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## Promoting a gentler activism

By [Carli Cutchin](#)

Longtime environmental activist Dave Foreman does not have a prosaic past. As a founder and leader of Earth First! in the early 1980s, Foreman helped spark what was then the most radical environmental group around. Activists made headlines by spiking trees and railroads, cutting fences, destroying power lines and burning wooden bridges as a protest of environmental destruction and irresponsible, unchecked growth.

The group called their actions “ecosabotage” many were inspired by Edward Abbey’s 1975 novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Earth First!’s more hostile foes called it “ecoterrorism,” particularly as the group became more forceful. Eventually, groups like Earth Liberation Front--a grassroots group linked to setting fire to lumber companies, high-end homes, a ski resort and political headquarters--splintered off.

Perhaps it’s all a matter of semantics, though. In the title of his 1991 book, *Confessions of an Eco-warrior*, Foreman associates himself with the legitimized form of combat--taking on environmental destruction without using tactics of terror.

As he walks into Scott Slovic’s University of Nevada, Reno, Western Traditions class Oct. 7, Foreman seems an improbable person to have helped start a tradition whose adherents were tagged as doers of terror. Dressed in a gray jacket, a slate-blue shirt and khakis, Foreman looks like a thoughtful academic with a twinkle in his eye. His hair and beard are a soft silver, and his complexion is slightly ruddy.

This Q&A session was one of Foreman’s three appearances in Reno in the first week of October. No longer involved with Earth First!, Foreman is now chairman of the Wildlands Project, which promotes the restoration of biodiversity through the creation of core roadless wilderness reserves.

A female student with curly, blonde hair asks Foreman what he thinks of Earth First! today.

“What Earth First! has become is a punk rebellion for Earth,” he answers. “I admire their struggle, but their politics leave me cold. It’s so easy for dissent to be a 2-year-old’s temper tantrum.”

Sharon Netherton, executive director of Friends of Nevada Wilderness, is a longtime friend of Foreman’s. She is quick to point out that Foreman has changed over the years. While that gung-ho strain of ecowarfare has become more prevalent among Earth First!ers, Foreman has taken an increasingly measured view of things. Foreman now preaches “responsible” dissidence, a shift that Netherton admires.

“Everyone needs to work together,’ she says. “When people get polarized over philosophy, things fall apart.’

The American West has often been a land-use battleground, with its wide-open spaces the hotly debated arena of ranchers, oil drillers, the government, developers and environmentalists. Foreman and Netherton lived in Ely at the same time some years ago. They saw the contentions among ranchers, city governments and the Bureau of Land Management. When environmentalist groups entered the scene, they witnessed firsthand how rural Nevada’s collective blood pressure went through the sky.

“I think the wonderful thing that’s happening now, with all the growth in Las Vegas and Reno, is that people are recognizing the value of [wild lands],’ Netherton says. “It’s a time to reflect and to learn. ... One of the things I love so much about [Foreman] is he’s been all over, from civil disobedience to cutting-edge science. [He believes that] we have to bring science in--it has to be convincing, it has to be powerful, and it has to be real.’

After the classroom discussion, Foreman says that he has found that the aims of environmentalists and ranchers are not so discordant. Often, the prerogatives of a so-called “redneck’ set--such as the designation of areas where folks can hunt and fish and of areas where motorcycles, which tend to disturb grazing cattle, are not allowed--harmonize with environmentalist aims.

Foreman says that many ranchers support the preservation of wilderness areas. It’s power-hungry, small-town governments, Foreman says, who want to pit ranchers against conservationists--and it’s these oppressive governments that the mainstream media pay attention to.

In the sun-filled lobby outside the lecture hall, a dark-haired graduate student waits in the wings to give Foreman a tour of the university campus.

Before leaving, Foreman says that environmentalist groups need to be careful about whom they choose to present the conservationist case and should send “messengers’ who understand ranchers’ needs to rural areas. Otherwise, folks involved in the give and take of the environmental debate will continue to buy into a lie of dichotomy.

“We have to blow that myth apart,’ Foreman says. “And not let the media play up the polarization between city and rural.’