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Seed's creed

Rainforest guru John Seed reminds me of why I found deep ecologists so obnoxious, but it turns out I like him

By WAYNE ROBERTS

Australian activist John Seed, who has put rainforests on the radar of global environmentalism since the late 70s and promotes a school of eco-psychology he hopes can save rainforests as "the womb of the planet," looks cheery and untroubled. This despite the fact that the latest news from the world's rainforests looks very grim.

With no introduction, he stands at the front of the St. Clair Avenue Unitarian Church on September 6, breaks into a rapid-fire recital of rap-style earth poetry, then picks up his untuned guitar to do a campfire-quality singalong celebrating life and nature.

Barely a mention of a specific that's happening in the rainforest today, or a tangible something that anyone can do about it.

He reminds me instantly of why I found deep ecologists so obnoxious when they came on the scene during the 1980s. I suddenly realize why NOW's news editor seemed nervous when she asked me to cover this NOW-sponsored event.

I've always worked to ground environmentalism in the populism of green economics and job creation, and steered clear of the types who want to connect with our inner flake, dolphin or bear, hocus-pocus that I feel distracts from hard-headed organizing and solid economic alternatives.

An organic burger, please, but hold the side order of organic identity. The closest I was going to get to my bear identity was two nights of grin-and-bear-it through Seed's lectures, I figured.

But it turns out I like him. I especially appreciate his take on 80s environmentalism, a heady, insurgent and then undomesticated world movement that felt like it was going from victory to victory.

Seed, founder of the Australia-based Rainforest Information Centre, was at the centre of several of those victories, leading bold, theatrical and humorous campaigns. These won major set-asides for rainforests in Australia and pressured Burger King in the U.S. to cease sourcing soybeans by clear-cutting Costa Rica's misty woods.

Dominant groups at that time "had no antibodies to our theatre of social change," Seed recalls. Back then, greens could galvanize the media with stunts that featured enviro warriors putting their lives on the line to stop giant machines, as he did in New South Wales, or cheeky folksingers parading outside Burger King world headquarters in Minnesota, as he did in 1984, singing Lay Your Whopper Down, Baby to the masses during Whopper Stopper Month.

I learned that Seed does not have his head in the rainforest clouds. His organization started moving in ahead of logging companies, successfully convincing indigenous peoples to turn down offers from clear-cut loggers in favour of local initiatives that brought in money and skills but left traditional cultures and forests intact.

A hippie dropout from the computer industry who practised Buddhist meditation seriously, Seed saw past his immediate successes to the impending failure of any effort "to save the rainforests one forest at a time."

For every logging they stopped, two went ahead. The writing was on the burger wrap. "Nothing could stay saved for long if we didn't deal with the psychological-spiritual disease," he tells the Unitarians.

He worked with Arnie Naess, the Norwegian philosopher who coined the term "deep ecology," and self-described community therapist Joanna Macy to write *Thinking Like A Mountain: Towards A Council Of All Beings*. It's a Gaia thing. Mountain thought links Buddhism to a geological time scale, allowing people to see past the ego that comes from separating humans from the live planet that gives them birth, air, water and food.

Thoughts change from "'I am protecting the rainforest' to 'I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking,'" he writes. "The thousands of years of imagined separation are over and we begin to recall our true nature."

And he helped create exercises for this kind of "remembering." "We use guided visualization and movement/dance to recapitulate our entire evolutionary journey and release the memories locked in our DNA.

We invite the experience that every cell in our body is descended in an unbroken chain from the first cell that appeared on the earth 4 billion years ago," he writes.

He's on quite a different wavelength from "environmentalism," which a moment's reflection indicates expresses the misconception that humans are saving someplace out there, beyond the web of all life, when they're really just saving their own animal butts.

Mountains don't think, people like me who live in their heads will immediately argue which is Seed's key point. He hopes we'll think outside of our heads and urges mindfulness at a deeper (as in deep ecology) level. Songs, poems and rituals, he says, are the tools by which we drill into the inner recesses of our psyche so we can rekindle childlike delight in the magic of all creation and tenderness for the suffering of all creatures.

Wanting to connect with Seed through an ancient ritual, I invite him for dinner before his next night's speech at St. Michael's College.

How does all this tie in with something practical like local systems of food, I ask over plates filled with Commensal's vegan goodies. It's the issue of rainforest preservation that provided the ethical compass allowing hundreds of millions of people to think beyond the once mindless act of eating a burger, he says.

It was also deep ecology ferment that spawned the "bio-regional" movement, a celebration of living one's life appropriate to one's surround, that's put local food on the map.

At Seed's St. Mike's talk, Chris Winter of the Conservation Council refers to saving farmland from urban sprawl as the industrial-society equivalent of saving the rainforest. I ask Seed for a reaction to this possibly blasphemous equation of domesticated farmland with wild rainforest.

It all connects, he says. His three-part list of to-dos, which he ascribes to co-thinker Macy, looks like this: Participate in actions that save species and ecosystems from extinction. Create institutions and models for the future, like local and sustainable farms. Deepen consciousness about our connection to all of nature.

One part is not more important than the others. We should just do what we are called and gifted to do, he says, before bringing his second lecture to a close with a song.

How can I keep from joining in and singing along?