

Does Earth First! Need a 12-Step?

Avalon

1996

“At Wounded Knee, there was absolutely no drinking but after that it was all drugs and alcohol, which weren’t so much an obstacle to taking action as an impediment to an effective organization, and also something that compromised our public positions.”

—Dennis Banks, American Indian Movement

A familiar routine occurs every Friday and Saturday night. As it grows dark, state and county parks fill with people and the sounds of hard rock, soft rock and acid rock reverberating off the native rocks. Through habit and a turn of a knob, escapees from urban environments mask over the sounds of crickets and wind in the trees. Soon flames from campfires leap high into the air, threatening to set nearby trees on fire—no doubt to keep the already comfortable summer night from being so scary. And finally, the Schlitz-induced rowdiness completes the taming of these “primitive” places making the landscape once again familiar.

Earth First! gatherings suffer from the same disregard for the night and our surroundings. We are prisoners of our own maladjusted habits, circumscribing our time together with booze. True, we hike a little farther from our vehicles. True, we leave our radios behind. But we go to Herculean (Haydukian) efforts to carry in ludicrous amounts of libations. And the sounds of the night are overlain by the obnoxious chants and dominating rants of inebriated individuals.

I envision a different way of coming together to mourn our losses and celebrate our connections. Every child is able to play, to feel deeply, to form bonds, without any need for booze. I’ve been on countless wilderness trips where the absence of alcohol created an atmosphere where adults explored the world more freely and with more intensity.

As a movement we have taken an essential step towards this vision by rejecting the music of the consumer culture at our gatherings. We have created our own songs which reach across human boundaries to help us connect more deeply with the natural world. Earth First! songs speak of lively resistance to a culture out of control. And I submit that the absence of radios and tape decks around the campfire has allowed musical creativity to flourish. What if there was a similar absence of alcohol?

Our music is our strength, but our beer guzzling is our weakness. On one Wild Rockies Day, vast numbers of people and vast quantities of alcohol traveled up into the mountains—at least a five hour drive each way involving equally vast quantities of gasoline—to party late into the night, then wake up and immediately drive home. Because the organizers had provided a familiar routine — tap the keg, hang out by the fire and get drunk — no one seemed to have any real contact with that place. Like snowbirds watching TV in their RVs at night, we used that place as just another scenic backdrop.

Even if it is the almighty microbrew, we are still trying to drown out the stillness of the night and the awkwardness of being together. We do the same thing that every fraternity, every sailor on shore leave does — except we export out self-absorbed drunkenness to the woods. Most of us would cringe at the thought of frat boys invading a sacred place like a cave or hot springs with cases of beer. So why is there this silent acceptance of the frat boy mentality when Earth First! is supposed to be visionary, pronouncing the sacredness of *all* wild places?

A rendezvous should not be an excuse to party; it should be a time of coming together as a community. Alcohol leads imbibers to focus on each other, excluding both the non-drinkers and the natural inhabitants of the place. People who are new to EF! are put off by the rowdy cliques of drunks. The whole scene is a direct affront to recovering alcoholics, children of alcoholics and

people uninterested in sophomoric antics. There is nothing redeeming, for instance, in jumping naked over a fire. It is sheer human arrogance, showing contempt for the power of the elements and the sacred gift of trees. Only a drunken fool (or an outright fool) abuses fire in that way—and the next day the same individuals will go off on how resource managers don't have respect for the natural processes of the land.

If we dare ask loggers to give up their livelihood, agency officials to question their bosses, corporate execs to hear the voice of the land, then we too should have the integrity to question our own habits. Alcohol has become a significant part of many activists' lives and much of our time together. References to booze can frequently be found in the writings of several Earth First!ers. It's become a part of this movement's identity much like the monkeywrench. Defining oneself through alcohol seems a lot like alcoholism to me.

More than just having a bunch of lushes in our ranks. I believe Earth First! itself is an alcoholic movement. Otherwise, there wouldn't have been such a controversy over the decision to make this year's Northwest rendezvous alcohol-free. It would simply have been one of the many choices that rendezvous organizers must always make regarding how to integrate ourselves with the landscape. The boycott of the rendezvous by some activists should be a clear warning that alcoholism is amidst us.

But wait, you say, rendezvous are our one chance to party with old friends. First, the EF!ers I know who say this have endless parties in their lives back in the cities in which they live or pass through. And secondly, to build a lasting movement it's imperative we strive for deeper ways to interact with friends we don't often see. Limiting our drinking binges to a post-rendezvous party in a nearby city, as the NW rendezvous did this year, seems like the direction we should be heading.

Making a gathering alcohol-free is similar to requiring people to hike to the camping and meeting areas. I have always enjoyed camping well away from the parking lot, but it is good that the decision was made for me because I tend to drive as close as I can get to my destination. I know I am not alone. Many of us would sleep inside our vehicles or camp next to them out of habit. So it is interesting to note the response to the alcohol-free NW rendezvous. Some denounced the organizers' decision as an affront to freedom and personal choice with the same vigor and the same arguments as wise users denouncing the closing of lands to ATV use.

Alcohol is a tool of oppression, not freedom. Throughout history alcohol has torn apart the social fabric of Indigenous populations. Drugs and alcohol have been used to subjugate the masses and pacify discontent. Look at the effects of alcohol on the American Indian Movement (AIM). Look at the effects of coke on the Black Panthers and pot on the sixties radicals. Riots and revolution are staved off by addiction and numbness. The Zapatistas know this. The EZLN prohibits alcohol in regions where they operate.

In the heavy drinking lands of the northern Rockies, open disregard for a no-alcohol agreement was the norm during a weeklong walk for Cove-Mallard. Our one strong Nez Perce ally brought us, elk meat one evening. He had wanted to say a prayer when the meal was served but felt that praying was inappropriate when so many people had beers in their hands. His decision to bring his two teen-aged sons had been based on the event being publicized as alcohol-free. He left at first light, very displeased.

After enduring three summers at Cove/Mallard, I've come to appreciate the alcohol-free base camps of other campaigns. Yes, it is excruciatingly painful to be amidst destruction day in and day out. The pain accumulates, but does liquor wash it away? Booze just numbs that pain for

a little while, dulling our passion and our clarity. Drinking is a temporary holding pattern that takes you ever closer to crashing.

There, on the edge of the largest, wildest landscape in the lower 48, several activists were dangerously close to crashing last summer. A few activists were regularly drunk before dinner; a problem alcoholic was asked to take some time away; friends provided beer to someone else who desired to stay sober but has no self control. I think it's time we tried to take better care of ourselves. Behind the endless flow of alcohol are a few individuals who don't have control. There are many more who appear to be choosing a self-destructive path. Am I supposed to remain silent while my friends use a bottle like a slow bullet to the head? Then there are those who drink because that's what they've always known. Meanwhile, our social skills atrophy and our so-called tribal bonds remain shallow.

To those of you who are new to Earth First!, please don't let this article make you anxious about getting involved. There are others who feel as I do and maybe we can more actively challenge old assumptions about what it means to have a good time and be in solidarity with one another. Earth First! has evolved away from a flag-waving, good-old boy machismo. I'm sure the evolution will continue.

I hope this does not spur a debate on "the merits of alcohol." We have a lot of work to do. Let's acknowledge that alcohol can get in the way of this work and let's attempt to limit its influence on our lives. If we are approaching the end of the era of mammals and reptiles and amphibians, it seems disrespectful to always be getting drunk at Mother Nature's deathbed.

Letter replies

To the People,

In support of the recent article by Avalon, "Does EF! Need a 11 Step?" One step simply placed away from having alcohol at gathering would suffice... and as the author implies, would do more to honor the Earth and her children than any number of actions may ever accomplish. Of course, the changes we make in our own lives are always the hardest... and the most necessary. Should this idea find agreement and consensus (is this possible?) please publish this announcement so that I can make plans to attend an EF! gathering where clarity of vision strengthens our tribe, and respect honors every relation.

—Shanú

Dear SFB,

Avalon is right to suggest that we need to watch out for our friends whose drinking has become a problem. Silence is complicity. However, I take issue with his characterization of the rowdy fires at Rendezvous (that is, the drinking and fire dancing) as being somehow spiritually deficient. If I understand Avalon correctly, proper integration into a sacral landscape requires us to connect to the land and each other in a way that seems surprisingly similar to church on Sunday.

My disagreement with this is that I feel total exuberance is often the highest attainment of spirituality, and that alcohol can facilitate such exuberance. It is no coincidence that booze has for centuries been known as "spirits."

There is a famous Thoreau quote, often misunderstood: “In wildness is the preservation of the world.” Thoreau’s wildness is not just wilderness, some other-than-human artifact of civilization. The wildness Thoreau spoke of has a lot to do with human spirit, with the unquenchable green fire in our eyes. The wildness generated around an EF! campfire is, at its best, the apogee of such wildness. I hope that never changes.

Deliriously yours,

—Chester Woolah

Dear Avalon fer Brains
You go vegan, I’ll go sober.

—A damn Sot

Dear Hell raisers,

While I am in agreement with universal sobriety as an admirable goal, words can scarcely describe my astonishment at Avalon’s suggestion in the June EF! Journal that Earth First!ers should be intolerant of those who drink beer at wilderness reunions and celebrations. Remember that alcohol is the only important drug that corporate America has not currently succeeded in banning and using as a tool for political harassment. The theory, I suppose, is that drinking beer at EF! reunions is a recent deviation that necessarily equals drunkenness, which in turn implies chronic alcoholism and political ineffectiveness in between such events.

I’ve been around political activists of every stripe for decades, and believe that if you eliminated beer drinkers, pot smokers, tobacco addicts, or (fill in the blank) and their close friends in an attempt to meet a drug free standard of higher spiritual consciousness within almost any political organization, you’d have a bunch of conservative Southern Baptist- types who probably couldn’t organize their way out of a paper bag.

Beginning with focusing attention on personal lifestyle issues that have little or nothing to do with external political effectiveness, and by opposing the development of political unity through socializing around a beer keg, we could logically branch out in other obvious directions. We could exclude not only the heathens who trouble Avalon by chanting and jumping naked over fires, but those who drive cars, non-vegetarians, those who have kids, leather shoes, etc.

And if we really want to do this thing up right, we could probably find revisionist anthropologists willing to claim that prehistoric societies never used alcohol or herbal drugs for religious or celebratory purposes. We could attack groups like the Native American Church who some may suppose use peyote only as a phony substitute for deep spiritual unity.

Arguably, if the feds wanted to sow the maximum amount of dissent among rank and file EF!ers, one of the easiest ways to do so would be to find a Native American agent who could effectively monkeywrench EF! traditions by imposing their own superior “Native American” values in order to guilt trip any EF!ers who like to drink beer with friends.

I urge those who believe a significant focus of Earth First! should be centered on personal lifestyle issues rather than opposing the sins of the giant industrial corporations to form a tiny puritanical little neo-religious cult of their very own. I predict the work of policing the correct consciousness within such a group would leave little time for political activism directed against what most of us can agree is a seriously troubled and spiritually deficient world.

Unrepentantly pro-choice,

—Roger Baker

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Earth First! Journal, Litha 1996, Page 3 & 28.

<www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/key_docs/ef_16_6_1.pdf>

Plus, Earth First! Journal, August-September 1996, Page 3 & 30.

<www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/key_docs/ef_16_7_1.pdf>

‘Dear Shit for Brains’ (SFB) is the title of the Letter to the Editor section of the Earth First!
Journal.

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