

Book Review

Iain McIntyre on how an Australian activist strategy crossed borders

Environmental Blockades: Obstructive Direct Action and the History of the Environmental Movement, by Iain McIntyre, London and New York, Routledge, 2021, 274 pp, \$ AU 59.19, ISBN 9780367480554, Publisher's website <https://www.routledge.com/>

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This important book takes us beyond slogans to the complex dilemmas facing environmental activists. With a tight chronological focus, from 1979 to 1997, McIntyre explores movements against destruction of biodiverse places, mostly old growth forests, in Global North countries – Australia, then the United States and Canada, with a glimpse of the United Kingdom. He asks how activists developed the tactics which they hoped would stop destruction of the places they cared about.

This is a book about people, rather than about the more-than-human world. In particular, it is a book about people in former settler colonies. Each of the three focal countries had dispossessed Indigenous people. Consequently, environmental movements in each incorporated varied but similarly problematic relations with First Nations. Within the period covered by McIntyre's careful research, it is British Columbia in Canada which demonstrated most clearly the assertion of First Nations forest owners to control the defence of their lands. Yet in both Australia and the United States, as McIntyre shows, ongoing interactions around colonial dispossessions underlay – often uneasily – the course of each environmental movement.

Australia, the United States and Canada became McIntyre's focus after a careful survey of environmental activism from 1970 to 1997, when the first activist guides were

published. These three countries demonstrated most activity and, despite frustrations, most successes in saving biodiverse places. Blockading is followed to show how tactical innovations have occurred and been tried in different locations and different social as well as geographic environments. Blockading or ‘obstructive direct action’ (ODA) aimed to stop work at the site of destruction. It includes, for McIntyre, a range from ‘soft blockading’ – where a group stands or lies to block an entrance or worksite – through to precarious ‘tree-sits’ and ‘lock-ons’ from which it is extremely difficult to extract the protesters without injury. The tight chronological focus allows a careful analysis of the mobilities of tactics – sometimes from one battle to another and sometimes across international borders. It also allows valuable attention to the processes of innovation – how and why new tactics emerge and how new tactics spread from one conflict to another.

Obstructive Direct Action had of course been undertaken before – in Brazil from 1973 onwards, in the Indian Himalayas with the Chipko ‘tree-hugging’ campaign in 1974, in New Zealand in 1978 and Finland in 1979. Of the three focal countries, blockading tactics emerged first in Australia, from Terania Creek in 1979 through the Tasmanian campaigns to the Daintree forest in 1984. Then these strategies were adopted in the United States – slowly and initially only by the activists of *Earth First!* which drew lessons from ‘our brothers and sisters in Australia’, including after discussions with the Terania activist, John Seed. This led after 1983 to more innovations in blockading tactics. In the very different legal climate faced in the US, with many privately-owned commercial forests, blockading tactics were taken up and expanded in, for example, the use of bicycle U-locks to ‘lock on’ in Texas in 1986 and later with a variety of ‘kryptonite’ locks (requiring grinders for removal) in California and Southern Illinois to ‘lock on’ to heavy forestry equipment during 1989. Finally, McIntyre considers the battles in Canada, and particularly those in British Columbia, from 1983 to 1985, when First Nations people asserted control over environmental action. McIntyre is able

to show how blockading strategies expanded and changed as activists encountered new problems and changing opponents. The general direction was to ever greater 'enhanced vulnerability'. While 'ecotage' or 'monkey-wrenching' were widely rejected by environmental movements as threatening harm to logging workers, the goal of 'enhanced vulnerability' instead was to place the bodies of the forest defenders at risk, even in 'soft blockades'.

McIntyre draws his theory and methods from the study of social movements. He succeeds here in opening up the dilemmas for environmental campaigners as well as recognising their enthusiasm and, at times, their great courage. In these focal countries, activists drew on the strategies and philosophies of earlier campaigns— the Peace, Civil Rights, anti-Vietnam war and anti-nuclear movements. Each of these took non-violence as a foundational approach, drawing from pacifist resistance to WW1 and then what the West understood to be Gandhian non-violent civil disobedience strategies. Yet contentions around exactly what 'non-violence' meant and how blockading challenged the way that 'normative' protester behaviour was conceived were a common site of tension in all three countries' environment movements.

In Australia, tactics involving 'ecotage' (like tree spiking or sabotage of machinery) were rejected. In Canada – and, soon after, in Australia – First Nations people asserted their authority to control tactics in the defence of their lands, and in both cases, they insisted on the more collectively-sanctioned 'soft blockade' tactics – which were nevertheless enormously frightening for participating activists. The greatest conflict within the environmental movement over non-violence developed in the United States, where a major split in *Earth First!* emerged between (simplistically) social justice advocates and those favouring 'ecotage'. Overall, however, it has been the violence demonstrated by state and private

foresters in their pursuit of profits, in contrast to the courage of the activists in both 'soft' and 'hard' blockades, which has drawn widespread public sympathy.

Questions remain. McIntyre readily acknowledges that environmental protesters drew from earlier movements, like the anti-nuclear movement and unionists' campaigns for safety, as in anti-pesticide campaigns. Yet these movements are not explored, nor even recognised as environmental. Focusing on the 1980s, the book is unable to reflect on how the role of First Nations people in British Columbia might have been comparable in Australia to that of the Mirrar at Jabiluka the later 1990s. Nevertheless, Canadian cases do demonstrate the tensions between protesters who seek to use spontaneous, clandestine obstructive strategies without deferring to Indigenous land owners.

Another limit of tight chronological focus is losing analysis of recent diffusion through the escalating role of social media, with news of new tactics now circulating instantly between campaigns. Nevertheless, person-to-person communication has remained crucially important, just as with John Seed in the 1980s. Overall, as McIntyre shows in each case study, mainstream media and journalism played an important role in mobilising essential public support. ODA was often undertaken to buy time – delaying the destruction on the ground until legal or political action could end the threat altogether. So relations with the press and with the broader court of public opinion were of prime strategic importance. Even those who believed that significant property damage was justified if it saved forests, nevertheless cautioned against 'muddying the waters' with dramatic blockading if it lost public support for forest defence.