

Who Speaks for the Trees?

People Unite to Save a Sacred Oak Grove in Berkeley

BY MATTHEW TAYLOR

Is nature sacred? Who has the legitimate right to declare it as such? These questions lie at the heart of a currently unfolding, multifaceted conflict over UC Berkeley's plans to cut down a much-beloved grove of oak trees in order to construct an underground athletic training facility adjacent to the California Memorial football stadium.

Following in the footsteps of Julia Butterfly Hill and Earth First! forest defense actions, the Save the Oaks Campaign has all the makings of a classic environmental struggle, including activists living for months on end in lofty tree platforms and a contentious lawsuit. The campaign's most prominent figurehead is Native American leader and mayoral candidate Zachary Running Wolf, who along with other natives and community members has declared the grove to be sacred. The campaign focuses on a broad range of issues — from respect for war veterans to the global warming crisis — revealing deep truths about how we relate to the world and why humanity stands on the brink of ecocide.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

The Oak Grove is only a little more than a football field in length, but carries an outsized significance to the people and creatures of Berkeley. Environmental Science professor Ignacio Chapela, a well-known critic of genetically modified organisms and the corporate takeover of universities (see page 42), points out the grove is a wildlife corridor, providing animals such as Red Foxes a vital pathway between two disparate strips of wildscape to the northeast and southeast of the stadium.

This "urban forest" is also cherished because it provides a special space for the community to relax, meditate and commune with nature. Urban forests are known to improve the mental health, happiness and well-being of city dwellers whose daily experiences are dominated by a sea of concrete. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service has published numerous reports on the effect of urban forests on air quality, reduction of harmful UV radiation and greenhouse gasses, and mitigation of soil erosion. The Oak Grove is one of the last such groves in the city's flatlands. The oaks are also considered excellent specimens as a gene bank of native trees.

Concerned with global warming, activists state that the University's reported plans to "plant three new trees" for each one they cut down cannot possibly replace the loss of an urban forest or mitigate the loss of a mature oak tree's ability to sequester CO₂. Further, they say it sets the wrong example for students in an age of global warming. British journalist George Monbiot warns we must cut emissions 90 percent by 2030 or face an irreversible positive feedback loop of warming that causes more warming. (See <www.monbiot.com> for more details.)

The Oak Grove is adjacent to the California Memorial Stadium, which is dedicated to the memory of World War I veterans. William Lindo Jr., the son of a World War II naval combatant, sees the grove as a "cemetery without the coffins" and would view any attempt to cut the trees as akin to defacing Arlington National Cemetery. A frequent visitor to the grove, he has pledged to hug the trees if they are attacked, claiming the UCPD would have to kill him first.

"The essence of what we're doing is, 'We shall not be moved.'"

— Major Tom, tree-sitter

FROM PETITIONS TO DIRECT ACTION

When the University announced its plans to cut the trees, community activists Doug Buckwald, Scott and Beth Wachenheim, and Michael Kelly filed objections at the University's public environmental impact meetings, launched a publicity campaign, and organized a lawsuit. Berkeley alumnus Buckwald was the chief spokesperson of the movement and captured attention by parading around Sproul Plaza dressed as a black-robed Cal graduate with a mock chainsaw in one hand and a gray squirrel perched on a tree branch in the other. Buckwald's tireless outreach efforts generated a groundswell of support.

In fall 2006, Emma Fazio and other students organized a rally on Sproul plaza that culminated in Buckwald's presentation of stacks of petitions to a security guard at the Chancellor's office. The Chancellor refused to meet with students or community members to discuss the matter — according to those who attempted to contact him about it, his response was, "I only meet with people to discuss human issues."

With Cal's plans to cut down the trees set for January 2007, a group of community activists decided they had to do something. Early in the morning of Dec. 2, 2006, (the day of the "Big

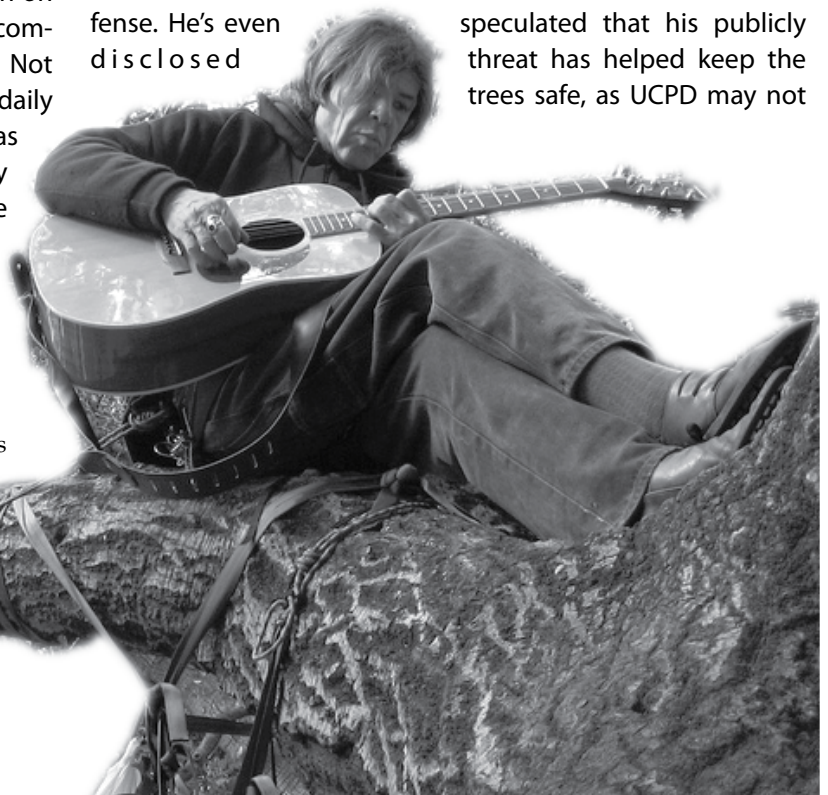


Zachary Running Wolf is a Native American elder and a prominent leader of the campaign.

Game" between Cal and Stanford), Running Wolf of the Black Feet tribe and a small group of his friends descended on the Oak Grove with the intention of occupying the threatened trees. A young woman known as "Giggles" (most tree-sitters use code names) managed to free climb partway up one of the trees and stayed there for more than thirty days. As we go to press in May 2007, over 100 activists (including a half-dozen students) have cycled in and out of seven different trees during the past four months, living on small wooden platforms and hammocks known as "dream catchers" they installed in the highest branches of the trees.

A supportive ground crew brings the tree-sitters food, water, and the basic necessities of life (hoisted up and down on ropes), empties their waste buckets, and keeps them company. Community members and organizations like Food Not Bombs have rallied to the cause and cook hot meals on a daily basis. Cop Watch supplies volunteers with video cameras to keep tabs on the UCPD, whose officers have repeatedly harassed both the regular tree-sitters and visitors to the grove, charging them with illegal lodging and trespassing. The police claim that the tree-sitters and visitors are engaged in criminal activity and an "illegal protest."

Nonviolent environmental activist Redwood Mary and musician Thomis Skotarek keep the oaks company.



In response, activists say that they are engaged in constitutionally protected free speech. Most police harassment consists of ID checks and threats to issue citations, but occasionally the police have physically assaulted activists (wounding one student, according to eyewitnesses) and made nearly a dozen arrests. Tree-sitter Major Tom, who is a citizen of the UK, has not been heard from since he was arrested a second time. His friends fear he was deported.

AN UNCERTAIN COMMITMENT

Is the Save the Oaks Campaign a nonviolent effort? Partially. A few of the activists, like Redwood Mary, embody the spirit of Julia Butterfly Hill in their commitment to dialoguing with their adversaries, respecting the humanity of the other, and acting from the heart with love and integrity. In a conversation before his disappearance from the scene, Major Tom said that he believes nonviolence is the only effective strategy. He contemplated, "The essence of what we're doing is, 'We shall not be moved.' We'll sit in place nonviolently, and they'll have to physically remove us with force, which will make things a little more difficult for them... If we did violent protest, the National Guard would be drawn in, and they'd shoot at us and the trees wouldn't be saved."

Others see things differently. Running Wolf, whose people and land have been the victims of Euro-American genocide and conquest for more than 500 years, relates that in the Black Feet culture, violent resistance is an accepted "last-resort" option. He says that if a police officer attempts to pull him out of his redwood tree (one of several non-oaks in the grove), he would consider it an attack on Native America, feel threatened, and throw the assailant out of the tree in self-defense. He's even speculated that his publicly disclosed threat has helped keep the trees safe, as UCPD may not

wish to risk the negative publicity and possible injury or death that could result from a struggle 50 feet above the ground.

What are the implications to a movement's ability to succeed in its stated objectives — and work to change the consciousness of humanity — if its participants do not embrace disciplined nonviolent resistance? History indicates that in such situations, all too often the violent actions of a few drown out the nonviolent efforts of others, especially in the media's eyes. (When 80,000 marchers in San Francisco peacefully protested the start of the second Iraq war and a few dozen "Black Block" protestors smashed a few windows, guess who captured the headlines and lead sentences of the newspapers?) When protestors resort to violence, the media covers the violence, but when activists maintain nonviolent discipline, the media is much more likely to cover the *issues*. If the Oaks Campaign is unsuccessful in the lawsuit and the struggle gets decided in the tops of trees, a lack of nonviolent discipline could seriously undermine activists' capacity to accomplish their objectives.

THE TREE TRIBE AND THE "SPACESHIP"

Over the past four months, the Oak Grove has been transformed from a quiet corner of campus into a radical community of resistance. According to a prominent ground support activist known as Ayr, a wide range of people have come together to "live free from society's boxes" — no landlords, no rent, no bosses, no jobs. Musicians, artists, current and former students, those who have devoted their lives to activism, people who are otherwise homeless, and a few dogs have descended on the Oak Grove to live, laugh, create community,

and resist ecocide together as a "tree tribe." They have thrown numerous parties and special events, including the "Hundy Sunday" celebration of 100 days in the Oak Grove, educational nature walks organized by Prof. Chapela, and conversation salons. The Oak Grove is known to some of its denizens as the "spaceship": a location of spontaneous experience that is totally disconnected from oppressive capitalist reality.

According to Running Wolf, the grove has become sacred over the past few months as a result of the community that has arisen to defend it. He reports that the grove is a place of healing and transformation for individuals. Prominent tree-sitter Giggles — who recently renamed herself "Everything" because she wants people to see the 'big picture' — came to the Oak Grove not to save the trees, but to save *herself*. She had a profound spiritual experience during her initial 30-plus day stint in the trees, and those who know her consider her to have attained a heightened spiritual awareness, or enlightenment.

Chancellor Birgeneau said he disagrees with Running Wolf on the sacred status of the grove. On a cultural level, this is perhaps the heart of the conflict: Who has the right to make a claim about sacredness, and how is that claim socially understood? Another layer of sacredness was revealed when Running Wolf and other natives announced that the grove is an Ohlone burial ground, given that several skeletons were removed during the adjacent stadium's construction in the 1920s.

Running Wolf and other natives bring into focus the conflict between the modern patriarchal capitalist ideology of domination and conquest, as compared to a native understanding that says everything is interconnected and trees are as worthy of respect as humans. In Ohlone tradition, trees are known as "tree people." Given that all violence begins with dehumanization, it is quite easy to see how a native culture that view trees as humans would do a much better job of protecting them than our culture, which views them all too often as an extractable resource.

PERCEPTION AND REALITY

University administrators see the grove as expendable because they plan to "enhance" the area after cutting the trees by daylighting (or bringing to the surface) the underground Strawberry Creek in at least one area and planting new trees after building the underground training facility. The building would serve athletes from numerous programs, from football to gymnastics, and provide locker rooms for some athletes who reportedly change their clothes in their cars due to a lack of convenient facilities.

Although the mainstream media has dehumanized parties on both sides with stereotyped depictions of intractable opposition, the reality is not so simple. Numerous athletes who support the Oak Grove protestors have dropped in to dance,



Tree-sitter "Fish" camps out on a high platform at the top of one of the threatened oak trees.

sing and party with them late at night when the cameras are turned off. At least one football player I spoke to refused to identify

Few laws exist to protect nature for no other reason than because people love it.

himself for fear of losing his scholarship. Similarly, several of the regular Oak Grove protestors are athletes who play sports such as lacrosse (a Native American sport). Although many question the University's priorities when it chooses to spend hundreds of millions on corporatized athletics, none told me they would voice an active objection if the new facility is built in an alternate location. Thus, the debate is not "The Oaks v. the Gym" but "Why put the gym here and not there?"

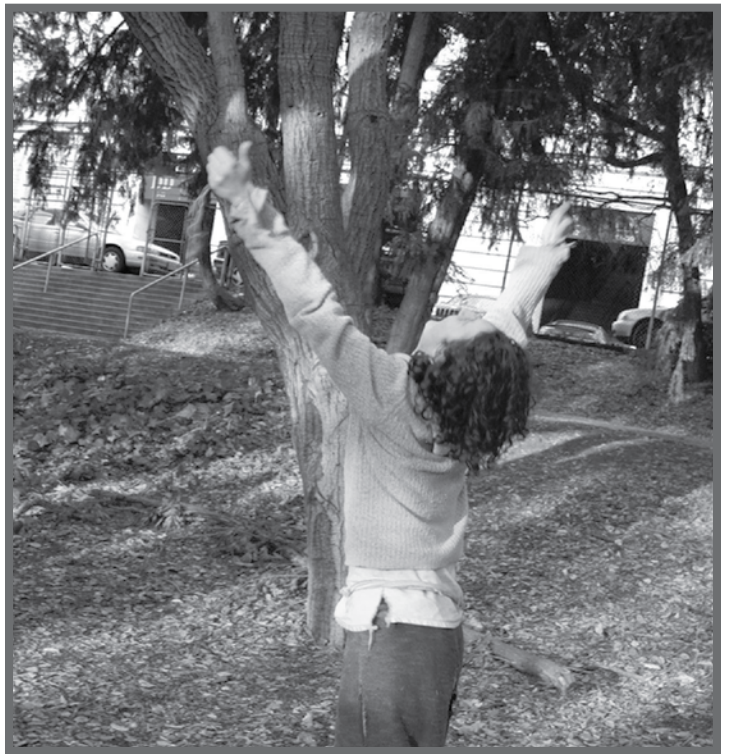
AN EARTHQUAKE OF A DISTRACTION?

According to the University's attorneys and documents obtained from the UC Regents, the primary reason that the University wishes to build the gymnasium in this specific location is so that the back wall of the facility can act as a partial retrofit for the western wall of the football stadium. UC attorneys claim that the University has been unable to raise the funds necessary to conduct the retrofit because donors would rather give money to build new things than fix old ones. However, Cal's "bear backers" are thrilled about the new training facility because it might attract the caliber of football players needed to win a Rose Bowl. By building the facility adjacent to the stadium, the University gets an essentially "free" partial retrofit — if built anywhere else, the retrofit won't happen unless the University raises additional funds.

Chris Thompson in a recent *East Bay Express* editorial called out the elephant in the room by labeling the stadium a 'death-trap' because it straddles a major earthquake fault — thus making the retrofit a wasted effort. He suggested Cal should play its football games at the Oakland Coliseum, which is accessible to public transportation, available on Saturdays, and not located on an earthquake fault.

With Cal intent on building the new facility, attorneys who represent the California Oaks Foundation and other plaintiffs have an ace in the hole: the Alquist-Priolo Zoning Act, which prohibits certain modifications to any structure that straddles a fault. If Judge Barbara Miller decides the training facility constitutes an "addition or expansion" to the stadium, Cal will probably lose the lawsuit. If not, the tree-sitters will likely face some very determined UC police officers and grounds crew in cherry picker trucks, at which point Running Wolf's threat — and other tree-sitters' commitment to nonviolent resistance — may be put to the test.

Given the previously discussed "big picture" issues, earthquake safety is a change of topic — and perhaps an unwelcome one. A cleaner confrontation between the people and



the powerful without the distraction of earthquake safety might produce a greater ripple in the consciousness of humanity. After all, while legislatures have written zoning acts to protect people from earthquakes, few laws exist to protect nature for no other reason than because people love it.

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO SAVE THE TREES?

For now, a preliminary injunction prohibits UC from cutting the trees while the lawsuit proceeds to a full trial. In the meantime, the tree-sitters remain in the trees, having vowed to stay "as long as it takes." That might be a long time. The common wisdom of the forest defense movement holds that, "There are no such things as permanent victories, only permanent losses." As long as our world continues to be driven by a cultural ideology that treats nature as an extractable resource, activists like Giggles and Major Tom will always find trees in need of human occupants whether or not this particular grove stands or falls. Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from the Save the Oaks Campaign is the simple wisdom of Running Wolf and his native sisters and brothers: "Earth is your Mother."

Matthew Taylor is writing a book about the Save the Oaks campaign, details available at <www.matthewtaylor.net>. He frequently passes the oaks while cycling around Berkeley's hills.

Resources:

Save the Oaks Campaign: <<http://www.saveoaks.com>>

Canyon Walks: <<http://canyonwalks.blogspot.com>>

Zachary Running Wolf and Redwood Mary webcast:

<http://webcast.berkeley.edu/course_details.php?seriesid=1906978403>

(PACS 164B Spring 2007 - click on March 20th Guest Speakers)