

# REDNECK FOR WILDERNESS

## EARTH FIRST! COFOUNDER DAVE FOREMAN ON BEING A TRUE CONSERVATIVE

JEREMY LLOYD

**B**efore meeting Dave Foreman at his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico, I spent three days backpacking in the Pecos Wilderness Area, a two-hundred-thousand-acre tract granted the highest level of federal protection. Along the way I experienced frost, sunburn, hail, rain, dehydration, and swollen streams — and I loved every minute of it. Clearly, like many other Americans, I have what Foreman calls the “wilderness gene.”

It's thanks to the work of conservationists like Foreman, whom Audubon magazine named one of the hundred Champions of Conservation of the Twentieth Century, that places like the Pecos received protection through the 1964 Wilderness Act. Foreman served for many years as Southwest regional representative of the Wilderness Society, which received widespread bipartisan support, as had the conservation movement as a whole since its founding a century before. Then, in the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan appointed as secretary of the interior the notorious antienvironmentalist James G. Watt, who once remarked that our responsibility to the land is to “occupy” it until Jesus returns. After that, Republicans began to dismiss concerns about the environment as impediments to economic growth.

As the environmental movement matured, grass-roots organizing was replaced by more professional and career-minded staffers — people who hardly even visited the places they were trying to save. Foreman could only watch helplessly as millions of acres in his native West — areas that were prime candidates for federal wilderness designation — were denied protection by the government and instead marked as fair game for the timber industry. Wilderness lovers had run out of options. The nonviolence of the civil-rights era was still fresh in the nation's memory, but the more recent writings of Edward Abbey — particularly his novel *The Monkeywrench Gang* — lent new appeal to the use of violence in defense of nature. One of many activists who took Abbey's message to heart, Foreman cofounded the radical environmental-protection group Earth First!

In its original manifestation, Earth First! was by no means the countercultural organization it eventually became. Overtly patriotic and steeped in cowboy mythology, it announced its

goal of returning “vigor, joy, and enthusiasm to the tired, unimaginative environmental movement.” Its members wanted to dream big, to slow down the machine of industrial society, and, as Susan Zakin puts it in her book *Coyotes and Town Dogs* (an account of the group's origins), to “ask for more than you can get.” Forget a national park here, a wildlife preserve there, so many of them isolated islands of habitat surrounded by development. What was needed instead was conservation on a continental scale — not primarily for humans, but for the creatures that had been living here since long before we arrived. Foreman and his allies envisioned a future when wolves would once again be able to roam unmolested from Mexico to Alaska.

In the meantime, Earth First! took up the more immediate task of defending beloved canyons, mesas, and forests by following Abbey's dictum that “if wilderness is outlawed, only outlaws can save wilderness.” In *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching* (Abzug Press) and *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior* (Three Rivers Press) Foreman vigorously defends tree-spiking — putting metal spikes in trees to damage loggers' saws — and other forms of sabotage, placing them within the honorable American tradition of resistance exemplified by the Boston Tea Party. Human life, Foreman said, must always be respected in such acts; machines, not living beings, were the target. As for Foreman, he suffered permanent knee damage after being dragged beneath a truck whose driver was attempting to run him over at a blockade in Oregon.

“No compromise with slaveholders!” declared nineteenth-century abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. “No compromise in defense of Mother Earth!” bellowed Foreman in 1980.

Foreman eventually left Earth First! after less than a decade. The group was outgrowing its original close-knit character and changing its focus, he says, due to the influence of Marxist and anarchist members. To Foreman, these were not changes for the better. Another sure sign that the game was up for him was the morning in 1989 when he awoke in bed to find three FBI agents pointing guns in his face. (He was arrested for conspiracy to sabotage power lines but was later acquitted of the charges against him.)



BRIAN JOLLEY

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*Foreman had never intended Earth First! to be revolutionary. If conservation lay at its heart, he felt, then its intent was ultimately conservative. But the Right saw it differently.*

*"You dirty communist bastard! Why don't you go back to Russia!" screamed Les Moore, the heavy-equipment operator who tried to run Foreman over in 1983.*

*"But, Les," Foreman replied, "I'm a registered Republican."*

*In Coyotes and Town Dogs, Zakin describes the incident as "the only documented case of one-upmanship by an environmentalist lying on his back in the mud, a fat rubber tire inches from his face."*

*After his departure from Earth First!, Foreman returned to the hard work of wilderness preservation, founding the Wildlands Project and editing and publishing Wild Earth magazine for twelve years, until it folded earlier this year. According to author Michael Frome, Foreman has read and digested more books on wilderness and the environment than perhaps anyone else alive. He's written his fair share, too. Among his more recent books are The Big Outside (Three Rivers Press), coauthored with Howie Wolke; The Lobo Outback Funeral Home (Johnson Books), a novel; and Rewilding North America: A Vision for Conservation in the 21st Century (Island Press). He currently has two additional books awaiting publication: The Myth(s) of the Environmental Movement and The War against Nature.*

*It is remarkable the degree to which mainstream environmental groups have caught up with the original goals of Earth First! The removal of dams has become common policy for achieving ecological restoration of rivers. And scientists and conservationists alike are taking seriously the "megalinkage" model of preserving wildlife corridors that would connect volcanoes in Central America to the Brooks Range in Alaska — thus saving not just individual species but whole ecosystems.*

*For decades Foreman has helped inject passion, courage, and muscle into the environmental movement when it needed it most. At fifty-nine, he is still doing so through the newly formed Rewilding Institute. As for his former radicalism, Foreman no longer advocates monkeywrenching, though neither does he disavow what he did. These days he appears to find it more productive to tap into what he sees as an existing social consensus favoring conservation.*

**Lloyd:** You're currently finishing a new book called *The Myth(s) of the Environmental Movement*. What are some of those myths?



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**Foreman:** The standard myth of the environmental movement is that with the first Earth Day, in 1970, wilderness conservation broadened its concern to include issues such as urbanization and the impact of technology and pollution on human health. I think this is a myth because I see conservation and environmentalism as two separate movements. They're sister movements, certainly, and they need to work together, but I think it's historically and operationally inaccurate to think of them as a single movement. And trying to cram the two movements together has led to problems. For example, some leftist, social-justice-oriented environmentalists don't know the first thing about conservation and dismiss wilderness as a bourgeois irrelevancy. Both movements would be stronger if they were kept separate.

I hate the word *environment*. You can love a forest. You can love a mountain. You can love a plant. But how can you love an abstract concept like the environment? To talk about forests, mountains, meadows, and rivers has much greater force. You can drill for oil in "ANWR," but it's a lot harder to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, because the full name has more power. The environmental movement should have called itself "the human-health movement," because that's basically what it cares about: the impact of pollution, urbanization, and everything else on human health.

The other myth of environmentalism is the stereotype that accompanies it: that environmentalists are hip, overeducated, vegetarian urbanites who wear Birkenstocks, don't like guns, and constitute a special-interest group within the Democratic Party. There are many people out there who would otherwise support conservation but are turned off by this stereotype. These are the people we need to reach, and they include plenty of folks who hunt and fish. The Sierra Club — 20 percent of whose members hunt or fish — finally has a hunter-angler outreach program to bridge this gap. And other groups of conservation-minded hunters and anglers are forming.

The base of support for both environmentalism and conservation right now is within the progressive movement and the Democratic Party, because the Republican Party has been hijacked by nut cases. I mean, even Barry Goldwater [former U.S. senator and father of the modern conservative movement] said back in 1989 that the Republican Party had been taken over by kooks. These people have destroyed the very idea of conservatism, because they aren't conservative at all; they are radicals bent on repealing the twentieth century, and they've been very effective.

**Lloyd:** Few people today would guess that Republican



Senator Trent Lott supported the Endangered Species Act in the 1970s. At what point did the environment become such a partisan issue?

**Foreman:** There are historic ties between real conservatism and conservation. But in 1980 Ronald Reagan declared himself a “sagebrush rebel,” appointing James Watt as secretary of the interior and Anne Gorsuch as head of the Environmental Protection Agency. The Republican Party became the corporate party, or the nationalist party, or the Christian party, depending on which constituency you belonged to. At the same time, conservationists and environmentalists began to drift more and more toward the Democratic Party and quit talking to Republican members of Congress.

I’m working right now to bridge this partisan divide and get environmentalists and conservationists to start talking to Republican politicians again. If we could get just a half dozen Republican senators and a dozen or so Republican representatives to pay attention to us, we could win some of these narrow votes on environmental issues. I think the reason these people aren’t voting our way is because nobody talks to them.

**Lloyd:** What do you see as the prospects for conservation and environmental protection during the second term of the Bush administration?

**Foreman:** I think we could see some truly horrifying things happen. If President Bush gets his way and appoints these so-called Federalists to the Supreme Court, they’re going to repeal some of the major legal accomplishments of the last hundred years. They’re going to say that the Commerce Clause of the

Constitution, which allows the federal government to regulate interstate commerce, has been overused for conservation and environmental and social legislation. And they’re going to declare the Endangered Species Act unconstitutional.

Right now we’re seeing a breakdown of the very idea of the national forests. Bush’s reversal of the Roadless Area Rule on federal lands has transferred authority to the states. Ever since we created the first forest preserve in 1891, these have been federal lands managed under federal standards. We shouldn’t hand them off to the state governors. As badly as the federal lands are managed, the state lands are generally managed worse. But the radical Right wanted to give the national forests and parks to the states because they’re more easily controlled by industry. For all practical purposes, industrial lobbyists are already in charge of the public lands and our conservation laws. And we’re likely to see more of this in the coming years.

**Lloyd:** Do you see a new movement rising up to oppose these developments?

**Foreman:** I hope so, but I’m concerned that there is so much pressure on conservationists, from both the Left and the Right, to compromise. We’re seeing a weakening of the movement at a time when we need it to be tougher. Groups are being pressed to sit down and “work things out” with their opponents. But you end up with bad compromises that way.

**Lloyd:** What special protection does federal wilderness designation provide?

**Foreman:** The Wilderness Act, which was enacted after World War II, grew out of the realization among citizen conservationists that they could not trust the forest service and the park service to manage federal lands properly and protect wilderness values on those lands. We needed Congress to pass a law establishing a system of national preserves within which you cannot build roads, cut timber, or set up resorts — because the evidence shows that when you build roads for logging, for example, they bring in all kinds of other development, which has a destructive impact on wildlife and the integrity of ecosystems.

**Lloyd:** Many environmental woes can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution of two centuries ago, but you place the real beginning ten thousand years ago.

**Foreman:** In light of newer evidence, I’d place it even farther back. We know from the fossil record that there have been five major periods of extinction in the last 500 million years, and what paleontologists, ecologists, and other scientists have realized over the last thirty or forty years is that we’re right in the middle of another mass extinction — this one caused by human beings. If we examine the fossil record over the last forty thousand years, we can see that extinction occurred as human beings spread out across Africa and around the world, encountering and hunting big animals who had never before had any experience with something like us. We caused mass extinctions wherever we went, and plenty of people don’t want to face up to that: that the tribes who came to the Americas caused the extinction of mammoths, mastodons, and other animals. And I acknowledge that my ancestors in Europe did the same thing; plus they probably caused the extinction of the

Neanderthals, our closest relatives. It's not a matter of blaming anybody, but of acknowledging this reality, the evidence for which is pretty strong.

So first came the Stone Age, when highly skilled hunters began to spread around the world. Then came the development of agriculture, which had an impact on nature fundamentally different from anything that had preceded it, because with agriculture we took ourselves out of the existing ecosystem and began to create our own ecosystems. That, in many ways, not only alienated us from nature but freed us from nature and led to our domesticating nature, in the sense that it removed us from the food chain to which all other creatures belong. Suddenly our population took off, since the natural controls were no longer there. Ten thousand years ago, when we first began to practice agriculture, there were probably only 5 to 10 million human beings on the entire planet.

More-recent developments have continued to liberate us from the confines of nature, including the use of fossil fuels, industrialization, and modern medicine. This began five hundred years ago, as European countries began to explore and colonize the rest of the world, and industrialization upped the ante.

Now extinction is being caused by sheer numbers alone. There are 6 billion of us, and more of us are using heightened technology. The recent growth of the middle class in China and India is accompanied by expanded greenhouse-gas emissions, both from the industrialization of those countries and from the exploding use of automobiles there.

**Lloyd:** To the extent that extinction is rooted in human history and global culture, it seems a part of our historical trajectory. Is there any reason to believe, if the Europeans hadn't colonized the globe, that it wouldn't have happened eventually with, say, Native American culture?

**Foreman:** Well, look at what the Aztecs and the Mayans did to their ecosystems: they flayed the land just as badly as the Assyrians and the Babylonians did. It's hard to find an example of a sustainable human society. We always seem to outgrow our way, and over the last fifty thousand years, it seems that what we've done is convert more and more of the earth into living space for human beings, leaving less and less room for other species, and that's what drives extinction.

Nobody is paying much attention to population growth anymore. In 1970, when I first got involved with conservation, population growth was at the top of everybody's list. Now there are twice as many people in the world, and we pretend the problem doesn't exist. Even the Sierra Club doesn't talk about overpopulation anymore; it's too controversial. If we're not going to talk about the fundamental cause of ecological damage, then I'm not sure what can be done to reduce it in the long term. As important as it is to live more simply, I think we have to acknowledge that no matter how simply we live, the diversity of life just can't exist in the presence of too many human beings.

**Lloyd:** What has the developing field of conservation biology taught us?

**Foreman:** About thirty years ago, as field biologists all over the world began to recognize the incredible rate of extinction,



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they also began to ask what we could do about it: specifically, how could we apply the lessons of ecological research to designing protected areas? Our national parks and wilderness areas were initially designed to be nice to look at — and they were inspiring. But the question now became: how can we protect the diversity of species within the parks? That was the genesis of conservation biology, which was really launched by my friend Michael Soule. For the last twenty-five years I've been trying to explain conservation biology to conservationists, from the Sierra Club to local grass-roots groups, to show how we can use that research to accomplish much more of what we want to do on the ground.

*(end of excerpt)*