

SNAKES AND CIRCLES

A report on the Midwest Environmental Ethics Conference on Ecofeminism, held on March 21-23, 1992.

It is the weekend of the spring equinox. In a funky 4-H camp on the Des Moines River, seventy people sit in a circle passing Danielle Wirth's two red-tongued, copper-eyed snakes from hand to hand. After two days of meetings at the Midwest Environmental Ethics Conference focused on Ecological Feminism, when I was beginning to doubt that I could continue to consider myself part of the ecofeminist clan, the two female milksnakes eased my doubts. They reminded me, wordlessly, of our deep connection to each other and to the earth. When Danielle asked us to tell our story of what brought us to this conference, I realized it was the first time this weekend I felt truly welcome. That the conference was nearly over and this was the first time we had formed a circle and invoked the powers of the sacred, became for me a powerful emblem of the conference and how it failed to ground the ecofeminist vision.

Looking back with several months of hindsight, it is easy to see that the gathering would have been better served had it been ritualized. Had we started by casting a circle, allowed for more interactive group sessions, allowed more room for spontaneity and feedback at each session, been conscious of building a group energy—had we acted like ecofeminists—then all the participants could have consciously contributed. Unfortunately, we allowed the conference to remain a conference; we remained divided into speakers and listeners, perfectly replicating the patriarchal forms that silence us in the larger world. By Friday evening some of us were whispering our discontent to each other; most of us were not academicians there to argue and further define the subtle points of ecofeminist philosophy and we were tired of being talked at. Many of us were activists and educators fighting uphill battles in our communities and workplaces. We were there hoping to learn more about the movement and how it might deepen our ecological practice, but for the most part the experiential was forsaken for the intellectual.

Two major topics that were ignored were population and other life forms. As an Earth First!er I felt dismayed, then angry, that when human population growth was mentioned it was only to name the subject as racist, sexist, and politically incorrect. This was a failure on two counts: first, it allowed the discussion of population to remain in the hands of the people who frame it in racist, sexist classist ways; secondly, it is morally irresponsible to ignore the reality of this issue. Whether the population size of the earth doubles or not by 2054, the existing pressures on the soil, water, and atmosphere are already so great that any increase threatens the existence of all life forms. This issue is complex, but we can begin to deal with it on our terms if we accurately reframe it as an issue of sustainability for all life forms.

There was little discussion of other species. Most talks were centered on humans and the effects of environmental degradation on us. The exclusion from our discussions of the winged, crawling, finned, and four-legged ones replicated the

reigning destructive view of nature. Once we place humans above other life forms, the circle is broken; in its place is a ladder, a pyramid, a hierarchy with a top and a bottom—those on the bottom become acceptable losers. I had assumed that the sacredness of all life would be a foundation of ecofeminist philosophy and practice, but the theory seemed focused mainly on human females. I would like to see us make our view of the circle of life most explicitly inclusive. Chief Seattle was credited with saying: "What are humans without beasts? If all the animals were gone, the people would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For what ever happens to the animals soon happens to the people. all things are connected."

I consider ecofeminists as allies, but I recognize more clearly that those of us who consider human life to be no more, or no less, valued than that of milksnakes, great blue herons, coyotes, hairy puccoons, rivers, loess hills, and white pines have a different sense of priorities and emphasis for the work we do to heal the earth. I think where our visions coexist is with the understanding that the basis for the work is a spiritual one.

Diane Kaufman



EARTH SUMMIT: Some Ecofeminist Observations on Our Political Times

A report on the Earth Summit, June 3-14, 1992, Rio de Janeiro reprinted from Women's Environmental Education Centre Newsletter, 10/92, PO Box A100, Sydney South, N.S.W. 2001, Australia. The author, Ariel Salleh, was a visiting scholar at NYU during 1992 and was able to attend both Prepcom VI and the Rio meetings.

Most of women's input into the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was achieved at Prepcom VI in New York. Once in Rio, there was practically zero access for people from non-government organisations (NGOs) to official government sessions some 20 miles away at Rio Centro. Apart from policed ID and strict dress rules, it meant US \$6 by bus each way daily, in 90% humidity and carbon monoxide fumes, and running gauntlet the clusters of Brazilian youth with erect machine guns. Many activists settled for enjoying the good food and ambience of what must be the world's most magnificent city. Others took to the streets in enthusiastic anti-Bush marches. Some NGOs claim that Earth Summit was deliberately organised along 'divide and rule' lines. In any event, Rio Centro was certainly sealed off from activist voices at the people's Global Forum in Flamengo Park; from NGOs meeting at the Hotel Gloria; from the Women's Truth Tent Planeta Femea; and from Indigenous Parliaments way off in another direction.

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About 1500 women from all continents were involved in workshops at the Women's Tent, including a handful of Australians. However, a Women's Environmental Education Centre request to Canberra that the Australian NGO delegation should reflect the prominent role of women leaders in our environment movement went unheeded. Alongside the official male delegate from the Centre for International Environmental Law in Sydney, our second NGO position remained unfilled. Ros Kelly visited Rio briefly and launched a booklet "Women and Environment," prepared by the Office of the Status of Women. Other notables were: John Kerin, Fred Chaney, Shirley McLaine, Jaques Cousteau, Gro Harlem Bruntland, the Dalai Lama, David Suzuki, Wangari Maathai, Helen Caldecott, Jerry Brown, Placido Domingo, and Fidel Castro.

Since the UN has been starved for funds - the US alone owing some \$7 million in unpaid dues, Earth Summit was largely funded by donations from multinational companies. The administrative staff for the various Prepcoms and Brazil meeting itself, was therefore, salaried by the corporate sector. And industry interests are only thinly disguised in early drafts of the main conference discussion paper - the 700 pages long Agenda 21. At the same time, two Rio sites were given over to technology displays; the peoples' Global Forum being a 50/50 mix of political workshops and Expo. Third World analysts see privatisation of UN functions as part of a general strategy to put environmental management under World Bank control. The Global Environment Facility (GEF) will be the agency for this.

There is no doubt that the real agenda of Earth Summit was the economy rather than ecology. The nitty gritty of the New World Ordure is set out elsewhere — in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), sometimes called the Uruguay Round of trade talks. If GATT 'free trade' proposals succeed — and the Australian Government is not particularly critical of them — then corporations will have open go to put destructive manufacturing operations wherever wages are low; worker health conditions are unchecked; environmental protection laws non-existent. (See our Newsletter No. 7 for an account of GATT impacts on women's lives.) As one NGO evening plenary had it - 'Who Rules the World: The World Bank, the IMF, or the People?'

Cynical ecofeminists suspect that Bush's refusal to sign the Rio Biodiversity Convention, and his signing of only a softened Climate Change Convention, is tied up with the currently stalled GATT negotiations. Whole slabs of Earth Summit's Agenda 21 complement the 'free trade' proposals. Its chapter on Technology Transfer, along with the Rio Declaration that replaced Earth Charter, locks economic growth in the South to whatever the North has to sell. Increasingly these days, it is an excess of weapons.

New financial institutions would ensure more loans to the Third World, so trapping these countries into ever more debilitating debt and structural adjustment programs that kill off education and welfare in order to meet repayments. Agenda 21 chapters on Biodiversity and Biotechnology talk about preserving tropical forests as 'carbon sinks' to absorb and

recycle pollution from the industrial North. Genetic material from abundant forest species is to be 'protected for patenting' by the multinational seed cartels and pharmaceuticals. According to Judy Henderson, lobbyist from AGFOA, Australian conservation groups could have pressured our government a lot more. The Earth Summit paper on forest principles is very ineffectual.

Not only 'green nature' but women's bodies, too, are 'resourced' in this latest wave of capitalist expansion. The U.S. Patents Office has already accepted applications for patents on antibodies in breast milk and on the hormone relaxin produced by the uterus during labour. The phrase 'mother nature' is much more than metaphor - as ecofeminists have argued now for several years. Genetic engineering, embryo experimentation, in vitro research, are all armoury of the growing biotech industry whose blatant patriarchal project governments and business hope will turn the world-wide recession around. The Australian Government has been giving encouragement to biotech firms by loosening up safeguards on genetic engineering research.

With the patenting of genetic resources, discovered and often developed by Third World workers or indigenous forest dwellers, scientists from the corporate sector create the conditions for a double theft; possibly a fourfold one. First, the material is pirated way to the laboratory for 'improvement', at which point it becomes subject to 'intellectual property rights'. Then, people in the South must pay royalties to the multinationals to get access to medicines or crops originating from their own lands. Meanwhile, women farmers in the South find their soils ruined by imported pesticides manufactured by the very companies who would appropriate their seed stocks. Often, these farmers will be advised by UN agricultural experts to return and purchase fertilisers from the same companies, now to remedy their soil degradation.

Clearly, women at UNCED have had plenty to say about the Sustainable Agriculture, Poverty, Human Settlements, Water chapters in Agenda 21. But as well as mainstreaming their views in this way, women have worked equally hard for visibility of their gender as a special interest group. In doing so, they joined with other 'minorities' such as Youth and Indigenous Peoples. Women - as 53% of global population - are not in fact a minority, but they are so, in the white, male, corporate perspective which set the terms of reference for Earth Summit. Curiously, the Business Council for Sustainable Development which represented the multinationals at Rio, also gave itself a chapter in the 'affirmative action' section of Agenda 21. In as much as 1% of the world's population own 90% of its wealth, this group could perhaps label itself 'a minority'.

The women's text from the section Strengthening the Role of Major Groups is worth reading. (And a copy is available at the Centre.) The 31 March draft is substantially what was passed at Rio. Some contentious or bracketed words, like 'war', got negotiated into 'armed action', which the smart young lawyers on the 80 strong US delegation may be sorry about later. The US, ever sensitive to 'finger pointing', also eventu-

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ally accepted references to 'overconsumption'. WEDO intends to lobby nations at the UN to ensure acceptance of women's contribution to Agenda 21. WEDO will also follow up on the question of financing for women's agencies such as UNIFEM, which somehow dropped out of the picture in Brazil.

Based in New York, the Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) focuses its activities around lobbying and international networking. Its approach to women and ecology tends to be shaped by a 'liberal feminist' politics, as opposed to say socialist, radical, or ecofeminist analysis. The group is well connected with the US Democratic Party, and has good credentials among overseas aid agencies. WEDO initiatives brought women across nations together in Miami for the 1991 World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet. That gave rise to an exemplary Women's Action Agenda to guide subsequent negotiations at Earth Summit. (A copy of this is also held at the Centre.)

While women from the South are on its board, WEDO's perspective is in many ways tied into lifestyle assumptions of the North. This became very apparent in Rio during discussion of their proposed NGO Treaty on Population, Environment, and Development. In the US, reproductive rights are still very controversial, and middle class feminists have a big investment in the debate. Many Brazilian, Australian, Indian, and other feminists, however, put birth control and population management in a different context.

Targeting population growth leaves the burden of environmental stress in the hands of Third World women, while taking responsibility off those who enjoy overconsumption in the North. Moreover, in the name of population policy, many women in the South have been subjected to genocidal experimental testing of badly designed birth control products by pharmaceuticals hand in hand with UN agencies. It is a delicate question, but agreement was reached at Planeta Femea by prioritizing the need for women managed community health care centres, where fertility advice is made available with other basic services.

WEDO has not been 'green' as it might in its analysis of other technologies as well. Its work on the Biotechnology chapter is predominantly affirmative action in orientation - viz. the call for more research into male contraception. Ecofeminists argue that a profound 'shift' in thinking is required in the North, one that gives intrinsic value to all life forms - rather than seeing them simply as resources for humans. The use of animal and human embryos by corporate technicians in search of new products is rejected. Ecofeminists are especially opposed to the recent move to commodify life by gene patenting. The political rationale behind 'intellectual property rights' is questioned as well.

Aside from the Biodiversity Convention, Climate Change Convention and Rio Declaration the outcome of Earth Summit is a set of guideline statements compiled as Agenda 21. These texts are to be ratified by governments at the UN General Assembly meeting in New York this Fall. They will very likely be reviewed for 'progress made' at an international

meeting in 1997. The chapter on Institutions puts forward a plan for a sustainable Development Commission, to be established under the auspices of UW's ECOSOC. An alternative set of NGO Treaties, about 30 all up, was also developed in Rio and is being circulated among the various national NGO networks for amendment. The NGO documents provide more democratic and ecologically sustainable approaches to global crisis than informs Agenda 21. Compromised as the latter is by the economic interests of multinational capital and governments.

The NGO Treaty process is being monitored in Australia by the Australian Council for Overseas Aid. The list includes - Population, Indigenous Peoples, Fisheries, Biodiversity, Scrubland, Climate, Consumption, Education, Sharing Resources, Urbanisation, Freshwater, NGO Global Decision Making, Energy, TNCs, Alternative Economics, Sustainable Agriculture, Trade, Technology Bank, Food Security, Youth, Media, Waste, People of the Americas, Militarism, Racism, Debt, Biotechnology, NGO Code of Conduct, and an Earth Charter - replacing the one that was thrown out at Rio. The existence of a Militarism Treaty testifies to the commitment of women - WILPF among them, and Pacific Island peoples, who refused to accept the UNCED requirement that militarism stay off the official agenda. The military, of course, continues to be the single greatest polluter of the global environment.

Women's input into UNCED is needed still, because many NGO Treaties were designed by activists who lack an awareness of gender politics. This is especially the case with Biodiversity and Biotechnology, where Brazilian environmentalist men captured the drafting process very early on. In the meantime, innovative women in Rochester, upstate NY, are already using the treaties as a way of rating conditions in their local community. The Philippine delegation came back from Rio to present their government with the treaties as a blueprint for a new national sustainable development program.

The British Government has offered to sponsor an NGO follow-up conference, 1993. But with nation-states becoming increasingly co-opted by the private sector; and bureaucracies increasingly dysfunctional in the face of complex environmental questions, NGOs will want to think carefully about strategy. NGO Treaties could be instruments in the formation of an emerging international civil society - people's transnationals - which like the corporations, may also pass governments. It would be a shame to compromise this potential. Again, women in particular, may want to work on the NGO Global Decision Making draft to keep it flexible and non-hierarchical. If popular shadow UN-type institutions begin to evolve, it will be crucial to have an ecofeminist say in that, too.

Ariel Salleh

