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PORTRAIT WITH BACKGROUND: TODAY'S CONSERVATION ACTIVISTS

Bill Lines

Who are the activists who serve on the front line of the conservation movement, as in logging blockades? They are drawn from the margins of the economy, not from the university educated professionals who dominate the conservation elite and the Australian Greens Party. Their motives derive from a form of local patriotism involving defence of Australia's unique natural environment. A significant minority are sceptical of the internationalist human rights agenda of the Green Party. They see their task as saving the natural world from humans, not for humans.

Early in the winter of 1997 forest activists began several months of direct action aimed at disrupting and delaying the logging of part of the 5000-hectare Goolengook block of old growth forest in Victoria's East Gippsland. Police made 200 arrests, including Bob Brown. After clearfelling about 100 hectares, loggers, police, and Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE) officers pulled out, defeated by the protestors' determination and persistence. The Victorian Supreme Court later found the logging itself was illegal.

After the initial protests activists maintained a blockade on Goolengook Road near Goolengook River. Despite persistent government threats and rumours of an imminent bust, the camp remained for nearly five years, almost continuously occupied and becoming the longest running forest blockade in Australian history and indeed the world. Blockaders demanded that Goolengook be included in the adjoining Errinundra National Park.

Over the years hundreds of people visited Goolengook. The blockade became a legend among and a destination for conservation activists, students, and travellers from all over Australia. People from every state visited, staying a few days, to a week, to months at a time. Backpackers from Britain, the United States, Canada, and Germany included Goolengook in their Australian itinerary.

In February 2000, some fifty-timber workers raided the camp, destroyed tents and possessions, overturned cars, and assaulted campers. Undaunted, activists returned next day and over the next several months rebuilt the blockade, this time as a palisaded fort with moat and drawbridge. Where did this resilient defiance come from? Who were the people responsible for the blockade month after month? What motivated them and what did they believe?

I first visited Goolengook in January 2001. Over the following twelve months I visited again some half dozen times. I returned for beauty and to camp by the gorgeous, pristine Goolengook River that flows through old growth rainforest and is overshadowed by huge trees, ferns, gullies, side streams, and mossy rock pools. Songbirds, owls, raptors, marsupials, and invertebrates inhabit the canopy and undergrowth. I also returned to express solidarity with those maintaining the blockade and who believed that the destruction of life and beauty is wrong and must be opposed.

Over many days and nights sitting around the campfire, helping with daily chores, practicing tree climbing and blockade techniques, and taking part in meetings, I came to know many of the

mainly young blockaders. I heard their histories and discussed their reasons for being there.

None of the major conservation groups — Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), The Wilderness Society (TWS), or Friends of the Earth (FOE) — organised Goolengook. They contributed money and resources and helped with publicity but the blockade itself was largely self-reliant, a spontaneous act that grew out of other actions and continued through the will and interest of individual activists. The blockaders themselves made the day-to-day as well as longer-term decisions concerning the camp. Many were associated with the Goongerah Environment Centre Office (GECO), an anarchist collective based in the East Gippsland hamlet of Goongerah. GECO assumed immediate responsibility for the blockade as well as almost every other forest action in East Gippsland since the early 1990s. Another local conservation group, Concerned Residents of East Gippsland (CROEG), helped defend the forests through informing the media, research, and legal intervention.

Surveys of conservation organizations usually reveal members as belonging to the affluent, professional class. This new class of intellectuals was barely represented at the Goolengook blockade or at GECO. Certainly, many students, mostly children of middle-class parents, visited. But through background and inclination, the majority of frontline activists were not destined for professional lives. Some came from broken, scattered families. Many had parents engaged in manual occupations. Others had farming backgrounds. A few had timber workers in the family. Some had families in small businesses. Blockaders also included the children of hippies, and single parents. Some had alcohol and drug problems. Many were looking for a purpose in life, trying out different identities, or running away from abusive circumstances, unsatisfactory relationships, or moral and emotional confusion. As people on the margins they were unacquainted with affluence and higher education. But they enjoyed their outcast status and openly and proudly referred to themselves as hippies, ferals (fezzas was the preferred term), and greenies.

Manual employment, either in the building trades, or as farm workers, arborists and very commonly, for both men and women, bush regeneration, dominated many people's work experience. Others made patchy livings as musicians, part-time teachers, child-carers, office clerks, or through employment in service industries. Although some sought further education, most had a suspicion of expertise.

Despite their lack of tertiary qualifications, most blockaders were well informed about forestry issues, understood the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA), appreciated scientific assessments, and were capable of articulating a coherent case against woodchipping, logging, and clearfelling. They appreciated what was at stake. Many, especially those with bush regeneration experience, were also acquainted with the practical dilemmas for conservation arising from our shifting understandings of nature and the natural.

All had good hearts and big hearts. They see much wrong in the world and want to right everything at once. People at GECO, for instance, decided, for strategic and moral reasons, to involve indigenous people in the struggle for East Gippsland's forests. For most, however, saving the forest is a priority. Many commit their lives to its defence and have endured numerous arrests and lead lives

constantly disrupted by the urgencies of the moment. Yet their commitment and activism hardly wavers.

Bush camps frequently resemble tribal society. People cook and eat communally and share a campfire night after night. They become aware of other people's moods and adjust their own accordingly. Conventional norms of privacy break down. Etiquette and customs arise peculiar to a blockade and specific circumstances. Relationships — intimate, dependent, enduring, and exclusive — form. Blockades can become insular and there is often tension between the need for solidarity and the need to be open and welcoming to new people.

Veteran forest activists frequently told me that blockading was the most intense experience of their lives. Nothing else compared. As a possible equivalent they cited the experience of the Gallipoli soldiers. Both soldiers and blockaders live concentrated lives, feel deep commitment, and enjoy the special bonding that occurs through engagement in a common cause. The prevalence on blockades of military attire and war metaphors — blockade, struggle, campaign, strategy, operations, mission, and resistance — heightened the similarity.

But Gallipoli was an all-male experience. Blockading involves men and women who work together as comrades, partners, and friends. They learn mutual trust, share joy and disappointment, and experience the thrill and beauty of defending the forest. Of course, flirting goes on. Many blockaders become lovers. Children and families are a common outcome of blockades. Nevertheless men and women on blockades frequently forge acquaintances outside of sexual bonding. Women especially find the possibility enormously liberating. As one young female blockader jubilantly observed: 'Out here girls are still girls and guys still guys but there is none of the stupid game playing that goes on in the city social scene. Here, men and women are friends'.

Men and women may become friends and equals but sex roles still emerge. A sexual division of labour, although not necessarily conventional, characterises much bush activism. During social gatherings around the campfire men tend to dominate the talk and determine topics of conversation. In more formal situations, however, during strategy meetings, women commonly take the lead, become discussion facilitators, frame the issues, and suggest the decisions to be taken. Not that the men always pay attention. Regardless of consensus, men sometimes isolate themselves, plan their own actions, and take their own risks. They are less interested than women in reaching mutually agreed decisions, and occupy themselves with tree climbing, building, and other physical activities.

Politically, the great majority of frontline forest activists are anarchist. All share a suspicion of authority, hierarchy, commercialism, and consumer society. They enjoy culture jamming — the fun creation of fake ads, false newspaper articles, parodies, and pastiche to combat media manipulation and introduce radical ideas. Their big hearts lead them to join many other causes commonly considered leftwing: anti-globalisation, refugee movements, and reconciliation ('indig business'). Nevertheless, although Goolengook activists, for example, took part in the S11 protests (largely to ensure conservation issues were not neglected), few, if any forest activists, sympathize with the S11 organisers, the Socialist Alliance; most distrust socialism and socialists.

Interestingly, while conservation

activists invariably support urban, human rights protests, whether anti-globalisation or pro-refugees, few, if any, human rights campaigners ever visit the bush to support conservation. There are probably two main reasons for this.

Bush campaigning demands hardiness. Not everyone is constitutionally equipped to forsake urban comforts like showers and laundries, or to sleep on muddy ground in leaky tents or under mouldy, wet, dripping tarps, for days, weeks and sometimes months in the bush. Not everyone is prepared to live communally, shit in a hole in the ground, tolerate crawling, biting insects, and sit in a perpetual cloud of campfire smoke. Bush activism requires a physical competency and a mental robustness not found among most urban activists.

But there is another reason why social justice and human rights campaigners withhold enthusiastic and full-bodied support for conservation. They speak another language. Their vocabulary alienates them from the material, physical roots of conservation. Their education predisposes them towards abstraction. Abstraction requires viewing anything whatever as a thing made up of parts. The social analysis behind the cause of human rights inculcates a habit of subdividing downward in the expectation of reaching rules or units that refuse to be broken. These rules, once discovered, can then be used to impose uniform, universal laws. The world becomes fungible, the same everywhere, subject to the same progress and development. Rights, for example, are absolute, everywhere the same and never contingent.

Nothing could be further from conservation. Conservation is always about the concrete, never about the universal and abstract. Conservation focuses on specific suites of organisms interconnected through unique, non-duplicatable relationships in particular places. According to conservationists, life cannot be subdivided, the world is not fungible and organisms cannot be reduced to universal abstractions. Life is contingent.

Ecological thinking conflicts with the abstract thinking characteristic of the discourse of rights. Moreover, an emphasis on rights discourages the adoption of collective and individual responsibility. But this is precisely what conservation activists do: assume responsibility.

Abstraction in the furtherance of rights leads to internationalism, the ultimate abstraction, the ultimate universal rule. Activism in the pursuit of conservation reflects an appreciation of the unique, the non-repeatable, the particular, and the local. The cause of conservation suggests a concrete patriotism, derived not from abstractions about freedom, ethnicity, history, and nation building but from living in and breathing a physical, real Australia. Activists mount blockades, dig themselves into the soil, lie in front of bulldozers, and sit in trees because they care about this continent. They may not wave flags (or at least not the Australian flag) but they regard Australia and its incomparable suite of wildlife, vegetation, forest, rivers and desert as a land worth defending, often with their bodies. Conservationists respond to place, love country, and care about its preservation. They are moved by beauty and life.

Almost all activists have a high regard for Bob Brown, chiefly because of his record as a frontline activist and consequent moral authority, not because he is the leader of the Greens. He has earned credit. And 'cred', which demonstrates commitment and authenticity, is terribly important among activists. Many regard

his views on matters such as population as unimportant or irrelevant. Neither are they greatly interested in the Greens' internationalist fantasies. For these activists conservation aims are more immediate and concrete: such as preventing the logging of Goolengook.

To be fair, not all blockade activists articulate their views as patriotic. Rather, I am writing about sentiments, tendencies, and feelings. I am interpreting. In reality, worldviews as expressed by blockaders themselves are often cloudy, a jumbled mix of self help, New Age solipsisms, deep ecology, and beliefs derived from myths about ecological Aborigines, which, in turn, are based on myths about ecological American Indians. To sort out and examine the many constituents of their worldview would confer more coherence on the ideas than they actually possess.

Other activists, more political and strategic, do not engage with the New Age. They dismiss their compatriots' bundle of spiritualisms as 'woo-woo stuff'. Nevertheless, they are happy to work together for a common cause, united by a patriotism that focuses attention on the protection of the very real natural world of Australia.

Goolengook was part of the greenie network and I soon learned of other forest protests, most notably at Badja in southeast NSW. Early in 2001 NSW state forestry listed Badja State forest on its order of works. Over Easter 2001, conservationists occupied the old-growth forest and, in honour of the Goolengook structure, built a fort across a Badja logging road. I visited shortly after and returned several more times.

TWS initiated the blockade. But the people who maintained it for the next eight months were not beholden to TWS. They made their own decisions and came and went according to their own dictates. TWS continued providing resources and money but the blockaders still needed self-reliance. They drew on personal savings supplemented with money raised through donations, benefit concerts, and fund-raising activities in Canberra and Sydney.

After police and NSW Forestry officials busted the blockade in November 2001 and prohibited entry to the forest, protestors set up camp in nearby Wadbilliga National Park. But the roadblocks, arrests, and harassment that accompanied the massive police and forestry presence wore down the protest and ensured that logging proceeded relatively undisturbed. Protestors disbanded the camp in February 2002.

Like Goolengook, no central direction guided the Badja actions. Support was voluntary and spontaneous. People took it upon themselves to become involved. Again, like Goolengook, the core group of activists hardly matched the profile of affluent middle-class professionals — some were protest veterans, others were new to activism. They included arborists (with essential skills for tree climbing), organic farmers, student dropouts, and musicians. The core group itself changed and after the bust came to include many people from southeast NSW. I also noted a disproportionate number of activists from the Newcastle area, which appears to supply more conservation activists per capita than any other place in Australia. I subsequently visited Newcastle several times, met local activists and, in July 2001, attended the Students and Sustainability (S&S) conference at the University of Newcastle. This annual gathering, hosted by a different campus each year, attracts students and other people interested in conservation. Over 500 participants from all over Australia

attended the weeklong Newcastle event.

All the students had been schooled in the dominant and fashionable vocabulary of rights but they did not necessarily view conservation in terms of social justice. They did not automatically think of environmental harm as a human rights violation. Many wore their learning casually. Even though their education closeted them from the possibility of alternative vocabularies they remained curious and open to other points of view. Many were especially responsive to the notion of obligation: we are an affluent country and have a responsibility to the life of this continent and of the rest of the planet. We should step lightly rather than make demands.

Those most insistent on rights were also the most intellectually intolerant, arrogant, and doctrinaire: the socialists, feminists, and eco-feminists who tend to see the world in terms of oppressors and oppressed. By their reckoning, Australia is full of victims. Personal liberation and the overthrow of the oppressors were intrinsic to the liberation of nature. Most students, however, had little time for such convoluted argument. They did not consider themselves victims. On the contrary, as children of the middle class, they understood they had inherited positions of great privilege and privilege carried responsibility.

Members of Socialist Alliance were conspicuously active at the Newcastle conference. Tables displaying their pamphlets, books, bumper stickers, t-shirts, and propaganda appeared outside lectures and meetings. Most students politely ignored them. As in previous years, the eco-feminist sessions were among the most contentious. Attendees disputed abstract claims about patriarchy and the linking of the oppression of women with the oppression of nature.

Nevertheless, feminists exerted influence out of proportion to their numbers. For example, they vehemently opposed a proposal for a men's group. Men, by virtue of being male, belonged to an oppressor cohort and were therefore not permitted the kind of exclusivity reserved for victims: women; indigenous people; people from the Third World. The vast majority of S&S participants disagreed and found these arguments unreal. Most dubious were the women who were active in forest protests with men and who trusted their own experience before feminist theory. Regardless of majority opinion, however, organizers cancelled the men's group.

In previous years, questions about Australia's population size and growth provoked controversy. Socialist Alliance members were particularly vociferous and disruptive in their opposition to the matter even being discussed. They shouted down speakers and banished the topic from future gatherings. Nevertheless, Ian Lowe and Ted Trainer spoke at S&S 2001 and both raised population issues. They attracted one of the largest audiences of the gathering. Students are curious about arguments around population and seek information. They know that our indulgent lifestyle plus numbers — not our status as victims or violators — spells doom for much of Australia's indigenous life. They understand that conservation can only be secured through a reduction in human impacts and numbers. Indeed, population concerns figure prominently in the thinking of a wide range of conservation activists, not just students.

My involvement in S&S, like my initial visit to Goolengook, arose as part of a larger enquiry. For over ten years I had been writing about people and nature in Australia from a conservationist perspective. Much of this work was done at

a distance while I lived in the United States. When I returned to Australia in late 2000 I was determined to become directly involved in conservation: befriend the people who made the grass roots cause, ascertain their backgrounds, discern their beliefs, understand their motivations, and familiarize myself with contemporary campaigns.

My research continued through much of 2002 by which time I had interviewed over 80 activists from Tasmania, Victoria, NSW, ACT, Queensland, and Western Australia. These interviews were confined to the people who were the most active and most committed to conservation. By virtue of their exceptional energy, dedication, and position they formed an elite. Many were campaigners for TWS, FOE, the ACF, the Greens and state-based conservation councils. Most were not. Many worked for locally based action groups in cities as well as rural areas. Activists recommended all the interviewees. In this way I worked through the greenie network.

After 80 interviews I was no longer able to maintain relative anonymity. The value of my initial approach exhausted itself. The elite cohort of activists is actually quite small. Everyone knows everyone else. They call one another frequently, coordinate activities, and meet socially and at conferences. Many had become friends. I was also involved in forest campaigns: speaking at rallies, acting as a courier and recruiter, participating in demonstrations, contributing to planning sessions, confronting police and loggers, and engaging in direct action. I was a one-person nomadic action group. My enquiries were quite obviously not simply academic. But my conservation involvement meant that, in addition to my 80 interview subjects, I had also befriended, worked with, and spoken to dozens and dozens of other activists.

By the end of 2002 I had some understanding of the people who made the cause of conservation in Australia, what motivated them, and what they believed in.

Women make up the majority of activists. They may not occupy the top leadership roles in major national organizations like the ACF but they predominate at levels where most conservation work gets done. Women frequently take the lead in local action groups and at the grass roots level.

Politically, women tend to be more independent of, and more skeptical about, party politics than men. Many men retain a sentimental attachment to the Labor cause. Women, however, are less inclined to view Labor as a natural ally of conservation. Nevertheless, leftist rhetoric is often dominant and even activists unaligned with any party tend to link conservation and rights through an all-embracing vocabulary of 'environmental justice'. They believe in saving life support systems for the sake of humanity. Perhaps they form a majority of activists.

Most activists explain their involvement in conservation as arising out of a sense of duty, obligation, and responsibility (a large proportion have Catholic backgrounds). Typically, they claim they had no choice other than to act. Action commits them to local political and social initiatives. But here they face inconsistency. By framing the struggle in terms of rights, which emphasizes universal entitlements, they erase vocabularies of duty, responsibility, and collective commitment and snuff out the commitment to contest local conditions. As rights advocates conservation activists are riddled with contradictions. Perhaps ambivalent porosity is their secret strength; contradiction may make them flexible. But

perhaps incoherence is a fatal weakness and damages conservation more than it advances it.

A significant minority of activists, however, explicitly rejects links between rights and conservation. They believe nature has intrinsic rather than instrumental value and they see their task as saving the natural world from humans, not for humans. They have little sympathy for the internationalism of the Greens and many talk of forming a conservation party with unambiguous policies on population.

In any enquiry around Australia one must be impressed by the fact that practically every suburb, town, hamlet, and locality in the country harbours a greenie or an action group fighting a development proposal, protecting a reserve, looking after wildlife or lobbying local and state government. This continent-wide level of awareness and care represents an extraordinary achievement of the conservation movement. It is an expression of people identifying with this land, adopting place as a determinant of identity, and making an effort to protect national heritage.

As with any group of impassioned folk, conservationists disagree with one another. Those devoted to a cause offering little personal gain often feel others are not pulling their weight. Resentments cloud judgments and poison relationships. Personalities clash. Political and philosophical views diverge. Disagreements arise over priorities, strategy, tactics, and aims. Some people and groups work with government and bureaucracies. Some believe in education. Others trust in direct action. Strong differences exist about compromise and participation in government-sponsored discussion groups. Some conservation organisations contributed to Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) and the Regional Forest Agreements (RFA). Others labeled the processes a sham. TWS, for example, dropped out of ESD discussions and refused to participate in the RFA. Subsequently, TWS sought to destroy the RFAs — with some success. They were scuttled in Western Australia and, following recent pre-election promises forced from the Bracks government, are effectively finished in Victoria.

The point is not to praise TWS but to convey the tremendous range of outlook among conservationists. No single group or party encompasses all conservationist opinion. Indeed, differences between conservationists preclude the possibility of such unity. It is a media and political myth that the Greens represent conservation. This suits those in power. Politics is about numbers. If the Greens vote falls then politicians conclude conservation does not matter. Many conservationists recognize the danger. They refuse to identify the cause with the fortunes of a particular political party. Conservation is too important for that.

The Greens human rights vocabulary propagates an unduly abstract idea about people, politics, society, and ecology. Their one-size-fits-all emancipatory rhetoric reduces the instance of and possibility for particularity and variation. This opposes conservation, which, above all else, celebrates place and nurtures diversity.

Postscript:

In a pre-dawn raid on 5 March 2002 Victorian police and DNRE officers busted the blockade at Goolengook, arrested and evicted the blockaders, and bulldozed the fort. They prohibited public entry to the forest, installed gates and roadblocks, provided escorts for logging vehicles, and guarded logging operations. Over the next six weeks the state government spent around $1.7 million policing Goolengook in return for royalties of some $110,000 from 90 hectares of clear felled and destroyed old-growth forest. Seventy people were arrested defending place and diversity.