the U.S., some of whom made an appearance at the violent riot at the capitol on January 6th.

This is all to say that as we push forward with the climate justice movement, it must also take stock of the lineage of anti-democratic and racist green ideas that all too easily creep into well-meaning factions of the environmental movements today.

As Jedediah Purdy suggests,

“It can only help to acknowledge just how many environmentalist priorities and patterns of thought came from an argument among white people, some of them bigots and racial engineers, about the character and future of a country [the United States] that they were sure was theirs and expected to keep.”

Gavin Lamb

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recommended reading! 'The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism' by @kmwoodhouse, an intellectual and political history of 1970s/80s radical environmentalism in the U.S. shedding light on both its 'wrongheadedness' and relevance for today.



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The Ecocentrists | Columbia University Press

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7:31 PM · Jan 17, 2021



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Ecocentrism Today

Unfortunately, Woodhouse writes, by pushing green ideas to their edge, this led environmental historians to largely dismiss the ecocentrist movement of the 1970s and 80s, relegating their views to curious footnotes of the environmental movement. This has resulted in a failure to seriously examine how radical econcetrists wrestled with challenging environmental problems and solutions, having rich and complex debates that still hold great relevance for the environmental movement today. As Woodhouse writes,

“an environmental point of view must wrestle with the vital questions that ecocentrism raises. The more I learned about radical environmentalists the more I understood them as serious thinkers, engaged in conversations that held great relevance for the broad environmental movement and for the way that anyone might think about climate change and the Anthropocene. Their ideas were sometimes deeply wrongheaded, but their conversations were often thoughtful and even urgent. And their false turns came from confronting issues that were and are complicated, distressing, and maybe even irreconcilable.”

The ‘wrongheaded’ ideas he is referring to are the dangerous paths that certain radical environmentalists traveled towards “nihilistic antihumanism, reactionary authoritarianism, or simple bigotry.”

Some radical environmentalists veered down authoritarian and racist paths, from John Muir to Edward Abbey. But most eco-radicals argues Woodhouse, seriously “*wrestled with the environmental movement’s place in a democratic society, confronting some of the difficult questions about individualism and material progress that environmentalism, at its worst and its best, seeks to ask.*”

In sum, Woodhouse’s *The Ecocentrists* gives us a fascinating look into the history of an angry, often caricatured, but still relevant group of ecocentric thinkers activists who wrestled with the ecological crisis in the latter half of the 20th century.

“The naturalist Aldo Leopold once wrote, ‘One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.’ What would it mean to live in a world of healing? That’s another question that is impossible to answer but essential to ask, and that ecocentric thought — or at least non-anthropocentric thought — might help us to think through.”

– Keith Makoto Woodhouse

Next steps

- To explore more about the language of ecocentrism and Earth First!, [The Rachel Carson Center’s Environment and Society Portal](#) keeps an open-access archive of Earth First! movement writings.
- Here is an interesting documentary made in the 1980s about Earth First!: [Earth First! The Politics of Radical Environmentalism by Chris Manes](#)
- Join my [weekly digest](#) with updates on ideas, tools, tips, and research in EcoWriting, ecolinguistics and environmental communication.

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Written by Gavin Lamb, PhD





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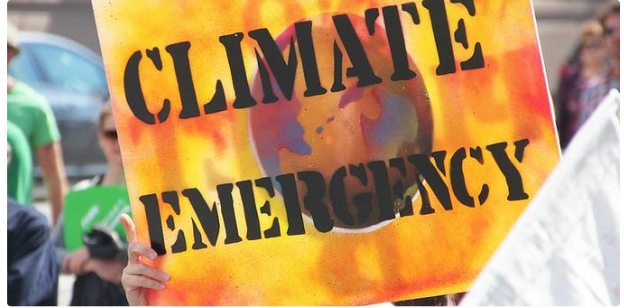
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