

# **Mrs. Claws Refutes 12 Myths, Accusations and Obfuscations About Santa's Helpers**

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20 March 1999

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## **1. Burning things is easy**

In an attempt to make civil disobedience (CD) seem more noble, some would like to dismiss the Vail fires as a simple and careless act of flicking a Bic. However, a close examination of what happened last October reveals an action that required much research, expertise and commitment. The saboteurs knew where Vail was most vulnerable, and they knew the terrain. They torched a mile-long series of targets at 11,000 feet above sea level. According to an incendiary manual, 10 gallons of fuel is needed to destroy a small building; a larger building requires more fuel. This means the elves had to carry in over 800 pounds of fuel at night through deep snow. They pulled this off at an altitude that would later cause arson investigators to be ill just from walking around. Like true elves, they were able to blend into the landscape, slipping past all the hunters and hikers that swarm the mountainside in early fall. They knew the area well enough to elude police blockades and helicopter searches. If this raid was similar to published accounts of Animal Liberation Front (ALF) arson attacks, then there would've been lookouts, radio communications, monitoring of police frequencies, timing devices, getaway vehicle(s) and weeks of reconnaissance.

## **2. The timing was poor**

The Earth Liberation Front (ELF) delivered their fiery warning to Vail only hours before construction was set to begin. Impartial observers would view this as masterful timing. Those who think otherwise probably disagree with the action as a whole and would be unable to come up with a better time. The ELF struck only days after the legal battle over an injunction was lost. Presumably they had to wait for no wind, no moon and no security. They couldn't wait too long as the start of ski season was only two weeks away and employees would soon be in the buildings getting them ready. Suppose the elves had waited for a time when there were no protesters in the woods: No blockade is able to keep loggers from walking past and cutting trees further on. So by waiting, the ELF would've been stuck with a situation where their raid occurred after many or maybe all of the trees were already on the ground.

## **3. Civil disobedience and sabotage shouldn't occur together**

This is an obtuse way of saying that the ELF intruded on Ancient Forest Rescue's (AFR) turf. But who can say whether it was AFR or ELF that started planning their respective actions first? Both groups waited until after the legal challenges were exhausted. The logistics of the arson attack required as much planning and preparation as any lockdown. Do monkeywrenchers have to abandon their plans whenever any group wants to do CD?

The EF! movement has never made that decision. And even if we had, what gives us the right to decide what other groups can and cannot do? Would EF!ers listen if the Sierra Club set down rules for when CD is permissible? In the past CD campaigns have occasionally shared the same time and space as acts of sabotage. As the ecological crisis intensifies, sabotage will be more prevalent. Denunciations serve no good. If there was a single, unbeatable strategy, wouldn't we be winning by now? Wouldn't the redwoods be saved by now?

#### **4. The fires ruined the opportunity for CD**

The ELF action caused a massive influx of cops from every agency as if it was a fire sale at a donut factory. As a result, AFR lost the element of surprise, making some blockade techniques difficult or impossible. Plans had to be adjusted, but a large police presence does not preclude backcountry actions. The entire campaign at Sugarloaf in Southern Oregon, for example, was carried out with cops as thick as flies in a barnyard. Not only did US Forest Service law enforcement officers patrol the woods in camouflage, but some patiently waited in ambush behind trees. Activists at other campaigns have been chased by dogs and helicopters. But we always have the advantage of being more fleet of foot, more comfortable in the woods and a hell of a lot more unpredictable than the cops.

Even if direct action at Vail's construction site seemed unfeasible at the time, this Medusa-like company offered many other opportunities for CD. To shy away from CD because it might antagonize our neighbors or because the setting is unfriendly is to miss the whole point of civil disobedience. (Please recall the conditions facing civil rights protesters in the South.) Paradigm shifts don't happen without intense controversy.

#### **5. Local support for the roadless area was lost**

This criticism is valid. But at this stage of the battle, one must ask, so what? Environmentalists had already lost in the only venue where local opinions count, the vote by the county commissioners. If Vail Associates was at all concerned about local opposition, it wouldn't have pushed the project ahead so aggressively. Vail Associates cares only about making money. Because environmentalists lost in the legal and political arenas, the economic arena is where the battle must now be fought. Many local residents, especially small business owners, would have eventually defected anyway once they realized that the only way to pressure Vail is through economics. Civil disobedience is designed to embarrass, to sour public relations, to turn away customers. Yet organizers have been reluctant to initiate a full-scale boycott. This illustrates the shortcomings of a strategy that views local support as being all-important. ("If you call yourself a conservationist and you don't have people mad at you, then you're not doing your job."—Helen Caldicott)

#### **6. The ELF attack should've occurred elsewhere on the mountain**

The ELF attacked targets that clearly inflicted the maximum economic damage. The attack at the heart of Vail Associates' operations made it impossible for anyone to visit the ski resort without knowing about the controversy. The author of "Thoughtful Radicalism Revisited" in the last issue of the *Journal* argues that it would've been more appropriate to monkeywrench bulldozers in the project area. The author fails to see that both media and tourists would have overlooked a few decommissioned bulldozers. Such an action would have been misdirected at a third-party, small-time contractor and would've truly interfered with AFR's plans. Instead, the fires of October 18 kept both a physical and a strategic distance from AFR's sphere of activity.

## **7. The ELF action didn't stop the logging so it was ineffective and unjustified**

This is a bizarre assessment coming from forest activists. When treesits, tripods and barrel lockdowns are removed and the cutting of trees commences, do we condemn those protesters who put their necks on the line? Blockade techniques, no matter how extravagant, can only forestall logging for a matter of hours once the police move in. The resumption of logging does not mean failure. The effectiveness of GD is measured by its ability to (1) draw attention to the issue, (2) interfere with the orderly workings of the machine and (3) raise the overall cost of doing business. This is equally true for sabotage. The Vail fires were remarkably effective when assessed according to these criteria. Overnight, people across the country learned about the imperiled lynx, that the ski industry is not as benign as they previously thought and that Vail Associates is up to no good. The nationwide media coverage was especially fortuitous considering that Vail Associates' customer base extends to the East Coast. If you still wish to cast negative judgment on the fires, think about this: We will never know how Vail Associates and its customers would've responded if local environmentalists had kept the message focused on the lynx and the Two Elk Roadless Area during the media circus that ensued. Vail Associates would have felt much greater pressure if spokespeople from the Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society and AFR had stuck to the issue instead of playing the power-politics game of condemning another group to make their own group more respectable. Furthermore, these groups squandered a golden opportunity by not being proactive and using all this media attention to call for a boycott of Vail Associates.

## **8. The ELF put more visible activists at risk**

The ELF did no such thing. We legitimize government repression and abuse of power by thinking in these terms. It is the government that uses grand juries and federal agents to harass and intimidate. The government basically sends the message, "Nobody step out of line or we're going to hurt innocent people." This is terrorism by the state. Grand juries in their political incarnation are the kinder; gentler equivalent of random police beatings or government death squads. The severity is different, but the purpose is the same: to instill fear and mistrust and to disrupt all forms of resistance. We must never accept the myth that we are responsible for "bringing down" repression upon ourselves or others.

## **9. Arson is dangerous**

ALF literature stresses the importance of searching buildings for animals and humans prior to setting fires. The ELF presumably shares this concern. The ELF activists discovered Neil Sebso, a hunter, sleeping inside the restroom. This was the only structure in the area that was not burned down. Snow on the ground, a lack of winds and the pernicious practice of removing trees in ski areas ensured that the fires did not spread. If nobody is inside a burning building, nobody can get hurt. Firefighters can easily differentiate an arson fire from an accidental fire and as a rule will not enter a structure to fight an arson fire. The risk to firefighters is negligible. There is a greater chance of injury when police officers have to carry limp protesters.

## **10. Property destruction is violent**

Discussions about violence must encompass scale, Such everyday actions as using profanity and raising one's voice can be considered "violent" on some level. But this is not the same as institutional violence where animals are confined to cages for their entire lives, where people are homeless while others build mansions and where corporations are allowed to decimate entire species for profit. Against this backdrop, property destruction is just and entirely nonviolent. To argue otherwise is to belittle the very real suffering inflicted daily by institutional violence. From the very beginning EF! was different from other environmental groups because property destruction was accepted as an important tool in the toolbox. In so doing, EF! enlarged the debate. Not everyone in EF! chooses to use this tool, but those who condemn monkeywrenching are in the wrong movement.

## **11. The ELF took credit for the fires lit by someone else**

A little investigative journalism easily dispels this myth. The media reported eight fires. The ELF communique was more specific, claiming five buildings and four lifts were "reduced to ashes." This information was correct, was not in any news stories and could only have come from first hand knowledge. (The control booth for one lift adjoined the first aid hut—both were destroyed in a single blaze.) The ELF statement was sent anonymously through email. All the websites that perform this service use a random but significant time delay to maintain anonymity. This means the ELF statement was mailed as much as 48 hours earlier than it was received, possibly before any news stories were even printed. A delay in the communique is consistent with other North American ELF actions and is undoubtedly the result of security precautions.

## **12. The FBI set the fires and sent the communique**

Some people have been watching too many X-Files episodes. It's ludicrous to think the FBI would do \$12 million worth of damage to a private company. And this is not just any company, but the most prominent one in the ski industry, in the center of a state that defines its identity around skiing. And for what purpose? To discredit a small group of environmentalists who have yet to "win" anything? Is the FBI also behind the other ELF actions? In less than two years there have been at least four other arson attacks claimed by ELF in the western US, All resulted in complete destruction of the targets.

As you can see, there is a lot of elfin' magic afoot on this continent. You can blame the FBI if you like or you can blame the Brits for letting it escape from the Old Country, but Earth First! had best get used to the secretive, mischievous, no compromise ways of the elves.

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