

ECOSABOTAGE FOR NATURE AMELIORATION IN EDWARD ABBEY'S *THE MONKEY WRENCH GANG*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts a critical analysis of the acts of ecosabotage for nature amelioration as portrayed in Edward Abbey's novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975). Abbey's works motivate humanity to review its behavior towards the natural world and facilitate the methods of ecological defense. This novel became an inspiration for environmental defence through various ways of sabotaging environmentally destructive human interventions. The publication of this novel inaugurated a global ecological campaign named "Earth First!" in 1979. The contemporary eco-centric movements in the West are primarily focused on direct action against man-made factors of environmental degradation. Employed as a form of civil disobedience, ecosabotage has emerged as a significant political form of protest undertaken with the purpose of safeguarding environment. The paper discusses the strategies of environmental protection put forward in the novel and also examines the social, political and ethical dimensions of this form of protest that comes dangerously close to acts of terrorism and militancy.

KEYWORDS: Amelioration, Ecosabotage, Environmental Defence, Nature, Protest

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary eco-centric movements in the West are primarily focused on direct action against man-made factors of environmental degradation. Employed as a form of civil disobedience, ecosabotage has emerged as a significant political form of protest undertaken with the purpose of safeguarding environment. The purpose of this paper is to critically analyze the acts of ecosabotage for nature amelioration as portrayed in Edward Abbey's novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975). This novel became an inspiration for environmental defence through various ways of sabotaging environmentally destructive human interventions. As Michael Martin observes, ecosabotage is "sabotage for the purpose of ecological protection" (291). The paper discusses the strategies of environmental protection put forward in the novel and examines the social, political and ethical dimensions of this form of ecosabotage, which seems to be a counter-authoritarian phenomenon.

From the morphological point of view, the term ecosabotage comprises of two words "eco" and "sabotage." While "eco" implies environment, "sabotage" is derived from the French word *sabot* that means a wooden clog that was either thrown by protesting Luddite workers into the gears of newly invented mechanical looms or simply a clumsy, noisy piece of footwear that resulted in bungled work. Sabotage means to destroy equipment, weapons or buildings to defeat

enemy. Ecosabotage focuses on sabotage of any type of industrial operation by human beings that is destructive to mother earth. It is alternatively known by several nuanced names such as ecotage, monkeywrenching, eco-terrorism etc.

The American essayist and nature writer Edward Abbey is renowned for his exceptional adoration of wilderness. Most of his writings are replete with his adventures in the West, which speak of the natural beauty and resistance against techno-centric development. Abbey's works recount his eternal love for the pristine natural beauty of the American West. About Abbey's nature excursions, James Cahalan rightly observes: "Abbey liked to give the impression to readers that he was some kind of cowboy or ranger" (xii). The significance of Abbey's contribution to ecological revolution can be known from the fact that the publication of his *Desert Solitaire* in 1968 led to the commemoration of "World Earth Day." Subsequently, the publication of his novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* in 1975 inaugurated a global ecological campaign named "Earth First!" Abbey's works motivate humanity to review its behavior towards the natural world and certainly facilitate the methods of ecological defense.

"Earth First!" has been immensely impacted by the idea of ecosabotage. According to Steve Casimiro, "Abbey's masterpiece novel [*The Monkey Wrench Gang*] launched eco-sabotage as the cool thing to do, wrapping Earth First manifesto in outrage, lust, and characters that live on after their creator is gone" (Casimiro). In this set, several eco-warriors actually pursue what Hayduke, Bonnie, Doc. Sarvis and Smith do in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. It is an extremely prominent group. Under the leadership of Dave Foreman, "Earth First!" was born in 1979 and supported and still supports the thought of monkey wrenching. The group arises out of dissatisfaction over apparent misuse of public lands, the dilapidation of roadless regions by the federal administration, and conventional preservation groups' deficiency of control in fighting these attacks bureaucratically. As Foreman has thought, the group, from the beginning, is a cluster of "Ed Abbey style conservationists... there is a group of people in the West that belong together, there is a clan of us out there, and [Edward Abbey] is the common denominator." (Temple)

The activist impulse of Abbey in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* represents the end of counterculture era revolt, ecological defence and political activism. In spite of Abbey's concern for ecological as well as political causes in the defence of wilderness, the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964 and the promise of the counterculture revolt, the exploitation of wilderness persisted. Abbey was dissatisfied with the Act and called for an alteration in the awareness of individual as well as personal way of life to deal with the ecological catastrophe. In defence of nature he supported a call for action that became more aggressive with the passage of time.

The Monkey Wrench Gang arose in a moment when there was huge disillusionment about the US politics, the counterculture as well as existing preservation groups. Abbey called for a new brand of environmentalism that involves activities such as "ecosabotage," "ecodefence," "ecoterrorism" or what James Bishop calls "environmental hooliganism" (125). As a significant work of fiction, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* narrates a tale of four eco-warriors named Hayduke, Bonnie, Doc. Sarvis and Smith who oppose any tyranny to the environment. In the novel, these characters break all obstructions, inconveniences, laws as well as standards set to control wilderness. With public adoration for wilderness and opposition to industrialism, they unite to demolish all machinery and constructions which shatter the equilibrium of bionetwork and spoil the exquisiteness of the natural world. According to Chris Diehm, such environmentally-motivated "acts of sabotage - commonly referred to as 'ecosabotage' or 'Ecotage'" are straight deeds to defend the natural world (61).

The Monkey Wrench Gang popularized the concept of ecosabotage. Michael Ryan aptly argues that, "Abbey's 1975 novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* ... promotes ecosabotage - attacks on property and machinery used in the

exploitation and destruction of wild nature - as a viable means of environmental defence" (4). The book describes several ways of ecosabotage in detail such as tree spiking, sabotage of construction equipment, sabotage of vehicles, pulling up survey stakes, destruction of powerlines, billboard cutting, etc. for instance, the eco-warrior George Hayduke says strikingly, "Always pull up survey stakes. Anywhere you find them. Always. That's the first goddamned general order in this monkey wrench business. Always pull up survey stakes" These activities of ecosabotage become crystal-clear from the narrative:

He unscrewed the oil-filler cap, took chisel and hammer and punched a hole through the oil strainer and poured in more sand. Smith removed the fuel-tank cap and emptied four quart bottles of sweet Karo syrup into the fuel tank. Injected into the cylinders, that sugar would form a solid coat of carbon on cylinder walls and piston rings. The engine should seize up like a block of iron, when they got it running. If they could get it running. (*The Monkey* 86)

Abbey criticizes contemporary culture that values material prosperity, hi-tech growth and unending advancement. Since the late 20th century, the environmental disasters have signified the clashing disagreement between the eternal material requirements of human beings and the restricted ability of the ecosystem. Humanity's uncontrolled and forceful development will certainly lead to the end of the earth. Keeping in view the growing population, increasing settlement and rising mechanization the American administration approved Abbey's resolution to safeguard the wilderness. Opposing the belief of anthropocentrism and developmentalism, Abbey puts forward his perception of nature writing and ecological defence called ecosabotage. According to Michael Sim's "*The Monkey Wrench Gang* ... popularized the notion of "monkeywrenching," imagining direct action in general, and ecological sabotage in particular, as viable and defensible means of environmental protection" (8). Abbey's method of eco-defence, though slightly extreme, is more direct and efficient.

After the Second World War, American economy underwent swift progress and initiated a golden era. This blind economic development and extreme incursion of the natural world shattered the equilibrium of bionetwork leading to mutilation of the natural world. The original motive of progress for better life slowly took the shape of unrelenting technological developmentalism. Such human attitude asked the natural world to provide more than what it could afford, which led to grave ecological catastrophe. More awareness was created with the increase in worldwide ecological tribulations like extermination of species at an alarming rate, global warming, chemical pollution, destruction of the tropical rain forests, etc. as a corrective measure, American administration broadcasted the Wilderness Act policy, under which several places were labeled wilderness lands and proposals were made for expanding national wilderness. The bill aimed at codifying as well as describing the term "wilderness." This is explicit in these words:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation. (Dilsaver 277)

The Wilderness Act set up limits against exploitative utilization of these lands, claiming the prohibition of business ventures is prohibited and roads within wilderness areas. However, in an act of pacification to industries keen on moderate utilization of wilderness and those with accessible mining privileges were permitted to carry on their tasks for a

span of twenty years. Profitable services were permitted if they were deemed to be essential for accurate entertainment progress. The President of the United States was actually given free control in settling on the utilization, governance, and mistreatment of labeled wilderness. The President was authorized to look past the area's extraordinary label in opposition to progress. Consequently, the dispute about the exploitation of wilderness did not end with the passing of this bill. The writers of the age continued to promote the wilderness cause through their writings. They critically observed two tricky exemptions given to huge business and industry. However, it seems that they didn't attain the desired results due to the ambiguous American standards pertaining to the issue of wilderness.

The Wilderness Act asserts that wilderness is a distinct unit from mankind, a space that humans visit, although do not reside. Abbey's life experiences in the wilderness suggest that he has made the wilds domestic to him and they symbolize liberty for him. *The Monkey Wrench Gang* promotes the essential ecological movement and condones sabotage against technocratic despoilers of wild nature. Michael Martin aptly argues in this context:

Sabotage in the name of environmental protection not only has occurred in real life but has also been detailed in field guides and in fiction...Edward Abbey's novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, which influenced the leaders of Earth First!, tells the story of a small group of environmental activists in the southwestern United States who, among other things, blowup railroad bridges, destroy construction machinery, and pull up survey stakes to frustrate land development and rail road construction. (292)

Abbey expresses his perception in fictive form thus:

If a stranger batters your door down with an axe, threatens your family and yourself with deadly weapons, and proceeds to loot your home of whatever he wants, he is committing what is universally recognized- by law and common morality- as a crime. In such a situation the householder has both the right and the obligation to defend himself, his family, and his property by whatever means are necessary... The American wilderness, what little remains, is now undergoing exactly such an assault. With bulldozer, earth mover, chainsaw, and dynamite the international timber, mining, and beef industries are invading our public lands- property of all Americans. (Abbey, *One Life* 29)

Notwithstanding unjust behavior of authorities, human beings can protect themselves by developing a harmonious relation with wilderness which is the most worthwhile asset of humanity. Abbey reveals the effects of developmentalism on human beings and the natural world. For instance, Hayduke, the protagonist of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* comes back from Vietnam battlefield and returns to his native land with enormous hope for constantly leading a cowboy life, like before going to the war. But he is shocked to see the entire change and shattering of his dreams: "The city of Tucson from which he came, to which he returned, was ringed now with a circle of Titan ICBM bases. The open desert was being scraped bare of all vegetation, all life, by giant D-9 bulldozers reminding him of the Rome plows leveling Vietnam" (*The Monkey* 16). It is discovered that those machine-made wasters develop in real-estate growth. There was no signal of free living creatures like horned toads, desert rats, Gila monsters and coyotes. Even the sky, that dome of delirious blue which in the past he had contemplated to be green, was turning into a deposit of the gaseous trash of the copper smelters. It appeared that a blotch of toxic air overhanged his hometown.

The outlook of "the growth for the sake of growth" not just brought about irreparable catastrophes for bionetwork but also caused severe destruction to human wellbeing. In *The Monkey Wrench Gang* another eco-warrior named Dr.

Sarvis angrily avers: "...the developers - bankers, industrialists, subdividers, freeway builders and public utility chiefs - had succeeded with less than thirty years' effort in bringing the air of Southwestern cities "up to standard," that is, as foul as any other" (*The Monkey* 233). Production brings toxins that assault children's lungs and the similar toxins gobble up the mucous membranes of numerous of several million other inhabitants. From poor visibility to eye irritation, from allergies to asthma, the trail lays directly forward, pathogenic all the way. The school children were prohibited to play outside in the open air, deep inhalation being more perilous than child molesters.

There are some scholars who condemn ecosabotage and specify that author merely presents the reality rather than any ameliorating practice. However, James Cahalan posits that Abbey lays emphasis on such philosophical discourses which aim at radical change. Cahalan says: "One brave deed performed in an honorable manner and for a life-defending cause, is worth a thousand books...Philosophy without action is the ruin of the soul ..." (217).

Developmentalism has certainly brought about irreparable damage to the American restricted wilderness. As wilderness itself is incapable of protecting itself from such nefarious human intervention, the community devoted to wilderness should itself protect on behalf of nature. In *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Dr. Sarvis being the part of the gang, acts very valiantly, which establishes the distinction between the operational eco-warriors and ordinary conservationists. Dr. Sarvis is a professor in a university. In the novel, there is a scene in which he arrives at the fifty-million-dollar new University Medical Centre to deliver a lecture on the topic "Industrial Pollution & Respiratory Illness." In new Bauhaus million-dollar classroom buildings there is smell of raw cement. The thin, elongated and a small number of windows appear gunports in a pillbox. The air-conditioning arrangement is of the current design. When Dr. Sarvis comes inside the classroom, he discovers the room overheated and the air decayed. The students appear sleepier than normal however unconcerned. "Need some air in here," the doctor complains (*The Monkey* 75). A student shrugs and the Doctor approaches the nearest window and attempts to open it. But he cannot open it as this is an air-conditioned building. Doc says, "But we need fresh air." "What do we do?" (*The Monkey* 76). One student proposes him to complaint to the management. However, Dr. Sarvis is still quiet and logical as he walks to "the steel-framed desk by the blackboard [picks] up the steel-legged chair waiting behind the desk and, holding it by seat and back, [punches] out the window glass. (*The Monkey* 76)

Being the most logical member, Doc. Sarvis frequently pleads with others to relax prior to taking action. However, he himself acts so astonishingly in the classroom that everyone is amazed at him. Ensnared in torpid atmosphere, what should humans do, endure or present various non-effective suggestions? The eco-warriors choose to oppose plainly and efficiently. They think that there is no negotiation to defend wilderness. According to Hayduke there are hardly any alternatives left: "Hopi elders, the American Indian Movement, the Black Mesa Defence Committee, all the bleeding-heart types...They tried everything else...They tried lawsuits, big fucking propaganda campaigns, politics" (*The Monkey* 169). It is certainly an era for remonstrance as quiet appeal has finished and directly, violent measures are urgently required to be taken. In order to break American technocracy road building apparatus is demolished, billboards are cut down, trees are spiked, trains derailed and Glen Canyon Dam planned to be exploded to protect wilderness from American industrialism.

The motivation to hurl a monkey wrench into the machine, or system, as means of disappointed and hostile revolt in opposition to the supremacy of industrialization is not totally new to Abbey. His thought of ecosabotage has its chronological basis. In bestowing his book to Ned Ludd, the expected head of the English cloth employees whose objections and machine contravention shuddered England in the early 19th century, Abbey admits the link between his book and the activities of Ludd and his associate textile employees. In nineteenth-century England Ludd and his associates

rose up and destroyed the latest mechanical textile looms that endangered their livelihoods, and were immediately hanged for their rebellious conduct. Similarly, in the United States, New England farmers rebelled and endeavored to demolish huge dams beside the Winnepesaukee River that had flooded their fields in 1859. Theodore Steinberg aptly says in this context that “the flooding of land caused by the construction of large dams became the outstanding focus of such conflict [over the waters of New England]” (101). It is found that Abbey’s ecosabotage is similar to theirs. Abbey and his eco-warriors demolish to shield the non-humans whereas labourers and farmers devastate to defend their own livelihood. They are strained to do so by developmentalism. As a result of progress, labourers lose their vocations and their livelihood is endangered. In such a scenario the farmers are not able to harvest the crops they are worthy of. As the non-humans are also at risk, the eco-warriors attempt to sabotage what should not have existed.

Ecosabotage is an acute incarnation of eco-defence; but, eco-defence is an extraordinary reason and not everyone can take up. The eco-warriors which Abbey generates are a cluster of brave men who adore desert and wilderness profoundly. To maintain the natural world, they would rather give up their comfort and even abandon their existence. These brave men know that their enemies are powerful and they themselves are extremely small. In addition to this, they are aware of the fact that ecosabotage is not the best alternative. But all these eco-warriors are determined to achieve their mission. Eco-warriors comprehend that the sphere of their action is restricted as Dr. Sarvis moans: “Though the way is hard, the hard is the way. Our cause is just (just one damn thing after another) and God’s on our side. Or vice versa. We’re up against a *mad machine*, Seldom, which mangles mountains and devours men. Somebody has to try and stop it.” (Abbey, *The Monkey* 216)

Eco-defence is not violence as what the developers allege: “...burglary, armed robbery, kidnapping, destruction of private property...” (*The Monkey* 382-383) There is a sharp difference between sabotage (harm to machinery) and aggression (harm to living things). Terrorism puts existence in danger, which is infringement of the monkey wrench gang’s foremost law: “nobody gets hurt.” (Abbey, *The Monkey* 218) The eco-warriors do not battle against public but against an organization, the earthly domain of development and avarice. They do not demolish human beings but an atrocious megamachine that was never seen ever since the ancient times. This runaway machinery, an all-devouring body that nourishes on minerals, metals, rock, soil, on the earth itself, on the bedrock base of universal life form. In fact, Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, based on his and his friends’ own monkey wrenching activities, motivates the actual life labors of numerous saboteurs and straightforwardly persuades the foundation of the radical environmental group, “Earth First!”

At present, “Earth First!” is a tough, global, powerful to some extent secretive, organization. Particularly vigorous in the Pacific Northwest, “Earth First!” carries on to promote its hymn “No Compromise in Defence of Mother Earth.” Their glorification of eco-arson and numerous other types of sabotage proves that they persist to walk a fine line between the regulation and civil disobedience. Subsequent to the institution of “Earth First!” various other radicalized fringe splinter organizations have originated like The Earth Liberation Front (ELF). According to Nadir Zaidi, “The Earth Liberation Front (ELF) used eco-sabotage, defined as radical activism that is conscientiously undertaken with aims to stop or frustrate some action that is believed to be harmful to the natural environment through illegal or non-public means. The tactics of the ELF include tree spiking, arson, and bombing” (Zaidi).

Admittedly, ecosabotage is stimulating; nevertheless it is paradoxical in some features. In order to safeguard nature’s rights, eco-warriors do something severe that almost damages human lives. Facing such potent collective forces, eco-defence is only a reason that the marginal natives engage in and generate restricted influences. In any case, such

radical behaviors break the regulations and ethics followed by numerous people in the contemporary times. Eco-defence is merely an exceptional creation of American social order and it is the solitary weapon of a handful of radical conservationists and associations. However, it is a fact that it cannot be popularized among ecological movements. Sabotage is not ideal as it comes with not just optimism but inextricable tribulations as well. Eco-warriors also reveal their contradictions:

“George, we do not know exactly what we’re doing. If constructive vandalism turns destructive, what then? Perhaps we’ll be doing more harm than good. There are some who say if you attack the system you only make it stronger.”

“Yeah- and if you don’t attack it, it strip-mines the mountains, dams all the rivers, paves over the desert and puts you in jail anyway.” (*The Monkey* 112)

To conclude, when murky progress damages bionetwork and disturbs the way of existence, the administration must come into action. Though the administration becomes conscious to some extent, it is a typically figurative operation that is insufficient to protect the planet. Abbey, a true devotee of wilderness attempts to protect the natural world directly. Abbey assists conservationists work out a firm mean for defending wilderness i.e. ecosabotage. The behaviour of the monkey wrench gang infuriates several natives and they are severely criticized. Particularly the developers and the American government start to condemn them as what they accomplish attacks American confidential assets. In American culture, property is sacred, valued far above human life. Actually, not every American’s confidential assets are damaged by the monkey wrench gang except those developers’ plethoric possessions as they attack wilderness and demolish the natural world with technology. Abbey assures that when the Earth and the majority of lives are endangered, destroying this machinery cannot be considered ethically wrong. It requires extraordinary courage and integrity to confront such intrinsic perception in American national culture. While ecosabotage is still a controversial concept, one can affirm that its purpose signifies an elevated logic of liability for the natural world and earth and such strength should be overvalued. If all citizens on earth can bear such commitment for their motherland and endeavor their best to take care of it, the ecological association can accomplish its worth and the impending environmental catastrophe can be thwarted.

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