

CHAPTER 14

IN THE WILD WITH "THE TOWN CRIER OF THE GLOBAL VILLAGE"

John Seed, an Australian whom the *Christian Science Monitor* has called "the town crier of the global village," doesn't remember exactly how he came to environmental activism. Like many early Earth Firsters in the United States, he protested against the Vietnam War as a teenager, and there were one or two environmental preservation marches that he vaguely recalls as well. When he eventually allowed himself to be swept away by a swell of environmental consciousness, it came with ambivalence and even guilt. He was a talented artist, a committed Buddhist, and a farmer. "For some time after I got involved," he says in a soft accent with mixed Australian and British tones (he lived for a time in Britain), "I remember wondering if I was just trying to escape from meditation or life back on the farm, looking for something more exciting to do. I didn't really trust that strong impulse that got me involved in environmentalism....I just found that more and more I was going out there, doing actions and (spending time) on the road."¹

Since then, the late 1970s, Seed has yet to stop traveling. Co-founder of a wildly popular environmental awareness workshop called the Council of All Beings, Seed spends less than half of his time at home in Lismore, New South Wales. His journeys usually take him to the U.S. for several months each spring, and from there he may travel to Eastern Europe, or wherever else he is called. The heart and soul of Seed's activism, however, are the world's rainforests. In the early 1980s he began publishing the *World Rainforest Report* "out of a shack that had a solar panel that powered his computer," says Randy Hayes, co-founder of the Rainforest Action Network. "He put out this simple rag with this lofty title, and people like [noted biologist] Paul Ehrlich thought this was one of the most useful documents out there in the early days before rainforests became 'chic.'"² With the *Report* known worldwide today, and having seen his Rainforest Information Center, after which Hayes' group in the U.S. is patterned, grow to stand

on its own, the forty-four year old Seed has all but traded in office work for a lap-top computer and a permanent plane ticket.

Spirit and Action

Why, Seed wonders, should he sit talking for a book that is going to "waste paper" when he could be out fighting for the Earth? Like Mike Roselle, he is both loathe to stay for long and a great talker when he can be pinned down. And like Roselle, there is no doubt that his heart is in *action*. Talking into a tape recorder is excruciating. Discomfort endured for the Earth, on the other hand bothers Seed but little. "I've got no problem, like I did a couple of weeks ago, chaining myself by the neck to the suspension of a vehicle to stop that vehicle from being moved from the path of logging crews wanting to get in and log the forest," Seed says. It took a long time before the police realized that their saws were no match for the Kryptonite bicycle lock. Their only option was to dismantle the vehicle's suspension. That done, Seed was arrested and driven two hours to the nearest police station for booking. "Then as soon as they let me go I took the lock off so it was ready for the next action. I've got no trouble with that. It's not that I'm brave. It's just that's what I'm into, that's what I like to do. But as far as answering questions, I'm just not into it!"

Yet the amiable Aussie talks on. Looking back on it, Seed locates the roots of his environmental addiction in the varied and visually stunning places around his childhood home: the sandstone country, dense eucalyptus forests, and the rocks and surf of the coastline around Sydney. "I think I was completely unconscious of it when I was growing up, but it had a profound effect in retrospect," Seed says. "I used to go surfing on the weekends when I was in school. There's something totally natural about it—you couldn't cheat or lie. You either caught the wave or got dumped." In that sort of natural honesty Seed found both the other-worldly and the basic. "I feel very spiritual about nature," he says. "That's where I have my spiritual experiences. That's the touchstone against which everything else has got to ring true." Indeed, nature's *truth* is what drives him to fight for the Earth in a variety of creative ways, the object of all of them being the elimination of the Eco-Wall through individual enlightenment and action. "It seems to me that unless there is a radical, thoroughgoing, *unprecedented* change in consciousness sweeping throughout the human race within a decade or so, we can kiss complex life good-bye," he says imploringly.

To help inculcate others to the need for such change, he and environmental activist Joanna Macy created the Council of All Beings. A Council is a workshop, a fluid, flexible process involving people who make a conscious decision at the beginning to work to heal the planet. From there, a Council sometimes involves a series of exercises designed to enable participants to feel their part in nature. Everyone disperses to the surrounding environment.

to discover, and then to *become*, some aspect of the local non-human natural world. At the Council, these beings vent their anger and frustration at the stand-ins for the human population, then share a gift of some sort, and later dance and celebrate their oneness. Seed figures he has conducted somewhere between sixty and 100 Councils and has become so inundated with them that he no longer leads them in North America, but instead devotes his time training workshop facilitators. No one may make a profit from a Council; it is all tilled back into the Earth, going to fund a variety of environmental projects. The process seeks to motivate people like no other tool at their disposal to live and act in ways contrary to the Eco-Wall; in Seed's words, the Council of All Beings moves people "from having ecological ideas to having ecological identity, ecological self....In the end, what we want to do is to turn people into activists."

The Fight for the Nightcap

Seed's own serious environmental activism began in the rainforests of the Nightcap National Park in New South Wales in 1979. There, 300 protestors demanded an environmental impact study of proposed logging in the Park, which resembled a U.S. National Forest in its lack of protection from development. The Park's huge trees were a remnant of a rain forest that covered Australia as long as 100 million years ago, and it included Aboriginal initiation and burial sites. The activists undertook civil disobedience in the virgin rainforest near Terania Creek by camping among the trees and walking slowly in front of bulldozers cutting a road into the area. This, the first full-scale environmental protest in Australian history, occurred nearly four years before the first comparable Earth First! action in the United States.

Two ministers of Parliament supported the activists' demands, and the study was undertaken. When the inquiry wholly ignored the protestors' proposal for a 247,000-acre National Park and instead allowed logging of portions of the rainforest, the activists again took up their struggle. It continued for three years. Near the end, in July 1982, the Nightcap Action Group (NAG), including Seed, set up camp on Mt. Nardi in a last-ditch effort to save what forest they could from the unrelenting logging. Hundreds of people joined them, and seventy were arrested under a new, stricter trespassing law passed in reaction to their efforts. Seed and others soon discovered logging in Griers Scrub, an area that none of them had ever visited because it was on the opposite side of the range from their protests. From their camp atop the mountain, however, they could hear the chain saws hundreds of feet below. Rather than wait for the logging to come up the mountain, they went down to confront the loggers.

It took several tries to negotiate the steep canyon. "Eventually," Seed says, "we got down there, and when we did we discovered the most beautiful

flooded gum trees, *Eucalyptus grandis*, that we'd ever seen. Massive, mighty trees, and these were the ones being logged." In the ensuing fight, both sides employed intensive psychological warfare. The protestors' strength was their non-violent approach, their mere presence in the forest. The loggers, who were paid three to four times what they normally would receive to stay at the site despite the protestors, answered by spiting the protestors, cutting the biggest of the trees. The 250 to 300 foot tall sentinels of the forest, Seed says, "would smash to pieces when they hit the ground—they were hollow up the guts. The loggers knew that, and they were doing that because they knew the amount of pain it caused us. They were saying that our presence there was worse than useless, that because we were there, they were feeling annoyed. And when they felt annoyed, they cut the old trees down."

When the activists attempted to alert the authorities to logging irregularities at Griers Scrub, such as cutting on slopes as steep as fifty degrees, ignoring erosion mitigation steps, and "harvesting" of unmarked trees, they were arrested. They followed with more direct civil disobedience actions, steeling themselves against the day that the loggers would attack Mt. Nardi itself. Public sentiment for permanent preservation of the Park was running upwards of seventy percent. The protestors had the people on their side. What they needed was time.

Time ran out early one September morning. The NAG activists maintained a constant vigil along the lone road to Mt. Nardi. To slow the onslaught they felt was certain, they sabotaged the roadway, removing steel cattle guards at several crossings and blocking the road with cars. They also prepared the makings of a bonfire in the middle of the road. At three-thirty the radio crackled with the news that trucks were rolling up the mountain. Those in the base camp scrambled down the slope, set fire to the huge mound of debris, and gathered behind it as the police-escorted bulldozers trundled up the road. Cars and cattle guards were easily negotiated. Then the NAG protestors took their places in the middle of the road in a last-ditch effort to halt the column, but to no avail. A bulldozer casually dispensed with every obstacle, eventually pushing the blazing fire into some of the road sitters and over the edge. Police carted off the road sitters. By dawn the way was clear.

Swatted away like flies, within a matter of days the activists saw the lush mountain begin to fall. They continued their blockades in hopes of slowing the cutting of thousand year-old brushbox trees, a companion of eucalyptus and rainforest species. Tensions on the part of the authorities began to rise, and things got especially nasty on October 1, 1982, when police cleared protestors from the path of the logging trucks using their cars and even the trucks, running over and injuring some. Forty more activists were arrested. But the end was at hand. Non-violent, largely non-destructive protest won out. Later that same day, a court injunction was granted, halting the logging

on Mt. Nardi. Protestors turned their blockade headquarters into a tree-planting camp while they awaited the outcome of the legal action seeking a permanent stay on logging in the Nightcap. On October 26 the New South Wales government bowed to increasing public pressure and officially set aside the entire 247,000 acres as the protected Nightcap National Park.³

Struggle for a Wild River

During the latter stages of the Nightcap protests, three members of the Tasmanian Wilderness Society (TWS) visited Mt. Nardi and were arrested for participating in a blockade. Their mission was to ascertain whether blockading might work in their struggle to save the Franklin and Gordon rivers from the first of what would be many huge dams. The Franklin was Australia's lone remaining wild river, running as it did free from the boulders left by the last glaciers through verdant rainforests to the confluence with the Gordon, and thence to the Indian Ocean on Tasmania's southwest coast. Its path was called the Franklin-Lower Gordon Wild Rivers National Park; as in New South Wales, the "park" designation held little meaning if some "higher purpose," in this case electricity production, could be invoked. The dam the TWS fought against was without a use. The Hydro-Electric Commission built dams to spur development, not to serve an immediate or emergent need.

As the river's protagonist, the TWS took a no compromise approach to its defense of the Franklin. The Tasmanian government recognized the strength of sentiment for the river, and it backed off of its big dam proposal. Instead, in 1980 it proposed a smaller one on the Gordon above its junction with the Franklin. When the upper house of the state Parliament insisted on damming the Franklin, a legislative battle ensued that stalled the project for two years. In the midst of this political battle, the matter was put to a referendum. The people were given the option of selecting the smaller dam on the upper Gordon or one which would flood much of the densely wooded watersheds of both rivers. In a stunning act of electoral defiance, one-third of the voters wrote "No Dams" on their ballots.⁴ Still, in May 1982 voters elected a pro-dam Liberal Party majority to head the provincial government, and the TWS knew its only alternative was to fight to swing public opinion their way.

The three TWS activists who were arrested with the Nightcap Action Group reported enthusiastically about the blockade strategy. Seed's group had already been invited to the island to join TWS's effort when the Nightcap victory was announced. Flush with their success, Seed and two carloads of Nightcap protestors headed toward Tasmania. They stopped at an anti-American military bases action in Victoria along the way, eventually arriving in Hobart on Tasmania's south coast. They were about to engage

in a monumental struggle, one of the greatest environmental victories by a citizens group ever achieved using direct action.

In sheer numbers, no similar environmental protest has come close: more than 2,600 people participated in the action, with 1,272 arrests. Their sacrifice was for a river on which travelers could go for days without seeing another person, meandering with the water through tree-studded gorges and amongst a temperate rainforest of exquisite beauty and delicateness, comprised primarily of myrtle beech and Big Billy and asparagus pine. Seed remembers the literal tenderness of the land well, like the still-visible ruts left by logs dragged across the ground by horse teams eighty years before. "In the sub-tropical rain forests it's not like that," Seed says, "and up in the tropics, a mark like that would be gulped up by the forest in a matter of months. But down there it's so fragile that no matter where you walk, no matter how lightly you walk, you sink *inches* into the moss. The softness of the place!" He was so troubled by the damage that a simple footstep caused that he walked as little as possible. "I felt very much like an intruder. The place wasn't built for large, heavy things like me."

Summer Camp

Activists demanded that the government halt all dam construction by December 14 or else they would act en masse. Aware that they had little chance of stopping the "march of progress" by mere threats, TWS was hard at work in the ensuing weeks. The Nightcappers were put to work establishing a food buying co-operative for the blockaders and setting up a kitchen at a site donated to the TWS by local sympathizers. Everyone involved in the long-term operation, between fifty and sixty volunteers, contributed twenty or thirty dollars a week out of their \$100 unemployment checks for food, and a crew drove to Hobart to get the best buys. "Greenie Acres," as the final base camp was called (the first was a city park that health inspectors said was unsuited for the purpose), was two miles outside of the port city of Strahan, about twenty-five miles down river from the dam site. At any one time after the blockade began, 150 or more people from throughout Australia were there, most of whom were blockaders preparing to go up river. They ate meals served in a large tent, with bread baked in an oven made entirely of materials found around town. The place had the feel of an open-air commune.

With the Strahan camp in good shape, Seed and others went up river and established a collective, called the River Base Camp, to keep an eye on the Hydrology Commission's activities and to map the area for the activists who would follow. Along the way the Nightcap Action Group had been renamed the Nomadic Action Group, but a friend sharing Seed's tent awoke one night with what became his favorite name of all for the group. She sat bolt upright in her sleep and called out, "Nightmare Action Group!"

"I've always thought of it like that ever since," Seed says. "We were a bit of a nightmare for the environmental movement, a bit like Earth First! is in the United States. They (the TWS) were freaked out because they thought we would get them in trouble or give them a bad name or something."

The NAG's reputation for stunts like removing cattle guards was widely known. When the blockades began—the government totally ignored the December 14 deadline—they took periodic two week turns at River Base Camp assisting soon-to-be arrestees. There were always two assistance groups at the camp, and before NAG arrived for its first stint, rumors spread through the camp that they might be "too radical" and generally irresponsible. Sure enough, on the first day Ian Cohen and a friend named "Annie" wandered into the bush. (Cohen seems to be a dyed-in-the-wool trouble maker: to this day he has a habit of riding the bows of nuclear-armed warships arriving in Australian ports, protesting their presence by literally holding onto the leading edge of the ship after catching up with it on his surfboard.) The two were out all night, and although Seed and the other NAG members were not alarmed, the other group was. The next morning a group took a boat up the river and found the two miscreants waiting for what they knew was an inevitable pick up, totally unrepentant after a night of hiking and otherwise enjoying themselves beneath a full moon.

River Base Camp was a bit like summer camp, with NAG and the other support people acting as counselors for a constantly changing bunch of charges. As many as 100 people each day came up on the *J-Lee-M*, a tourist boat that was loaned by the operator as a troop and supply transport ship for the duration of the blockade. All of the protestors were trained in non-violent civil disobedience in Strahan. The training included role playing exercises, where protestors acted the parts of police officers or loggers; workshops on consensus decision-making; and opportunities for the activists to get to know one another before the action. Seed, who learned civil disobedience from Quaker Peter Jones, rebelled at the training's heavy-handed and "authoritarian" bent. In fact, none of the non-violence trainers had ever participated in a non-violent protest. Seed admits, however, that the training was effective.

By the time the activists arrived at the River Base Camp, they were prepared to be arrested. When they disembarked from the *J-Lee-M* they were welcomed to the camp and then briefed on the menu of arrest choices available to them. The camp-like air of the place was added to by the expectation of the soon-to-be arrestees. These people were fully prepared to bash away at a very tangible and growing block in the Eco-Wall in the gentlest, yet most profound, way possible. Dams, those curtains of concrete and steel, do more damage to the environment in a single stroke than any other single incursion into wilderness. Even clearcuts can, over centuries,

the other way. It felt like that a lot of the time. I don't think people were ever really confident that we could pull it off." The bulldozers left, and the river was free.

When the first of the Franklin and Gordon blockade arrestees were off-loaded from the police boat in Strahan, the officers formed a human wall to prevent anyone from escaping. Although some protestors later received rough treatment at the hands of the authorities, as the police grew to understand the gentle, cooperative attitude of their captives a congenial relationship slowly developed. It lasts even today; at one of Seed's recent arrests, a police officer proudly listed the other environmental actions where she had served. "They really like it. It's like their picnic—they get a day in the bush," Seed says. "Nowadays, they don't resent any longer, as they used to, being a part of the theater of social change." The police recognize the importance of saving the forests and their crucial role in making that possible, "that without their blue uniforms things could get violent. They're the referees, part of the process of media and social change. I think they're secretly pleased by that role." They also represent an aspect of the Eco-Wall, that of anti-environmental repression and laws, that in Australia is slowly crumbling. Seed notes with glee that the Melbourne Port Authority recently ordered 500 "Police for Rainforest" bumper stickers from the local Rainforest Action Group.

From the Franklin, Seed and the NAG went to the other side of the continent, Cape Tribulation and the Daintree region of Queensland, to engage in another prolonged struggle for rainforests. The provincial government there was determined to push a road from Cape Tribulation to Bloomfield, "cutting the tropical rain forest wilderness of that area, containing the world's oldest plants, the angiosperms, in half," says Seed. "Although a tiny area—one quarter of one percent of Australia's land area—it contains fully one-third of our species of plants and animals." In 1984 a score of people shut down construction of the road. The action was all the more noteworthy because it was there that activist Doug Ferguson invented the technique of stopping machinery by burying oneself in a mound of dirt in the middle of the bulldozer's path, a tactic used throughout the world since.

Early the following year, Seed and others purchased a bus and painted it as a rainbow. They drove 1,500 miles from Lismore to the Cape to join the struggle for the Daintree once more. After two months, the authorities turned dogs on the protestors and broke through their road blockade. Such brutality made little difference, Seed says. That same Australian spirit which went unbroken despite rough treatment at the hands of the police in Tasmania remained alive. And like the Franklin and Gordon struggle, the federal government stepped in to stop the road. A Labor government soon came to power in Queensland and halted the state's court challenge to the federal action. The Daintree rainforest, like those of the Franklin and

Gordon and in New South Wales, was subsequently listed by the United Nations as a World Heritage preserve because of its unique ecosystem.

"The Last Generation"

Seed's struggles, not only for Australian rainforests but for those in Southeast Asia and South America as well, leave him with an appreciation of the enormous burden on the shoulders of everyone on the planet today. "We are inextricably imbedded in the biology of this planet," he says in a passionate voice. "That biology is being torn to shreds before our very eyes, and we're the last human generation that's going to have the chance to do anything about it." He advocates widespread direct action on the part of people in developed nations to force the essential changes. "Greenpeace is not going to save the planet, Rainforest Action Network isn't going to save the planet. It's going to be small, non-hierarchical groups of people beginning in the so-called developed countries. If enough of these get serious enough, who knows?"

Such action can only occur if there is a watershed change in the way humans interact with their world. Without scaling the Eco-Wall, humans, the rainforests, and all else will not long survive. "What are the chances of this miraculous revolution in human consciousness? I haven't got a clue!" Seed says. "All I know is that I still feel highly motivated to spend my life doing things which would seem quite futile and stupid unless there were some chance of all of this happening. I guess there's a part of me that still feels it's all possible."