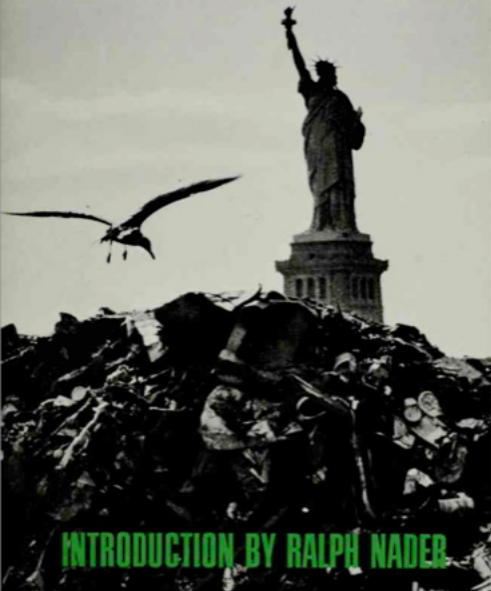


ecotactics:

**THE SIERRA CLUB HANDBOOK
FOR ENVIRONMENT ACTIVISTS**



INTRODUCTION BY RALPH NADER

ECOTACTICS:

The Sierra Club Handbook for Environment Activists

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by Cliff Humphrey

Doing Ecology Action

Ecology Action is what most organizations are not. The four of us who founded it in Berkeley in 1968—Chuck Herrick, Betty Schwimmer, my wife Mary, and I—were “meeting refugees.” We wanted to develop a method of facilitating action without the attendant excess baggage of motions, quorums, votes, committees and dues. It seemed to us that soon after a formal, organizational structure was established, especially on a national basis, someone wanted to run it. In the comotion of “wanting to run it,” the original purpose of establishing the structure was often trampled underfoot.

We believe that ecology—knowledge of our household—contains an implicit set of ethics for both individual and institutional behavior. Our common physical households—clean air, fresh water, fertile soil—sustains us all in a similar manner. We all share a common culture and economic system that values an increasing amount of health, comfort, joy and security. Yet there are tragic contradictions between these values and our naive attempts to fulfill them. To have knowledge of our household’s limitations is to understand these contradictions.

Our planet has a finite amount of arable land. Its diverse processes of air enrichment and fresh water distribution are limited. Its many interdependent forms of

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life all require a very complicated blend of conditions for a healthy existence. The dominant species, man, also has serious limitations. He can only deal with a small amount of information at any one time. This limitation has resulted in our not knowing the consequences of our actions.

We have collected in cities and have trusted others to provide us with food, water, fuel, housing, electricity, clothing and jobs. Those we have trusted have done well, according to a limited definition of their "job." But no one foresaw the eventual results of their labors. As a consequence, just doing their job has resulted in the obliteration of arable land, contamination and modification of natural systems, the extinction of many species, and more than 1½ billion underprivileged people. All are hungry, but some are dying of starvation and some have been mentally incapacitated by a hostile environment.

These contradictions are the specific ingredients of an abstract event—our extinction. And extinction is well under way. We are no longer nourishing ourselves with the clean air, fresh water and nutritious food our bodies require. Our social environment is preventing us from realizing our individual potential for joy and creativity. While there is a remote chance we could destroy the earth in one final crescendo of booming, exploding, poisonous hell, it is much more likely that we will continue to lose our humanness as our vitality, spirit and strength are insidiously sapped by devices of our own creation. At what point on such a decline does man, as defined today, pass into extinction?

Doing ecology action tries to take all of the household's limitations into account and evaluate everything else in relation to them. Each action large and small is evaluated simply by asking: does it facilitate our survival? All of our actions are directed at three main categories of cultural practices:

(1) irrelevant practices—new car models every year and hard-sell merchandising; (2) necessary

but possibly dangerous practices—food processing and distribution, construction of housing and its organization, the procuring and distribution of energy; (3) destructive practices—social regimentation, covering the soil with concrete, asphalt and buildings, dumping filth into our surroundings, and warfare.

Many environmental groups across the country are focusing on each of the destructive and most of the irrelevant practices. Other groups are watching over the operation of the necessary practices. But the issue of survival transcends all the individual concerns of these groups. For example, if a group brings about a change of practices on a specific issue but, while so doing, contributes to the total destructive impact of many other activities, the end result is a net loss.

Doing ecology action—taking action that follows from knowledge of ecology within the context of our physical and social surroundings—has an intrinsic system of ethics. These ethics are based on one premise: that it is not the purpose or intent of mankind to extinguish life on this planet.

As we enter the 1970's, politically ambitious public servants are already mouthing glaringly irrelevant pronouncements. They are pledging more money to fuel more business to overcome the destructive effects from too much business already. The stock market itself is a glaring contradiction of ecological ethics. A stock's rising price signals our ability to exploit a new portion of our household and the imminence of that exploitation. This means that we have a vested interest in our own destruction.

The groups that call themselves Ecology Action continue to develop ecological ethics and to explore their implications. Some groups feel, from a tactical point of view, that these realities are too harsh for popular consumption. I don't agree. I feel the general public will be relieved to understand that the hectic pace of daily affairs is, in fact, a misguided, destructive endeavor

rather than the American Dream. When we relate our actions to the ethics of ecology, basic insecurity will be replaced with a clear vision of what human existence can be.

Specific actions follow from development of the perspective, scope, and ethics of ecology. First, there is education, informing people of the survival crisis. Second, the discovery and clarification of contradictions within our existing activities. Third, the development and implementation of alternatives to the present cultural practices.

Ecology Action groups across the country are engaging in all three activities. Their involvement is not so much the result of any organizing effort as it is a reflection of an emerging awareness of the total consequences of our present cultural practices. Yet some amount of organizational structure is essential. The first level of the structure is individual action, as a private citizen during non-employed time, as an employee of a firm, or as a member of a fraternal organization, citizens' committee or sports club. The second structural level is the group that manifests ecology action. The third is institutional: government, business, educational and legal institutions are all capable of ethically relevant ecology actions. When the combined results of all these actions begin to reclaim our planet's fertility rather than detract from it, we will have developed the optimum organization.

Remember that we are not concerned here merely with the aesthetics of open space, the nice birds, or the reduction of noise in our cities. The issue is survival, for we are fooling with the guts of our entire culture, the lives of at least two hundred million people. Our activities in this cultural area will affect millions of other people in countries from which we are now obtaining our raw materials. We had better know what we are about and take each step with great care. There is not enough time to study our present predicament and then design a total solution, even if it were possible. The parameters of this crisis are changing so quickly

that a proper definition cannot be made. Only through intensive universal education and individual actions at all levels of organization can we mount an adequate and flexible response. If we have to wait for an agency to determine policy and implement federal programs, we may be waiting on our own extinction.

Individual action is only limited by an individual's particular situation. For instance, let's follow an imaginary employee of a steel plant through a day of doing ecology action. He will walk, pedal, join a car pool, or ride the bus to work. If he has to drive he will have on his car a sign telling how much air his engine inhales and the nature of its pollution. At work he will post on bulletin boards or available wall space clippings and pictures concerning ecological issues. He will also be on the alert for wasteful corporate methods that should be corrected, and be willing to talk fellow employees into helping him correct a deficiency. If employees are aware of a harmful process that could be corrected, and management refuses to take care of it, the plant should be struck until that practice is corrected. If management wants to clean up but can't afford to pay the price, perhaps some employees will drop by on a Saturday and pitch in.

There is simply no point in thinking about buying survival, because there is not enough money to pay for all the needed action. Each person, group and institution must contribute its own resources. When a natural disaster such as a flood or tornado strikes, we react in this manner. The effectiveness of this response to a natural disaster depends on a cultural consensus that we should respond quickly to alleviate human suffering. But we have no prior experience with survival crises. We have always been able to take life pretty much for granted. We do not, at this time, have a cultural consensus that the issue is one of survival. Education can help bring about this consensus. Demonstrations to point out built-in cultural contradictions can indicate the way to positive alternatives.

In retrospect, our most successful demonstration—

Smog Free Locomotion Day—seems a good balance of education and the revelation of both cultural contradictions and alternatives, in this case, alternatives to the gasoline-powered car. On Saturday, September 27, 1969, we staged a five-mile parade through the streets of Berkeley. Smog-free locomotion was represented by antique steamers, pogo sticks, stilts, electric cars, and bicycles. And we actually buried a Chevrolet V-8 engine under the banner "Bury smog producers before they bury us." We pulled the engine through the streets in a mock coffin.

Some of our earlier actions were an "unfilling" of San Francisco Bay, a tour of the Hayward earthquake fault, and the destruction of our own family automobile. To unfill the bay, we loaded money bags with bay mud and distributed them to the major corporations that have profited from filling the Bay. This project combined education with a clarification of the contradictions between ecological realities and economic expedients. On our Hayward tour, we decorated the fault with purple crepe paper and leaflets describing the dangers of living in this earthquake zone. The Hayward fault is active. It passes through the eastern end of the University of California at Berkeley campus, residence halls, private homes, the California School for the Blind and Deaf, an earth dam, the Bay Area Rapid Transit tunnels, even aqueducts.

At an environmental fair on June 7, 1969, we destroyed our family car, then reconstituted it into a piece of sculpture. I smashed the four-barrel carburetor with a sledge hammer to get things started. In about four hours, sixty people had reduced it to rubble. Now we are planning to convert cars into planter boxes for large trees, "mobile parks" for vacant lots. Just imagine the impact of a twenty-foot tree growing out of a Buick!

Ecology Action groups are proliferating across the country because of the quality of such images.

In Berkeley, the original Ecology Action group has developed a high school text. It is called "What's

Ecology?" and was first used by Bob Evans at Campolindo High School in the Bay area. Now we are revising it for primary and junior high school levels. And as this chapter goes to press, we are completing arrangements for our most ambitious undertaking: a "Survival Walk" from Sacramento to Los Angeles to demonstrate the relationship between the problems of agriculture and of our urban areas.

Unfortunately, there is a growing tendency to find niches or categories for various environmental groups, just as we tend to over-classify environmental problems. The universal nature of the survival crisis transcends all such schemes of classification. An action either relates to survival or it does not. If the ecological movement is going to be effective it must speak to as many people as possible. And the people *will* listen as long as the language they hear is the language of a new age of human maturity.