Ecosabotage and Civil Disobedience

Michael Martin*

I define ecosabotage and relate this definition to several well-known analyses of civil disobedience. I show that ecosabotage cannot be reduced to a form of civil disobedience unless the definition of civil disobedience is expanded. I suggest that ecosabotage and civil disobedience are special cases of the more general concept of conscientious wrongdoing. Although ecosabotage cannot be considered a form of civil disobedience on the basis of the standard analysis of this concept, the civil disobedience literature can provide important insights into the justification of ecosabotage. First, traditional appeals to a higher law in justifying ecosabotage are no more successful than they are in justifying civil disobedience. Second, utilitarian Justifications of ecosabotage are promising. At present there is no a priori reason to suppose that some acts of ecosabotage could not be justified on utilitarian grounds, although such ecosaboteurs as Dave Foreman have not provided a full justification of its use in concrete cases.

INTRODUCTION

The recent arrest by the FBI of Dave Foreman, founder of the radical environmental group Earth First! for conspiracy to sabotage two nuclear power plants and a facility that manufactures triggers for nuclear bombs1 raises anew the issue of the morality of breaking the law for ethical purposes. In this paper I explore a number of analytic and moral questions connected with what has been called ecosabotage: sabotage for the purpose of ecological protection. What is ecosabotage? Is it a form of civil disobedience? Can it be morally justified? Have advocates of ecosabotage such as Foreman in fact provided an ethically acceptable justification for what they sometimes advocate? Although ecosabotage has received wide coverage in popular magazines2 and other periodicals,3 these

---

*Philosophy Department, 745 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston University, Boston, MA 02215. Martin’s primary professional interests are philosophy of religion, philosophy of law, and philosophy of science. His major works include Concepts of Science Education (Glenview, Ill.: Scott-Foresman, 1972), Social Science and Philosophical Analysis (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1978), The Legal Philosophy of H. L. A. Hart (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), and The Case against Christianity (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, forthcoming). The author thanks David Rothenberg and two anonymous referees for helpful suggestions in revising this paper.


important and difficult questions have been in large part neglected by environmental ethicists.4

ECOSABOTAGE DEFINED

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. In their book Ecodfense: A Field Guide to Monkey Wrenching, Dave Foreman and Bill Haywood describe a number of techniques that can be used to stop, or at least slow down, the destruction of the environment by lumber companies, land developers, and similar organizations.5 These include how to spike trees with nails in order to break saw blades, use cutting torches on power lines, puncture tires of road construction equipment, disable bulldozers, and burn billboards. Edward Abbey’s novel, The Monkey Wrench Gang, which influenced the leaders of Earth First!,6 tells the story of a small group of environmental activists in the southwestern United States who, among other things, blow up railroad bridges, destroy construction machinery, and pull up survey stakes to frustrate land development and road construction.7 Field guides and fictional accounts aside, environmental activists such as Margaret K. Millet, Mark L. Davis, and Marc A. Baker have reportedly actually tried to cut down a tower that carries power to pump water to the Central Arizona Project, a massive irrigation canal, Earth First! co-founder Howie Wolke is reported to have spent six months in jail for pulling up survey stakes that marked a road into a site where an oil well was being drilled,8 Paul Watson, leader of the radical environment group the Sea Shepherds has claimed responsibility for sinking two of Iceland’s four whaling ships by opening key valves in the ships,9 and the Sea Shepherds also reportedly sank two Spanish whalers and one Cypriot whaling ship by attaching mines to the hulls.10

Can this great variety of acts of ecosabotage be subsumed under one definition? Perhaps, but the construction of such a definition is not easy. I approach the analytic task by first considering some of the elements that such a definition must include. First, any definition of ecosabotage must distinguish it from legal protests concerning environmental issues. Clearly this cannot be done merely in terms of the goals of the two kinds of activities, since an act of ecosabotage and a lawful ecological demonstration can have the same long-range goal, viz., the protection of the environment. Second, a definition of ecosabotage must distinguish it from sabotage for nonecological purposes, for example, wartime sabotage. This distinction cannot be made on purely behavioral grounds, since externally considered, some wartime sabotage might be indistinguishable from ecosabotage. For example, sabotaging a nuclear munitions plant might be either an act of wartime sabotage or an act of ecosabotage depending on what the act is supposed to achieve. Third, the definition must not restrict ecosabotage to the destruction of property. Even some acts of wartime sabotage do not involve this, for example, the removal of essential parts of machinery in a munitions factory. In ecosabotage, the removal of survey stakes from road construction sites might more appropriately be called obstruction rather the destruction.11 Fourth, ecosabotage should be distinguished from the typical acts of civil disobedience that have been adapted by environmental organizations such as Greenpeace.12 Fifth, ecosabotage must be distinguished from vandalism, the destruction of property or other mischief that is motivated by malice or spite.

It is also important to recognize that an adequate definition of ecosabotage must be as ethically neutral as possible—that is, the moral justification of ecosabotage must not be built into its definition. In other words, the question of what ecosabotage means must be separated as much as possible from the question of whether ecosabotage is morally justified. To be sure, these two questions are difficult to separate when, for example, it is unclear whether some criteria are relevant to the definitional or the moral issues. For example, it could be argued that part of the definition of ecosabotage is that it does not aim at harming human beings or other animal forms. On the other hand, it could be maintained that this is not part of the definition of ecosabotage and that an act of ecosabotage that aims at harming human or animal forms is simply not morally justified. An adequate definition of ecosabotage must decide such issues in a principled way.

6 See Kane, “Mother Nature’s Army,” p. 100.
11 The point here is not whether the parts of the machinery or the survey stakes are property, but that no property needs to be destroyed. Of course, survey stakes might be destroyed by being burned, but this need not happen in order for an act of ecosabotage to occur. One might, of course, argue that a survey itself is a type of property, because it costs money to construct, and that pulling up the stakes destroys it, because it costs money to do the survey again. Nevertheless, in this broad sense of property, acts of civil disobedience, e.g., sit-ins and blockades, also destroy property in this sense because they cost money. On grounds of clarity I do not use property in this broad sense.
Taking these elements into account, I suggest the following definition:

Person P’s act A is an act of ecosabotage iff (if and only if) (1) in doing A, P has as P’s aim to stop, frustrate, or slow down some process or act that P believes will harm or damage the environment, (2) P’s act A is motivated by a sense of religious or moral concern, (3) A is illegal, and (4) A is not a public act.

Condition (1) seems essential if ecosabotage is to be distinguished from other forms of sabotage. Condition (2) also appears essential because it distinguishes ecocapitalism from vandalism. Forceman, for example, argues that destroying the technology that is polluting the Earth is a moral responsibility. He also goes so far as to claim that “it’s a form of worship toward the Earth. It’s really a very spiritual thing to go out and do.” 13 These remarks suggest that ecocapitalists can be motivated by religious as well as moral considerations. Thus, we need not claim that an act of ecosabotage must be morally motivated, for it can be religiously inspired. Condition (3) also seems essential for any definition of ecocapitalism. Without it, a private act of prayer aimed at petitioning the deity to stop the destruction of the environment would be an act of ecocapitalism because such an act would otherwise meet conditions (1), (2), and (4). Condition (4) is the most controversial condition in the definition, for it is certainly not clear that it needs to be part of the definition and the vagueness of ordinary language makes it uncertain whether it should be a necessary condition for the correct application of the term. 14 However, I see no other way to distinguish a typical act of civil disobedience used by environmental activists, for example, placing one’s body in front of road construction equipment, from an act of ecocapitalism, such as pulling up survey stakes. As I have already noted, the crucial difference between these two acts is not that the latter destroys property and the former does not. The difference can best be seen when one compares the typical acts of civil disobedience practiced by organizations such as Greenpeace and the acts of ecocapitalism that are alleged by practitioners of Earth First! 15 In a typical

Greenpeace action, arrests are expected. Indeed, Greenpeace activists may want to be arrested as a way of advertising their cause. This is not to say that Greenpeace always publicizes its plans in advance. Surprise is essential for some of its actions. Nevertheless, once an action is completed—once the entrance to the incinerator is blocked or the whalers are frustrated—Greenpeace activists do not try to escape; they stay and accept their arrest, hoping that it will be reported in the media. On the other hand, an act of ecocapitalism is done in secret. Even when ecocapitalists do not destroy property but merely disturb operations, they do not intend to be caught. Indeed, part of Foreman and Haywood’s field guide to monkey wrenching is devoted to instructing potential ecocapitalists on how not to get arrested. 16 This is not to say that if ecocapitalists are caught, they will not use their own arrests to their own advantage in the media, but getting caught is not typically part of their plan.

This definition is value neutral in the sense that it does not assume that act A is either religiously or morally justified or unjustified. Although it can be assumed that the ecocapitalist believes that his or her act is justified either morally or religiously, the ecocapitalist could be mistaken. Moreover, the definition is neutral about whether A is effective or not in stopping, frustrating, or slowing down some process that is believed to be damaging the environment. The ecocapitalist believes that the act will be effective, but, again, he or she could be mistaken.

I have chosen not to include the condition that P believes that A will not injure any human beings or living things in the definition of ecocapitalism. To be sure, ecocapitalists typically maintain that they intend no such injury. Foreman is reported to have said that his philosophy “is nonviolent because it is directed toward inanimate machinery.” 17 Paul Watson, the leader of the Sea Shepherds, waited until after the crew had left to sink the Icelandic whaling ships. Doc Sarvis, the philosophical spokesperson for “the monkey wrench gang” in Abbey’s novel, is also opposed to violence against human beings. However, it is doubtful that this condition should be part of the definition of ecocapitalism. Consider the analogous case of wartime sabotage. A worker who, in order to help the enemy, intentionally caused damage to a munitions plant although he or she knew other workers would be injured, would not for that reason alone have failed to perform an act of sabotage. On analogy with this example, I am inclined to maintain that although considerations of intentional noninjury to human beings or other animals are relevant in determining the morality of an act of ecocapitalism, they are irrelevant when we are simply considering whether some act is or is not one of ecocapitalism.

---


14 It may be objected that this definition has a mistaken implication, namely, that a public act cannot be an act of ecocapitalism. Suppose that as members of the road construction crew watch in amazement an environmental activist disables a bulldozer in order to prevent road construction and suppose this act was motivated by a moral concern for the environment. Surely, it may be said, this would be a case of ecocapitalism. However, the concept of sabotage is vague and in some cases people’s linguistic intuitions may differ over what is a correct application of the term. I personally would hesitate to call this an act of sabotage. At the very least, most people would agree that it is a marginal or borderline case. My definition can be understood as an explication of the concept of ecocapitalism—that is, as an attempt to reconstruct the meaning of ecocapitalism by eliminating vagueness and thus exclude certain borderline cases. For an account of explication see Michael Martin, Concepts of Science Education (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972), pp. 77–79.

15 It should be noted that Earth First! does not officially advocate ecocapitalism, but unlike Greenpeace it does not reit it.

16 Foreman and Haywood, Ecodefense, chap. 9.

ECOSABOTAGE AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Is ecosabotage as defined above a type of civil disobedience? On the standard account of civil disobedience, the answer seems to be “No.” Consider these typical definitions of civil disobedience taken from discussions of the topic by leading contemporary philosophical theorists. According to Hugo Bedau, an act A is an act of civil disobedience iff A is illegal, done publicly, nonviolently and conscientiously with the intent to frustrate (one of) the laws, policies or decisions of the government. According to Jeffrie Murphy, an act A is an act of civil disobedience iff (i) there is some law L according to which A is illegal, (ii) L is believed by the agent to be immoral or unconstitutional or religious or ideologically objectionable, and (iii) this belief motivates or explains A. According to Christian Bay, an act is an act of civil disobedience iff A is an act or process of public defiance of a law or policy enforced by established government authorities insofar as the action is premeditated, understood by the actor(s) to be illegal or contested legally, carried out and persisted in for limited public ends and by way of carefully chosen and limited means. Finally, according to Carl Cohen, an act A is an act of civil disobedience iff A is an act of protest, deliberately unlawful, and conscientiously and publicly performed.

On three of these definitions, an act of ecosabotage is clearly not an act of civil disobedience. For Bedau, Bay, and Cohen, it is a necessary condition of civil disobedience that it be publicly performed. Ecosabotage, however, by the definition proposed above is not publicly performed. In addition, Bedau’s definition rules out many acts of ecosabotage as acts of civil disobedience by requiring that an act of civil disobedience be nonviolent. Furthermore, Bedau’s and Bay’s definitions rule out many acts of ecosabotage as acts of civil disobedience because acts of ecosabotage are often aimed at frustrating the actions or policies of private companies and not the government.

It should be noted that except for Bedau’s, these definitions do not include nonviolence as part of the meaning of civil disobedience. However, one should recall that nonviolent methods have been a crucial part of civil disobedience practice from Gandhi to King. See Gene Sharp, The Politics of Nonviolent Action, part 3, The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action (Boston, Porter Sargent Publisher, 1973), p. 608. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that nonviolent methods should be built into the meaning of civil disobedience. One may imagine circumstances in which a person honestly believes that he or she is justified in using violence to make his or her protest effective. To say that such a person’s act could not be an act of civil disobedience seems arbitrary. See Carl Cohen, Civil Disobedience: Conscience, Tactics, and the Law, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), pp. 22–36.


Cohen, Civil Disobedience, p. 39.

Murphy’s definition does not seem to apply to the typical act of ecosabotage for a different reason. An ecobooter who breaks some law L by destroying construction equipment probably does not object to either moral or constitutional or religious grounds to the law L insofar as it states that it is illegal to knowingly destroy someone else’s property. What he or she objects to is the way in which the construction equipment is being put. Murphy, however, in a footnote qualifies his definition by saying that “the agent may have no objection to L per se but may violate L because he views it as symbolic for or instrumentally involved with some other law L’. . . . to which he does object. In my view, such a person (Thoreau for example) is also to be regarded as civilly disobedient.”

Taken by itself this seems to allow a typical act of ecosabotage to be an act of civil disobedience because, for example, the ecobooter objects to some law L’ that allows the timber company to clear-cut the forest. Law L, the law that the ecobooter is breaking, is in some sense “instrumentally involved with L’.” However, later on in the same footnote Murphy adds: “What is most important is that motives of this sort be distinguished from the typical criminal motive: self-interest. We do not think of a criminal act as a public act of protest: but these features do typically characterize acts of civil disobedience.” If we take this qualification seriously, then ecosabotage is not civil disobedience for it is certainly not a public act of protest. In the end, then, these four definitions of civil disobedience exclude ecosabotage because of the requirement that acts of civil disobedience must be done publicly.

Some general category is surely needed that includes both morally and religiously motivated illegal acts whether they are done publicly or not. One could accomplish this by expanding the concept of civil disobedience to include nonpublic acts. This, in fact, is the approach taken by Howard Zinn when he defines an act of civil disobedience “broadly” as a deliberate violation of the law for a vital social purpose. Interestingly enough, from the standpoint of ordinary usage, Zinn’s definition seems to be more correct than the others so far considered. Certainly people who ran the underground railroad before the Civil War were said to have engaged in acts of civil disobedience, but these acts were not publicly performed. In accordance with Zinn’s definition, an act of ecosabotage could be an act of civil disobedience on the grounds that by definition ecobooters are motivated by a sense of religious or moral duty and that at least some ecobooters do deliberately violate the law for a vital social, i.e., moral purpose. However, it is unclear if all acts of ecosabotage fall under Zinn’s...

24 Ibid.
26 See Cohen, Civil Disobedience, p. 18, who claims that such examples constitute “a marginal category.”
definition. Would an ecosaboteur who pulled up survey stakes or destroyed construction equipment because of a mystical-religious feeling of unity with nature be described as breaking the law for a vital social purpose?

I suggest taking a different approach. Let us allow that civil disobedience must be public, or at least that it must be done for a social purpose, and introduce the concept of conscientious wrongdoing to cover either public or nonpublic law breaking for either religious or moral purposes. In this context, we can then specify that an act A is an act of conscientious wrongdoing if it is an act of breaking a law for some moral or religious purpose. In this way, acts of civil disobedience on both the standard account and Zinn's expanded version as well as acts of ecosabotage can be considered special cases of conscientious wrongdoing.

**CAN ECOSABOTAGE BE GIVEN A CONSEQUENTIALIST JUSTIFICATION?**

As I have just shown, without an expanded analysis of civil disobedience, ecosabotage cannot be viewed as a form of civil disobedience. Nevertheless, the civil disobedience literature can still provide insight into ecosabotage's possible justification. Most theorists of civil disobedience maintain that because acts of civil disobedience break the law and conflict with accepted modes of social conduct, they require some special justification to overcome what seems to be their prima facie wrongness. The same could be said about acts of ecosabotage.

If one follows this line of argument, the burden of justification is clearly on the civil disobedient person or the ecosaboteur. This burden is thought to be especially difficult to meet in a democracy because when laws are made by the people's representatives, they seem to have a legitimate claim to the obedience of all citizens. Yet this claim is never absolute. Democratic processes do not work perfectly: unjust and evil laws can be enacted; shortsighted and destructive policies can be pursued; it can either be impossible or can take too much time to change laws by lawful means. Thus, concerned citizens may sometimes legitimately entertain illegal means of changing the status quo and educating and arousing their fellow citizens. Before they become civil disobedients or ecosaboteurs, however, they need to have a clear rational justification for their actions.27

Carl Cohen, in his comprehensive study of civil disobedience, reports that historically there have been two basic ways to justify civil disobedience: the appeal to higher law and the appeal to teleological or consequentialist considerations.28 Although both approaches are relevant to the justification of ecosabotage, I focus on the consequentialist justification in detail in this essay.29 This emphasis is in no way intended to suggest, however, that there are no limits to consequentialist justification.30

As Cohen maintains, a consequentialist justification need not be restricted to a specific calculus of goods or evils:

It simply indicates that the justification will rely upon some intelligent weighing of consequences of the disobedient act. The protestor here argues, in effect, that his particular disobedience of a particular law, at a particular time, under given circumstances, . . . is likely to lead in the long run to a better or more just society than would his compliance, under those circumstances, with the law in question.31

According to Cohen, the disobedient person appeals to two sorts of factors to justify his or her actions: moral principles that specify the goal of the disobedient act and factual considerations that specify the means to achieving this goal. The goals of the disobedient act, Cohen argues, are usually not in question but are shared by the vast majority of the citizens of the community. In the rare cases that they are not in harmony with the community, their justification "is almost certain to fail."32 On the other hand, the means of achieving the goals are controversial and their justification involves a delicate and often inconclusive balancing of conflicting considerations. The person who is contemplating a disobedient act must consider the background of the case at hand and ask

---

27 In order to apply this argument to ecosabotage in the United States, certain assumptions must be made that might well be challenged. For example, it must be assumed that the laws that facilitate environmental destruction are democratically established and that it is prima facie wrong to disobey a democratically established law.

28 Cohen, Civil Disobedience, chap. 5.

29 According to Cohen, civil disobedients have often attempted to justify their conduct by appeals to a law higher than human law. This higher law justification has taken two major forms: an appeal to commands of God that are revealed to human beings in the Bible or other allegedly divinely inspired works or an appeal to noneological higher laws that are discerned by the light of natural reason. There are three serious problems with both types of justifications. First, there seems to be no objective way to decide what these higher laws are. Second, principles of higher law are usually stated vaguely and abstractly. Consequently, it seems impossible to reach any objective decision on how they apply to concrete cases. Third, such justification would at best justify direct civil disobedience, that is, the breaking of a law that is itself morally objectionable in terms of higher law principles. But many acts of civil disobedience are indirect—that is, the civil disobedient disobeys some law that he or she has no objection to because the disobedience is a means to eliminate some serious injustice in a related area. It could be argued that these same problems are found in any attempt to justify ecosabotage by appeal to higher law principles. However, Cohen is mistaken in limiting nonconsequentialist justifications of civil disobedience to the higher law tradition. A complete account of nonconsequentialist justifications of civil disobedience would also have to take into account deontological theories of justification ranging from Kant to Rawls.


31 Cohen, Civil Disobedience, p. 120. If Cohen means that the goal must be shared by the vast majority to be morally justified, he is mistaken. I do not interpret him in this way, however. It is correct, nevertheless, that unless the goal is shared by the majority, the civil disobedient will not be practically successful—that is, the disobedient will have failed to justify his or her action to the community, and thus the disobedient will not be politically effective.

32 Ibid., p. 123.
questions such as: "How serious is the injustice whose remedy is the aim of disobedient protest? How pressing is the need for that remedy? . . . Have extraordinary but lawful means—assemblies of protests, letter-writing campaigns, etc.—been given full trial?" The potentially disobedient person must also consider the negative effects of the disobedience and ask questions such as:

How great is the expense incurred by the community as a consequence of the disobedience? . . . Is any violence entailed or threatened by the disobedient act? And if so, to property or to persons? . . . Has a bad example been set, a spirit of defiance or hooliganism been encouraged? Has respect for law been decreased in the community, or the fundamental order to society disturbed?

Finally, the potential disobedient must estimate the positive results from the contemplated action and ask questions such as: how much influence will the disobedient act have in accomplishing change? Will it bring significant pressure to bear on legislatures that can bring about change? Can it attract public attention to some wrong or evil? Will the public put pressure on lawmakers? Or will the action of the disobedient be misunderstood and cause resentment? Will there be a backlash against the protesters?

These considerations are surely relevant to any consequentialist justification of acts of ecocaitage. Further, there seems to be no reason why a successful justification could not be given for at least some such acts. On a general level, the environmental goal of the public seems to be very similar to the goal of the ecocaiteurs: saving the environment from destruction and pollution. Recent polls indicate that the public is extremely concerned about environmental problems and is willing to go far in affording it protection. Whether the more specific goals of radical environmental groups would be approved by the public is less clear: for example, Earth First!'s goal of saving the grizzly bears or the Sea Shepherds' goal of saving the whales. Nevertheless, it is not implausible to suppose that most people are sympathetic with these specific goals to some degree.

Whether members of environmental groups who use ecocaitage can justify their means in relation to the goal of saving the environment is, of course, the crucial issue. Unless strong general arguments can be raised against any use of ecocaitage, the justification of each proposed act of ecocaitage must be decided individually. A consideration of some of the most obvious general arguments against ecocaitage suggests that such arguments are in fact weak and cannot therefore be used to undermine all ecocaitage.

First, it may be objected that ecocaitage is beyond the pale of moral legitimacy because it involves violence. However, since there is no plausible general argument against the use of violence in civil disobedience, it hardly seems likely that ecocaitage can be faulted simply on this ground. Even Thoreau and Gandhi allowed that violence is sometimes an appropriate action and history points to cases in which violence in civil disobedience has had a beneficial effect. As Zinn points out:

Violent labor struggles of the 1930's brought significant gains for labor. Not until the Negro demonstrations resulted in violence did the national government begin to work seriously on civil rights legislation. No public statement on race relations has had as much impact as the Kerner Commission report, the direct result of outbreaks of violence in the ghettos.

In any case, the distinction between violence against people and violence against property that both Zinn and Cohen stress in the context of justifying civil disobedience is relevant here. Violence directed against property is much less difficult to justify than violence against people. Zinn has emphasized that violence in the context of civil disobedience should "be guarded, limited, aimed carefully at the source of injustice." Advocates of ecocaitage in Earth First! say that violence should be directed only against property: they advocate destroying only equipment and facilities that are themselves used to destroy, deface, and pollute the environment. Eocaiteurs in the Sea Shepherds also attempt to limit and focus their violence: they wrack equipment that is used to destroy whales.

A second possible objection to ecocaitage is that it erodes respect for the law, thus deteriorating the social fabric of civilized society. However, as a general argument against ecocaitage, this has no greater weight than it does against traditional civil disobedience. As Cohen notes, the allegation that civil dis-

33 Ibid., p. 125.
35 A recent national opinion survey indicates that eighty percent of Americans agree with the following statement: "Protecting the environment is so important that requirements and standards cannot be too high, and continuing environmental improvement must be made regardless of cost." (Cited by Martin and Kathleen Feldstein, "In Defense of Pollution," Boston Globe, 1 August 1989, p. 74.
37 Gandhi wrote in Young India, "No rules can tell us how this disobedience may be done and by whom, when and where, nor can they tell us which laws foster truth. It is only experience that can guide us." And "I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence I would advise violence." See Zinn, "A Fallacy on Law and Order," p. 105.
39 Ibid., p. 108.
40 Cohen, Civil Disobedience, p. 125.
41 Hargrove calls our attention to the fact that our society is "dedicated to the protection of property (including construction equipment and bridges)." See Hargrove, "Ecological Sabotage," p. 291. Even so there is a clear moral distinction to be drawn between violence against people and violence against property.
obedience erodes the social fabric is "essentially factual, not philosophical, but the facts are exceedingly complex and difficult to determine accurately. . . . The evidence available from the American experience of the 1950s and 1960s does not seem to support the allegation." 44 The same counterargument applies to ecosabotage. To be sure, there is a great amount of disrespect for the law in our country and in the world: murder, massacre, terrorism, rape, governmental corruption, and white collar crimes are rife. But it is pure conjecture to suppose that ecosabotage with its carefully circumscribed scope and targets has contributed or will significantly contribute to this disrespect.

In any case, one might argue that respect for the law is not the highest value. As Cohen points out: "It is possible, of course, that the wrong against which the civil disobedent protests is more serious than the alleged deleterious consequence to the social fabric." 45 Foreman and others would surely argue that what they are fighting for is more important than respect for the law. Indeed, they might maintain that respect for the law will be of little importance in a world with polluted air and water, devoid of natural wildernesses, and depleted of most of its natural variety. This value assessment is controversial, but it is not obviously wrong or absurd.

One important difference between civil disobedience and ecosabotage provides the basis for another objection. It could be argued that although civil disobedients disobey the law on one level, they show respect for it on another level by acting publicly—that is, not inviting arrest—and by accepting the result of the punishment. Ecosaboteurs, on the other hand, show their contempt for the law by acting secretly, thus attempting to avoid arrest and punishment. Although the standard accounts of civil disobedience that require publicly performed acts would not allow secret acts to be acts of civil disobedience, these same accounts provide a rationale for such secret acts. As Cohen argues in defense of the operation that helped runaway slaves escape to Canada, "To continue this practice in the interests of other, later runaways, it was essential for the managers of the underground railways to conceal their repeated violations of the fugitive slave laws. Concealment in such cases is a pressing tactical need, stemming from concern for the welfare of specific human beings, not from shame or remorse for the disobedient conduct." 46 Surely the same sort of argument could be used to defend ecosaboteurs: to continue protecting the environment, they must conceal their identity. 47 Concealment in such cases is a pressing tactical need, stemming

from concern for the welfare of the environment, not from shame or remorse for unlawful conduct. There is no a priori reason to suppose that ecosaboteurs have less personal integrity than the managers of the underground railroad or that they consider their cause less morally significant than the managers of the underground railroad considered theirs.

There are, of course, other general arguments that can be used against ecosabotage, but because they parallel the general ones that have been raised against civil disobedience and can be answered in a similar way, we need not consider them here. 48

HAVE ADVOCATES OF ECOSABOTAGE SUCCESSFULLY JUSTIFIED ECOSABOTAGE?

One might reasonably conclude from the above that although ecosabotage can be morally justified on consequentialist grounds in some contexts and although there are no general arguments standing in the way of such justification, the case for particular acts of ecosabotage has yet to be made. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide such a justification, I consider critically how in fact advocates of ecosabotage such as Foreman have attempted to justify ecosabotage. In some cases where there is a gap in the justification, I fill in what I believe is a reasonable extrapolation or reconstruction of what a rational ecosaboteur might say. I show that the rationales given by advocates of ecosabotage follow in outline the sort of argument that, according to Cohen, a consequentialist justification of civil disobedience should take.

In a consequentialist justification, the moral goals of the civil disobedent are usually shared by the community. When they are not, they are likely to fail to persuade the community and not succeed politically. I have argued above that the general goals of ecosabotage are probably shared by most members of the community and that even the particular ones may be. However, Foreman explicitly interprets these goals in a nonanthropocentric way. Advocating the environmental philosophy of deep ecology, he argues:

Deep ecology says that every living thing in the ecosystem has intrinsic worth and a nature-given right to be there. The grizzly bear, for example, has a right to exist for its own sake—not just for material or entertainment value to human beings. Wilderness has a right to exist for its own sake, and for the sake of the diversity of life-forms it shelters; we shouldn't have to justify the existence of the wilderness area by saying, "Well, it protects the watershed, and it's a nice place to backpack and hunt, and its pretty . . . Furthermore, deep ecology goes beyond the individual

44 Cohen, Civil Disobedience, pp. 150–51.
45 Ibid., p. 150.
46 Ibid., pp. 19–20. On Cohen's own definition the managers of underground railways did not perform acts of civil disobedience. Cohen (p. 39) defines civil disobedience in terms of acts that are publicly performed.
48 See Cohen, Civil Disobedience, chap. 6.
and says that it's the species that's important. And more important yet is the community of species that makes up a given biosystem. And ultimately, our concern should be with the community of communities—the ecosystem. 49

Whether Foreman's biocentrism and holism is philosophically justified, we cannot decide here. 50 But what does seem likely is that these points of view are not widely shared by the vast majority of the moral community and would be considered by the majority of the community to be rather eccentric. Given his biocentric and holistic interpretation of the goals of Earth First!, therefore, the means as well as the goals of the organization become controversial. As Cohen points out: "Even if the community is wrong [about the goals], and the eccentrics right, deliberate disobedient pursuit of their special objectives, as long as they are in the moral minority, is not likely to advance the protesters' goals and not likely to be defensible on utilitarian grounds." 51 However, the ecosaboteur need not pursue what the moral community will perceive as eccentric goals. There are good anthropocentric reasons why natural diversity should be preserved, 52 why tropical forest should be safeguarded, 53 why whales should be saved, 54 and so on.

According to Cohen, a civil disobedient must consider the background of the case at hand and evaluate both the importance of the goals and whether legal means have been given a fair trial. Foreman's statement certainly suggests that he advocates deliberating on the background of acts of ecosabotage very carefully and has considered the importance of the goals of ecosabotage and legal alternatives to it. Thus, he maintains:

Species are going underground everywhere. Old-growth forests are disappearing. Overgrazing continues to ruin our western public lands. Off-road vehicles are cutting up the countryside everywhere. Poisons are continually and increasingly being injected into the environment. Rain forests are being clear-cut. In short, the environment is losing . . . everywhere. And to try to fight such an essential battle with less than every weapon we have available to us is foolish and, in the long run, suicidal. 55

One need not just take Foreman's word for this bleak picture of environmental devastation. Many environmentalists have painted a similar picture, albeit in more scholarly and less colorful tones. 56

But are there not legal means of stopping the destruction? Foreman at one time certainly thought there were. At the beginning of his environmental career he was a Washington lobbyist for the conventional environmental group, the Wilderness Society. However, personal experience quickly led to his disillusionment with the effectiveness of such groups in bringing about change and stopping the devastation. 57 Now as a member of Earth First! he has had personal experience of illegal actions being effective. He cites one example in which the legal action of the Sierra Club, a conventional environmental organization, failed to stop the destruction of a wilderness while Earth First! 's blockage of road construction by civil disobedience provided enough public awareness to be successful. 58

One wonders, of course, if Foreman's experience is typical and if he has reported the facts accurately. Are there cases not mentioned by Foreman where legal means have succeeded and where illegal ones have not? To give a more adequate justification, one would have to consider in a systematic way a wider range of cases than Foreman considers in which legal and illegal methods have been tried in order to see their relative effectiveness. His anecdotal evidence at most makes a prima facie case that illegal means are sometimes more effective than legal means for affording environmental protection. 59

Cohen also suggests that in any utilitarian justification of civil disobedience it is important to consider the possible negative consequences of one's action. Foreman gives evidence of having done this. When asked whether monkey wrenching—his term for ecosabotage—is counterproductive to the environmental cause and serves only to make environmentalists look bad, Foreman had this to say:

On the surface, this argument seems worth considering. But the fact is, there's already an awful lot of monkey wrenching going on, and such a backlash hasn't come about. The Forest Service tries to keep it quiet, industry tries to keep it quiet, and I think that there has even been an effort in the media to downplay the extent and effectiveness of monkey wrenching in America today. . . . It's easy to be

51 Cohen, Civil Disobedience, p. 123.
52 See Norton, Why Preserve Natural Variety? chap. 11.
57 Kane, "Mother Nature's Army," p. 100.
58 Peterson, "The Plowboy Interview," p. 19. It should be noted that this was not an act of ecosabotage.
59 However, the independent evidence provided by the effectiveness of the illegal actions of Greenpeace in protecting whales and seals confirms Foreman's contention. See Black, "Greenpeace: The Ecological Warriors," p. 29.
cowed into compromising and being overly moderate by the charge that you are going to cause a negative reaction, going to tarnish the whole environmental movement. But in my opinion, the argument itself is a more fearsome anti-environmental weapon than any actual backlash could ever hope to be, because it keeps many of us from using all the tools we have available to slow down the destruction.\textsuperscript{60}

Again independent evidence for a negative reaction should be sought. For example, do Greenpeace's door-to-door canvassers find it harder than a few years ago to obtain contributions because of the negative publicity occasioned by Earth First? Do polls show that the public is becoming less sympathetic to environmental causes than it was before news of ecosabotage? Until evidence such as this is obtained we will not know if ecosabotage is having a negative impact. But Foreman is certainly justified in remaining skeptical about the purported negative impact until such evidence is produced.

Another possible negative consequence of ecosabotage is the unintentional injury to human beings. This problem is considered to be especially worrisome in the case of tree spiking. The main danger is that a saw blade can break and cause injury to the saw operator or to other people involved in the milling process. Ecosaboteurs respond to this problem in at least three different ways. Some tree spikers mark the trees they have spiked. For example, it is reported that after Mike Roselle, a member of Earth First!, spiked trees in Cathedral Forest, he painted a large S on them.\textsuperscript{61} Thus, the recommended procedure is the notification of all parties who would be involved in cutting and milling trees. Consequently, only those who defied the warning were in jeopardy.\textsuperscript{62} Other spikers, however, try to keep their spikes from being detected,\textsuperscript{63} arguing that automation places most mill operators in control booths out of danger.\textsuperscript{64} Although this might be true, it would not protect the sawyers cutting down the tree. The chain on the sawyer's chain saw can break upon hitting a spike, whip back into the sawyer and cause serious injuries. Moreover, some ecosaboteurs may argue that although they should take care not to injure people, "nothing is more dangerous to the long-term health of the people of this planet than the largescale destruction of the environment, and we have to stop that."\textsuperscript{65} Consequently, any potential danger to the mill workers must be weighed against the greater danger to the world's population through environmental damage.

Whether these answers are completely adequate is a difficult issue that we cannot pursue here.\textsuperscript{66}

Cohen also maintains that a potential civil disobedient must estimate the positive results from the contemplated action. Does ecosabotage have positive results? For example, does it accomplish the goal of slowing or stopping the destruction of the environment? Foreman says:

I’m convinced that monkey wrenching can be one of the most effective ways of protecting our few remaining wild places. If a sufficient number of sincere individuals and small groups around the country were to launch a serious campaign of strategic monkey wrenching—a totally defensive effort to halt the continued destruction of wilderness—it would in fact cause the retreat of industrial civilization from millions of acres of wildlands.

For example, if a logging company knows that the trees are going to be consistently spiked with large nails—which plays hell with expensive saw blades at the mills—or that roads will be repeatedly blocked by having rocks dumped onto them, it quickly becomes impractical to try to maintain a profitable operation. . . .

For these reasons, along with the fact that conventional efforts to save the environment are not working, I believe that monkey wrenching is probably the single most effective thing that can be done to save natural diversity.\textsuperscript{67}

It is important to notice that in this quotation Foreman argues only that ecosabotage could work, not that it has worked or will work. However, Foreman does cite actual cases in which conventional civil disobedience methods, for example, blockage of a road by human beings, have been successful in getting public sympathy and attention. An ecosaboteur might argue by analogy: because conventional methods of civil disobedience have worked, it is likely that methods of ecosabotage will work as well. However, this analogy is far from perfect. Human beings blocking a road may make good press and create favorable publicity whereas tree spiking and rock dumping may not. Foreman’s argument, in any case, is not based on the favorable publicity that monkey wrenching will cause. He maintains that ecosabotage will make it economically unfeasible for industry to continue to destroy the wilderness. In principle, this may be true. But does the use of ecosabotage in fact work in this way? Until evidence is cited of industrialization actually retreating, “leaving more land for

\textsuperscript{60} Peterson, “The Plowboy Interview,” pp. 21–22.

\textsuperscript{61} Kane, “Mother Nature’s Army,” p. 98.

\textsuperscript{62} Savage, “Radical Environmentalists,” p. 35.

\textsuperscript{63} See Foreman and Haywood, Ecocide, pp. 24–51.

\textsuperscript{64} Malanowski, “Monkey-Wrenching Around,” p. 569. But whether all employees of the mills, for example, the head rig offbearers who guides the logs, are safe is another question.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{66} It should be noted that according to defenders of ecosabotage there has never been a documented case of anyone being seriously injured from its practice. See C.M., “An Appraisal of Monkeywrenching,” Earth First!, 2 February 1990.

\textsuperscript{67} Peterson, “The Plowboy Interview,” p. 21.
the grizzly bear, for elk, for old-growth forest” as a result of tree spiking and other acts of ecosabotage, one should leave as an open question whether ecosabotage is justified in terms of Cohen’s utilitarian model of justification.

It is also important to note that in the passage just cited Foreman argues that ecosabotage can be effective if “a sufficient number” of individuals and groups engage in it. If it is not successful now, Foreman might argue, it is because not enough people are trained and devoted ecosaboteurs. This may or may not be true, but a similar argument could be invoked by environmentalists who are opposed to ecosabotage. After all, it might be argued, if enough people marched on Washington, wrote letters to their government representatives, and performed public acts of conscientious wrongdoing, that is, engaged in conventional civil disobedience, it would “cause the retreat of industrial civilization from millions of acres of wildlands.” The number of people needed is unclear. But it is plausible to suppose that public outrage would have to be extensive—as, for example, it ultimately was in relation to the Vietnam War—to have the sort of impact that Foreman desires.

Foreman argues simultaneously that ecosabotage is already widespread, but that its presence is being covered up by government, industry, and the media, that the environment is losing, and that a sufficient number of ecosaboteurs would save the environment. Although there is no inconsistency in these remarks, they do raise the question of just how much more ecosabotage would have to occur to prevent the environment from losing and to save the environment from destruction. In response, it might argued that the number of ecosaboteurs that would be necessary for making a significant impact on environmental protection is several orders of magnitude less than the number of legal protesters, letter writers, public acts of civil disobedience, and so on that would produce the same impact. For this reason at least, it may be said, ecosabotage is to be recommended over conventional strategies. On the other hand, the training and dedication that is involved in leading the life of an ecosaboteur would surely limit the number of potential candidates. Indeed, it is not clear that there are enough potential ecosaboteurs to make the difference that Foreman wants. Furthermore, in view of probable arrests it would seem that their ranks would have to be constantly replenished. There are then indirect considerations suggesting that ecosabotage is not likely in practice to have the impact that Foreman anticipates in theory.

Although Foreman does not cite evidence that ecosabotage actually works, a very recent article by C.M. does.68 C.M. maintains that monkey wrenching is probably costing the government and industry about 20 to 25 million dollars per

---

68 See C.M., “An Appraisal of Monkeywrenching.” According to Earth First! C.M. “is a widely published writer and scholar whose career dictates anonymity.”

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 See Lester Rhodes, “Carrying on a Venerable Tradition,” Earth First!, 2 February 1990. Rhodes compares ecosaboteurs to those who ran the underground railroad.

72 To be sure, Foreman has argued that monkey wrenching should not be used when there is a nonviolent civil disobedience action such as blockages taking place. But what must be shown is that blockages and the like cannot bring about the same results as ecosabotage. See Foreman, “Strategic Monkeywrenching,” Ecodfence, p. 15.
CONCLUSION

In this paper I have defined ecosabotage and related this definition to several well-known analyses of civil disobedience. The comparison shows that ecosabotage cannot be assimilated to civil disobedience unless one expands the definition of the latter. The standard analyses of civil disobedience simply exclude it. I have suggested that ecosabotage and civil disobedience be considered special cases of the more general concept of conscientious wrongdoing. I have argued that although ecosabotage cannot be considered a form of civil disobedience on the standard analysis of this concept, the civil disobedience literature can provide important insights into the justification of ecosabotage.

Although other types of justification are possible, only a consequentialist one was considered in this paper. At present, there is no reason to suppose that some acts of ecosabotage could not be justified on consequentialist grounds, but I have concluded that advocates of ecosabotage such as Dave Foreman have not provided a full consequentialist justification of its use in concrete cases.

Evidence has been cited by C.M. showing that it does actually work in practice, but evidence is lacking that acts of civil disobedience would not be preferable. Nevertheless, Foreman and other advocates of ecosaboteurs such as C.M. have come further along in giving an adequate consequentialist justification of ecosabotage than is often realized and they have also met many of the objections against its use.