



Tree Spirit and Earth Repair

1996

“Environmental restoration may be the art form of the twenty-first century”

— from *Helping Nature Heal* (Ten Speed Press, 1991)

Environmental restoration is the other side of the coin to much of the activity that Earth First! has so far been engaged in — that is, grappling with the toxic forces of ‘law’ and ‘order’ in a very overt way. Such activity is the defensive work, a holding operation, crucial in many ways and important for bringing people together as a group, cementing the bonds between them in shared, often harrowing experience. However it is important not to get hung up on the adrenaline and peculiar glamour of such frontline situations.

Environmental restoration is proactive — whereby we set our own agenda — as opposed to campaigns, which usually involve little more than reacting to the latest state or business atrocity. Restoration therefore helps to signal our ultimate indifference to politicians and the fleeting games that they play. Restoration is less dramatic and more humble than the preservation battles, but it does establish a vital new paradigm: humanity as creator and healer — one who adds value or — makes reparations to nature — rather than one who is unable to do anything but destroy and despoil.

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Retrieved on September 22, 2010 from www.eco-action.org
Published in ‘Do or Die! Voices from the Ecological Resistance’
(Issue 5), 1996.

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There is no immediate gratification, no overnight old growth forest or pristine wilderness — rather a slow, cumulative process of getting to grips with what surrounds you, and establishing an intimacy and a rapport with a given area of land. There are strong personal and spiritual repercussions: the realisation that you have set in motion a process that will extend far beyond your lifetime leads you into a deeper comprehension of nature, and the scale on which she works. Some of you goes with the tree branches as they steadily rear up towards the sky.

Earth repair work is becoming increasingly widespread in the US, India and elsewhere, but is still relatively uncommon in Britain. We featured Alan Watson's visionary Trees for Life project in *Do or Die* #2 (Write to the editorial address for a copy of that article), and a similar project, albeit on a much more modest scale, is that run by the group Tree Spirit on their newly acquired 24 acre plot at Maesy Mynach, near Shrewsbury.

Tree Spirit exist to promote an appreciation of trees and the spiritual, social and ecological roles that they fulfil. To this end, they publish a newsletter, hold regular 'tree moot' gatherings, and campaign for the preservation of woodland areas. On a more practical level they also operate their own tree nursery, with stock largely drawn from commercial nursery surplus. (A word of advice to EF!ers interested in tree rearing with a view to clandestine or authorised planting: due to the exigencies of the deranged market system that we live under, many nurseries are forced to destroy thousands of perfectly good trees every year — generally from March through to June. This is for no other reason than to make way for the new stock (and to protect prices, of course). It is therefore worth approaching your local nursery at this time of year — you can take the trees off their hands, leave them with a clear conscience, and acquire the raw materials for reforestation at little or no cost.)

Another lesson to be learnt from Tree Spirit's purchase of Maesy Mynach concerns funding. The purchase was partly financed by the Forestry Commission's Woodland Grant Scheme, which is well

worth looking into for anyone contemplating such a project. Although the buying and selling of land is obviously a complete absurdity, it is true to say that if you buy land where it is cheapest — i.e. Wales or Scotland (Particularly Scotland where there is currently a glut on the market as the big estates are further dismembered) — and then reforest it under the Woodland Grant Scheme, you actually stand to make a profit (Over, say, about 10 years), which can then be reinvested in additional acquisitions — this is Tree Spirit's intention. And before you know it, your mighty empire of reforestation has expanded, and the wildwood has returned... NOT! (Ecological capitalism, any one?) Copies of the Woodland Grant Scheme are available from 'The Wilderness', South Downs EF!, or your local Forestry Commission office. Bear in mind the fact that, as the WGS is an attempt by the Forestry Commission to restore an image tarnished by decades of desecrating the landscape with conifers, the grants for broadleaved tree planting are very generous. Even more incredibly the grants for 'natural regeneration' are the most generous of all. For non-interventionist EF! types, this has to be worthy of serious attention. (A word of warning however. The Forestry Commission has reportedly begun to revert back to type — plans are afoot to increase funding for large scale conifer plantations, and to reduce it for broadleaved planting, particularly if it is small scale. If true, I guess it just goes to show that you can't keep a bad institution down.)

Maes y Mynach is itself a former Forestry Commission plantation, and part of Tree Spirit's vision for the land involves rectifying the environmental damage that such a plantation entails. Their aim is twofold: firstly, to create a mixed woodland for ecological reasons — to which end, a very wide range of trees are being planted: oak, ash, birch, rowan, willow, lime, chestnut, hazel, hawthorn, wild cherry, bird cherry, aspen, field maple, sycamore, yew and larch. Ultimately they intend to encircle the entire plot with a good mixed hedge, which will in itself be extremely valuable to wildlife.

Secondly there is the human element – acknowledging that we do have a place in nature, and that we are not intrinsically hostile to the natural world, as some strands in deep ecology seem to suggest. Tree Spirit hope that Maes y Mynach will be “a place where people can come to do practical conservation work, enjoy nature, relax and generally find a little bit of peace and quiet... it will be a place where people can stay for a few days without being told to move on or “get orf my land”. However they emphasize that “it will not become a permanent encampment for all and sundry. For those who have something constructive to offer or who need a little time away from the madness of modern society, Maes y Mynach will be accessible.”

To achieve these aims a tremendous amount of work is in order. Most of the tree planting has been done, but some still remains – particularly the hedgerows. Planting season is October through to April. Many paths need clearing as there is still a great deal of felled wood strewn about from the forestry operations. Tree Spirit want to create a pond, which will serve as both a wildlife feature and as drainage for the main track. Maes y Mynach also has a spring, which is currently being made into a source of clean water. The most ambitious plan is to construct a roundhouse, for which planning permission has already been obtained. It will be 32 feet in diameter, 13 feet high at the central point and crowned with a turf roof. It is envisaged that the roundhouse will act as a workshop, storage space, communal gathering/celebratory venue, and as a sleeping area. (Perhaps a future EF! gathering could be held there.)

Anyone who is interested in helping out with this inspiring project should contact Tree Spirit at:

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As Tree Spirit say, in a phrase that could serve as a motto for all our efforts: “Cooperation for mutual benefit and input of constructive energies will go a long way.”