

READINGS

[Essay]

THE IDOLS OF ENVIRONMENTALISM

By Curtis White, from a two-part series published this spring in Orion. White's "The Spirit of Disobedience" appeared in the April 2006 issue of Harper's Magazine.

Environmental destruction proceeds apace in spite of all the warnings, the good science, the 501(c)(3) organizations with their memberships in the millions, the poll results, and the martyrs perched high in the branches of sequoias or shot dead in the Amazon. This is so not because of a power that we must resist. It is because we are weak and fearful. Only a weak and fearful society could invest so much desperate energy in protecting activities that are the equivalent of suicide.

For instance, trading carbon-emission credits, and creating markets in greenhouse gases as a means of controlling global warming, is not a way of saying we're so confident in the strength of the free-market system that we can trust it to fix even the problems it creates. No, it's a way of saying that we are so frightened by the prospect of stepping outside the market system on which we depend for our national wealth, our jobs, and our sense of normalcy that we will let the logic of that system try to correct its own excesses even when we know we're just kidding ourselves. This delusional strategy is

embedded in the Kyoto Protocol, which is little more than a complex scheme to create an international market in pollution. Even Kyoto, of which we speak longingly—"Oh, if only we would join it!"—is not an answer to our problem but a capitulation to it, so concerned is it to protect what it calls "economic growth and development." Kyoto is a form of whistling past the graveyard. And it is not just corporations who do this whistling; we all have our own little stake in the world capitalism has made, so we all do the whistling.

The problem for even the best-intentioned environmental activism is that it imagines it must confront a problem external to itself. Confront the bulldozers. Confront the chain saws. Fight the power. What the environmental movement does not acknowledge is that something in the very fabric of our daily life is deeply antinature as well as antihuman. It inhabits not just bad guy CEOs but nearly every working American, environmentalists included.

It is true that there are cruel and greedy CEOs, few in number, who are indifferent to everything except money, and so the North Atlantic gets stripped of cod and any number of other species taken incidentally in what is the factory trawler's wet version of a scorched-earth policy. Nevertheless, all that we perceive to be the destructiveness of corporate culture in relation to nature is not the consequence of its power, or of its capacity for dominating nature ("taming," as it was once put, as if nature were a lion act at the circus). Believing in powerful corporate evildoers as the source of our problems, we think in cartoons.

Besides, corporations are powerless to be anything other than what they are. Far from being perverse merchants of greed hell-bent on destruction, these entities are as bewildered as we are. Capitalism has a way of reasoning, a *logos*. Capitalism is in the position of the notorious scorpion who persuades the fox to ferry him across a river, arguing that he won't sting the fox because it wouldn't be in his interest to do so, since he'd drown, too. But when he stings the fox anyway, he can only say, "I did it because it is in my nature." In the same way, it's not as if businessmen perversely seek to destroy their own world. They have vacation homes in New England and enjoy walks in the forest. They simply have other priorities.

The idea that corporate villains are to blame for the sorry state of the natural world is

[Poem]

EDEN

By Ina Rousseau, from the April issue of Poetry. The poem first appeared in South Africa in 1954. Translated from the Afrikaans by J. M. Coetzee.

Somewhere in Eden, after all this time,
does there still stand, abandoned, like
a ruined city, gates sealed with grisly nails,
the luckless garden?

Is sultry day still followed there
by sultry dusk, sultry night,
where on the branches fallow and purple
the fruit hangs rotting?

Is there still, underground,
spreading like lace among the rocks
a network of unexploited lodes,
onyx and gold?

Through the lush greenery
their wash echoing afar
do there still flow the four glassy streams
of which no mortal drinks?

Somewhere in Eden, after all this time,
does there still stand, like a city in ruins,
forsaken, doomed to slow decay,
the failed garden?

what Francis Bacon called an "idol of the tribe." An idol is a truth based on insufficient evidence but maintained by constant affirmation within a tribe of believers. Idols do not fall easily or often. Tribes are capable of exerting will based on principles, but they are capable only with the greatest difficulty of willing the destruction of their own principles. It's as if they feel that it is better to stagger from frustration to frustration than to return honestly to the question, Does what we believe actually make sense? Fallen idols are always accompanied by tragic disillusionment, but this is in fact a good thing. If they don't fall, there is no hope for discovering the real problems and the best and truest responses to them. All environmentalists understand that the global crisis we are experiencing requires urgent action, but not everyone understands that if our activism is driven by idols we can exhaust ourselves with effort while having little effect on the crisis. Our efforts may instead sustain the crisis.

The belief that corporate power is the unique source of our problems is not the only idol we are subject to. There is an idol even in the language we use to account for our problems. Our dependence on the scientific language of "environment," "ecology," "diversity," "habitat," and "ecosystem" is a way of acknowledging the superiority of the kind of rationality that serves corporate capitalism. You can pump this many tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere without disturbing the major climatic systems. This much contiguous habitat is necessary to sustain a population allowing for a viable gene pool for this species. We'll keep a list, a running tally of endangered species, and we'll monitor their numbers, and when that number hits a specified threshold we'll say they are "healthy," or we'll say they are "extinct."

I am not speaking here of all the notorious problems associated with proving scientifically the significance of environmental destruction. My concern is with the wisdom of using as our primary weapon the rhetoric and logic of the entities we suspect of causing our problems in the first place. Perhaps we support legalistic responses to problems, with all their techno-scientific descriptors, out of a sense that this is the best we can do for the moment. But eventually we come to adopt this mind-set ourselves. Corporate executives are perfectly comfortable with it, and corporate philanthropists give their money to environmental organizations that speak its language. Unfortunately, it also turns environmentalists into quislings, collaborators, and virtuous practitioners of a cost-benefit logic figured in songbirds.

Because we have accepted this rationalist *logos* as the only legitimate means of debate, we are willing to think that what we need is a balance be-