

Richard Grossman Letter To An Environmental Filmmaker

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Richard Grossman

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Dear Mark,

Greetings. I trust that the remainder of your East Coast peregrinations went well.

I watched "Berkeley in the 60s" twice. It's excellent, first-rate. Thank you for fusing the people and the ideas. I've loaned it to a friend and will send it back shortly.

I've looked over your "expanded. writeup" for the Environmental History film, June 2003. As you no doubt can assume from our conversations, I have a different perspective about the past 35 years of environmental activism.

It seems to me that this outline bites off way too much . . . limiting severely how much time the film can spend actually examining a few key points well. As you keep poking around, you will keep evolving, and I trust, focus down. Your early treatments of the Berkeley film were probably far broader in scope than the final product.

It would be good if you could divest yourself of environmental history clichés. To accomplish this, you would have to forge your own analysis, and not rely so much on the various advocates you interview, and on the "historians." As we discussed, after these past 35 years, the ecological report card is worse, not better. (Did you see the NYTimes Co. article Wednesday 4 August about mercury poisoning of fish -- and hence of people -- everywhere?) The nation is no closer to logical and ecologically sane investment and production and work *transitions* -- in energy, food, transportation, construction, general manufacturing, land use thinking, democratic self-governance, etc. -- than 35 years ago. When you talk to Lester Brown, Amory Lovins, Bill McKibben, Phil Shabecoff, etc., -- ask'em why.

You can also ask why the idea of constitutional RIGHTS for other species and for places (such as rivers, mountains, oceans, etc.) is not a glimmer in the eyes of activists in the woods or of lawyers at the Natural Resources Defense Council and elsewhere; and why so few environmental "leaders" acknowledge that constitutional rights of poisoning and destroying *corporations* are regularly and routinely enabled by the law of the land (and by,

of course, the armed might of the nation).

I've got some specific quibbles, such as:

- your opening line -- "Earth Day 1970 . . . the moment when environmentalism arrived as a mass movement" -- is just plain incorrect.
- "NEPA . . . proved to be one of the most important weapons env. ever had" is also not accurate. NEPA was a helpful tool on occasion. But its overall impact has been negative. The Act gives people and communities NO AUTHORITY over "government" investments except to help government destroyers get their procedural ducks in a line. The Act has deceived many people and camouflaged great harms not only to the Earth but to people's rights and democratic processes. The word "corporation" is not to be found within this Act, and the Act gives people and communities no powers to deny the stupid plans of corporate managers . . . backed up, alas, by the law of the land.
- Option 9 was, and remains, a fraud. Clinton and the environmental organizations which went along with Option 9 screwed the remaining ancient forests and ecosystems but good.
- It is inaccurate -- and a diversion -- to claim that Rachel Carson "exposes the dark side of industrial progress." First, she does not regard the corporate industrial system as "progress." Second, she is clear that industrial poisoning of natural systems and all life is not a "side effect," but rather the principal result of anti-ecological thinking at the heart of endlessly expanding production as the nation's #1 value. Poisoning and destruction of the Earth are THE PRODUCTS. So is pre-emption of local decisionmaking, and institutionalization of the inappropriate, complex technologies. Some goods and services are the BY-PRODUCTS. (It's just like nuclear power plants: massive and deadly radiation, centralization, authoritarianism and complexity are THE PRODUCTS. Steam to turn turbines is merely a BY-PRODUCT.)
- I'm no fan of regulatory environmental laws enacted in the '70s and '80s. Their job is to regulate environmentalists. So they never did, and do not now, represent a "command and control" approach. That is poisoner-generated nonsense. Would that they WERE command and control! Then, maybe, corporate managers would not be producing and spewing more toxic chemicals every day than the day before. And maybe the few cats running poisoning, destroying and rights-denying corporations would not be writing our laws and electing our public servants.
- For which human people and other species and flowing people was the "solution" at Love Canal a victory? A defeat? A camouflage?
- Re: Dow Chemical Corporation -- its "product stewardship initiatives and waste reduction programs" are another diversion. And this corporation, like other giant corporations, is still in there denying people's rights across the board and ravaging the planet. I don't know how anyone can "have fun" with the Dow Chemical Corporation, except by ending its existence -- and even that very serious step will leave us all with the monumental challenge of "doing something" with the corporation's deadly legacies (including the poisons lodged in organs and genes across the globe). (By the way, a few years ago the Dow Chemical Corporation "bought" the Union Carbide Corporation -- and now claims no liability for *that* corporation's destructions, murders, rights denials and other legacies at Bhopal or anywhere else, including at Institute, WVA).

My fundamental concerns are with the perspective revealed by your writeup. "Environmental history" cannot be examined without looking at *context* -- here in the USA or elsewhere. It cannot be understood without looking at the extraordinary violence which invading Europeans imposed upon the lands and peoples they conquered, without examining the ways in which that essential violence has been codified into law, and cemented into our culture. As experts and leaders know, the nation's jobs, security, progress, and liberty are directly dependent upon all this violence continuing, and being regarded as "legal."

Actually, the historical realm was one in which I felt the Berkeley film fell short. It offered no ideas about the US histories out of which the FSM and war-resistance and Black Panthers emerged. There are a few references to the vapid fifties -- but none to the great movements for rights and local authority and anti-imperialism -- and to the great struggles which the denied and disenfranchised and violated have waged for the soul of this country.

The Berkeley Free Speech Movement didn't come from nowhere. Clark Kerr, Ronald Reagan, the Oakland Police, etc., a public university *designed* to provide personnel to help corporate directors escalate production for ever and ever, didn't come from nowhere. What about the mothers and fathers -- the grandmothers and grandfathers -- of the FSM leaders. What about the old radicals and reds in California -- what were *their* relationships with these emerging leaders? What about the Panther's parents and grandparents -- what struggles had THEY gone through in the old Confederacy states? What denials of rights? What state violences?

Similarly, today's "environmental crisis" didn't come from nowhere. And people's resistance to the poisoners and destroyers -- governmental and corporate -- was shaped by the contours of US history. Leading this shaping was the overwhelmingly successful effort by the few to rule over the many, and to impose their ideas for societal organization based on stupid values -- starting with the *necessity* to conquer, subdue, crush and subjugate nature, and command and control the majority's labor.

So a basic question must be: What "environmental" -- "public health" -- "wilderness" -- "nature" values/resistance/advocacy was going on from In the Beginning? What was the struggle among these competing perspectives in the late 1960s -- early 1970s? Why, for example, did Denis Hayes back away from his radical speech on the first Earth Day? (He sounded back then a bit like Mario Savio.) Did the success of Cold War Red Scare Hysterias have anything to do with the way things worked out? What did the women's suffrage movement, and the early labor movement, and the Populist Movement, and the Socialists and Anarchists and Communists in the USA say and try to do on behalf of public health and the natural world? In the face of government and corporate rights and power to pillage and destroy?

What about those FSM and anti-war radicals? Some of them jumped into "environmental" struggles intent on framing them in the context of this country's great people's struggles for RIGHTS. What happened? Have you looked at this history -- obvious in the nuke (weapons AND power plants) battles, and in the toxics struggles (See Commoner for context and theory, along with the struggles against brown lung and black lung disease led by poor and working people, and the work led by Tony Mazzocchi and the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union in the late 1970s - early 1980s. (You can get some of this from

the chapter on labor history in the book *Fear At Work* which I gave you. [Richard Kazis & Richard L. Grossman, *Fear At Work: Job Blackmail, Labor & The Environment*, second edition, Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1991, (first edition: 1982)]

You briefly mention the Ford Foundation's role in creating NRDC and EDF. Who else in the corporate poisoner class was conscious way back then? What was the political and brain-cell impact of Rockefeller money (Laurance's) in western lands parkification? What was the role of men of property in diverting anti-nuke power resistance and antitoxic chemical resistance and clear cutting resistance from evolving into a cross-constituency, cross-class democracy movement?

Mark: if people want narrow, conventional histories of environmentalism they can go to the Sierra Club, and even to Samuel Hayes. They don't need you investing five years of **your life** merely to retell old tales revealing little about the diverse perspectives which got steamrolled.

I very much appreciated "Berkeley in the 60s." I mentioned to you that I also appreciated Mark Achbar's first film, "Manufacturing Consent." So I will close with similar words I wrote to Achbar upon reading a mid-way script for **his** second movie, "The Corporation," in fall, 2002. Since you both share the first name of Mark, I can address you both:

Mark: you created a wonderful first film -- radical and revolutionary. It was provocative, artistic . . . *and* entertaining. A "success." Now that you are undertaking your **next** film, you have the opportunity to use your considerable skills and artistic talents to help people grapple with another reality of our time. Why would you want to do retrograde work? Why produce a film which gussies up and perpetuates false premises? Which camouflages unspoken assumptions? Denies history, conceals, diverts and paralyzes? WHY NOT scrutinize conventional wisdoms and platitudes galore? WHY NOT help people see the broad range of thought and action to protect life, liberty and the Earth which so many people have engaged in for so long? Why not explore why "the environment" is in worse shape now than before Earth Day 1970?

Mark, take me up on my invitation and join one of our weekend Democracy Schools. They are scheduled through the fall in Boston, PA, North Carolina, Vermont and Sante Fe.

If you would like to pursue any of the matters raised here, you know where to find me.