

AMAZON TRAIL

Crossing the line

Environmental and human-rights activists can accomplish great things with a currency called respect

by Lee Lynch

One by one, holding hands, the men, some in suits, and the women, some white-haired, crossed the line to be arrested. Three or four hundred protesters broke the stillness of the old growth forest with applause. I photographed the historic crossing through tears. A woman behind me broke into a searing scream, giving voice to the mutilation going on around us.

This was a protest against the timber "sale" called Sugarloaf. People who love the trees, the earth, and the life that both sustain tried to stop the greed which was—at that same moment—powering chain saws that severed the trunks of trees so old only wild animals and the ancestors of Native Americans had seen the saplings.

On our way up the Caves Highway in southern Oregon truck after truck roared past us, most carrying no more than three logs apiece. These trees dwarfed even logging trucks. At Sugarloaf the rent-a-cops were waiting, paid for by the timber company, Boise Cascade. We stood in a respectful circle asking the forest to welcome us.

It was another day of shame for the United States. The same radicals who refuse to recognize their common humanity with gay people refuse to honor nature itself. They snuck Sugarloaf and many other sales through Congress. The courts had held back the forces of greed and destruction with the strong arm of the law. The radicals chopped off that arm—undid the law. They knew legislation to take the timber would never pass on its own, so they added a so-called "salvage rider" to an appropriations bill. Competitive bidding was not required. We taxpayers not only got nothing from the dirty deal, other environmental laws including the clean air and clean water acts were also lifted for these sales.

Many of the right-wing politicians who gave away Sugarloaf were elected on platforms that included anti-gay provisions. Now that the Oregon Citizens Alliance and its confederates in other states have amassed enormous mailing lists and funding through the use of gay-bashing propaganda, and have built political clout by demonstrating that they can influence the vote in Colorado, Cincinnati and Queens, N.Y., they are using that power to feed corporate greed and irreparably damage the quality of life provided by these last untouched lands.

It's not just Oregon. The Everglades in Florida are being smothered in concrete. A bill before Congress would allow a huge coal-mining operation by Anadalex, a Dutch-owned company, on 20 million acres of federally owned land in the Red Rock Canyon country of southern Utah (near Bryce Canyon and Zion national parks). More legislation would allow oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. Are there any wetlands left in your town? Where do all the wild critters go? This ecological holocaust goes on and on.

Out in the Sugarloaf woods, everyday people, kids who'd stayed out of school, politicians and environmental advocates crossed that line to protest lawless logging. I stood beside heterosexual folks I'd met while fighting the anti-gay ballot

measures. It seems like people who respect life, respect life in all its forms. And I was not the only gay person there that day.

In this time when so much I hold dear seems to be on the line—the right to health care for the old and poor, the right to jobs and housing for gay men and lesbians, the right to clean air and water—I greeted this informal coalition of human-rights and environmental activists with jubilation. We need to acknowledge that our bottom-line goals are the same, whether we champion salmon, education money, a decent minimum wage or freedom from persecution. We can accomplish great things, those of us who value all of creation, with a currency called respect. Our power comes from honoring the dignity of one another and of the planet that supports us.

I remember the old woman from the wildlife refuge who came to town for help. Laws allow farmers to use water from the refuge for irrigation. It was a drought year. When the pelicans came, as they always do, by the hundreds, to birth and raise their young, there was no water. The baby pelicans, forced to march miles to water with their parents,

dropped and died. The woman got no help from the regulating agencies. Alone, she carried some of the babies. She exhorted us to write letters, to make phone calls. When the pelicans returned the next year, there was more water, partly because one woman spoke out and reached out.

We do not know the extent of our careless cruelties, nor can we imagine the breadth of our concerted power.

At the Sugarloaf demonstration, the police refused to openly arrest

those who had crossed the line into the sale area. The police waited up the hill, around a bend, out of sight of the media. As the morning wore on, 95 people crossed the line. A few at a time, they went the whole distance up the hill and disappeared.

We cheered them. We pressed against the rope. I had traveled there with two local environmental leaders, level-headed people like me. We came with no intention of getting arrested. Yet at one moment, we looked at one another and nodded in unison. If the crowd crossed the line that denied access to our public lands, so would we.

There was some negotiation with the media: The arrests would only be worth the risk with witnesses to bring our action out of the forest. But if the media went with us, their equipment would be confiscated. One reporter went up the hill only to be tackled by the police. A white-haired woman was maced trying to protect him. The moment for the crowd to surge forward into mass arrests passed. Later, another old woman tried to be arrested. The police wouldn't take her until she returned with a group of younger women and stood in the shadows, where no cameras could reach. They wouldn't arrest kids at all.

The Sugarloaf giants are at the mills. The baby pelicans are dead. Gay kids are still killing themselves, and poor people are scared. The old women cannot stop the radical right alone. We can't either. In the chain of life we all need one another.



Lee Lynch at Sugarloaf

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