



“From Heresy to Conventional Wisdom at Blinding Speed”

A History of Earth Island Institute’s 25 Years

TOM TURNER



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International Rivers

David Brower, the first executive director of the Sierra Club and the founder of Earth Island Institute and many other organizations, had many passions. He loved books — the writing, editing, designing, and production of them even more than the reading, or so it seemed. He loved music. He had a passion for mountains, and the sea, and the canyons, and the prairie. Also, Tanqueray martinis and the Biltmore Hotel in New York. In fact, he was an enthusiastic fan of much of what’s good in this life and lived it all to the fullest.

Brower believed in passion and its close neighbor, boldness. A favorite quote he repeated thousands of times was from Goethe: “Anything you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.”



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Earth Island Institute was fashioned, in one sense, to encourage people to be bold. The name “Earth Island” came from Margaret Mead, who urged respect for “The Island Earth.” Her famous admonition, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has,” could be the organization’s motto.

But it takes more than thoughtfulness and commitment to repair this abused planet. To make a real difference, a group, sometimes an individual, needs support in a variety of areas — a place to work, for example, money to pay the bills, a Web site, maybe help with press relations or advice on the political process, help in keeping the books in order, and a myriad other tasks, large and small, that can too easily detract from time better spent on the real work, whether that means combating climate change or saving an endangered species.

This is part of the philosophy of Earth Island Institute, founded in 1982. The general idea was to provide a home for people who had an interesting new strategy for saving the Earth: Encourage them, offer administrative support, process grant money, give advice when asked for it. Earth Island would be a new kind of service organization, “a temple for all the people doing good,” in the words of Herb Gunther of Public Media Center (PMC), a nonprofit ad agency that was instrumental in getting the Institute started.

Dave Brower used to talk about the organizations he founded as life rafts. He created the Sierra Club Foundation when he sensed that the Internal Revenue Service might some day come after the Sierra Club’s tax-deductibility (which it did, in 1967). He founded Earth Island Institute in case Friends of the Earth (FOE) ever decided to dispense with his services (which it did, in 1985). Until 1986, Earth Island had no staff, though volunteers organized the first in a series of conferences, “On the Fate and Hope of the Earth,” under the institute’s co-sponsorship.

When Friends of the Earth moved its headquarters to Washington, DC in late 1985, Brower and several others from FOE set out to turn Earth Island into a new kind of organization. The first staffers were the late Wick Kenney, Karen Gosling, who is still on the staff a quarter-century later as membership director, and the co-executive

directors, David Phillips and John Knox.

“It may not work out,” Brower wrote in 1991, when the experiment was still new, “but Earth Island Institute consists of many projects essentially run by the people who dreamed them up, have a proprietary interest in them, seek what complementarity they can from the people in neighboring projects, and give as much as they seek. It isn’t all as idyllic as it sounds, but it builds leaders and gets things done.”

Vision helps too. Brower is frequently referred to as a visionary, “one of those unique individuals who can see around corners,” in the words of Martha Davis, the current president of Earth Island and former executive director of the Mono Lake Committee. “He was so far ahead of everyone else in the movement, it was amazing.”

Bob Wilkinson, Davis’s predecessor as president, echoes the sentiment: “Dave Brower would take issues from heresy to conventional wisdom with blinding speed.”



Earth Island

The International Marine Mammal Project’s successful campaign for dolphin-safe tuna was a major victory for Earth Island. Pictured here (from left):

Brower, David Phillips, Sam LaBudde, John Knox.

Randy Hayes was beating his head against the wall, trying to drum up support for a directory of Indigenous peoples’ organizations he was calling People of the Earth. On a visit to the Hopi reservation, he ran into Jerry Mander, the principal writer of the newspaper ads published by the Sierra Club that saved the Grand Canyon from two hydroelectric dams in the 1960s. Mander suggested that Hayes look up Dave Brower, who tended to be supportive of all manner of new projects.

Hayes met Brower and arranged to rent desk space at the Friends of the Earth office in San Francisco. He kept pushing People of the Earth, but wasn’t having much success. He had noticed that while talk of People of the Earth put people to sleep, they perked up whenever he mentioned the destruction of the world’s rainforests and their people. One evening, he and Mike Roselle, a co-founder of Earth First!, were sipping beers after hours in the office, and decided that they’d better change emphasis. Randy turned to another of the rented desks, where Monica Moore of the new Pesticide Action Network (PAN) did her work.

“PAN has a nice ring to it,” Hayes declared. “We’ll be RAN — the Rainforest Action Network.” He grabbed some Letraset sheets that were used to compose headlines for FOE’s journal, *Not Man Apart*, and mocked up some letterhead. RAN was born. Soon afterwards, Elizabeth Garsonnin, Mander’s wife at the time, drew a stylized black panther to go with the type, an image that is used to this day. Hayes petitioned Friends of the Earth to adopt him and RAN as a project, but was turned down. Soon enough, FOE moved to

Washington. RAN became a founding project of Earth Island Institute.

Other early projects at Earth Island were: the Brower Fund, honoraria and speaking fees Dave used to support promising young people with good ideas; the Sacred Land Film Project; the International Rivers Network; and the Environmental Project on Central America. One founding project that has become a signature campaign at Earth Island is the International Marine Mammal Project, the brainchild of David Phillips, who had fought for whales and dolphins as a FOE staffer since 1977.

Herb Gunther had been on the FOE board as a Brower ally, and when the effort began to get Earth Island established, he offered to help. PMC had done some successful direct mail and print advertising for Greenpeace based on that group's campaign of direct interference with Russian whaling ships.

"Give me an animal," he said to Phillips. They considered grizzly bears. They debated mountain lions. Then Phillips spoke about the plight of dolphins in the Eastern Tropical Pacific, which were perishing in tuna fishing nets in huge numbers. "It was horrible and no one knew about it," Phillips says.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act had just become law, but it contained a fatal loophole that permitted the continued slaughter of dolphins, excused as innocent-sounding "incidental take." It was anything but innocent, however — and hardly incidental. Tuna fishermen would set nets around pods of dolphins to catch yellowfin tuna in the water below. When the nets were hauled in, the dolphins would become entangled and drown, as many as 100 at a time.

Don Henley of The Eagles heard of the slaughter and offered to pay for a full page in the Los Angeles Times. But the campaigners needed visual evidence. A volunteer named Sam LaBudde went to Mexico, landed a job as cook on a Panamanian tuna boat, and managed to shoot a gruesome videotape of the carnage. The film was given to network television and shown to Congress. It caused immediate outrage. A boycott of tuna was launched. A lawsuit was filed that resulted in court orders to slow the killing. Finally, in 1990, Starkist Tuna, the largest tuna company in the world, announced it would go "dolphin safe." The other tuna companies quickly fell into line. The slaughter of Pacific dolphins that once killed 150,000 animals annually now takes about 1,000.

The original idea for Earth Island as an nursery of new ideas, an incubator for fledgling projects, and a provider of essential services for small, start-up projects came about as the result of meetings and conversations that began in the late 1970s. The concept was, in a sense, the product of one of Dave Brower's few shortcomings, which was attending to administrative details. Brower didn't do much fundraising. He had little time for policies and procedures. The vacation policy at Friends of the Earth for at least the first dozen years was: If you need one, take one. Same with sick leave: If

you're sick, stay home. This impatience with minutiae got Brower into hot water from time to time, first with the Sierra Club board, later with the FOE board. And it's hard to argue that mundane (if necessary) administrative activities don't take time and effort away from the key tasks of educating, agitating, and organizing. The idea for Earth Island, then, was to allow small organizations — many of them one-person shows — to concentrate on campaigning and leave the paperwork to us.

An early indication of just how different Earth Island would be from other environmental organizations was its adoption of a project first called Environmentalists for Nicaragua, later and better-known as EPOCA, the Environmental Project on Central America. “No one would give us the time of day,” says Dave Henson, who launched the project with Josh Karliner. “Here we were talking about an effort to connect poverty, war, and the environment in a Sandinista-led Central American country. Dave Brower understood and encouraged us. He did that over and over. He would hear anybody out.”

Henson now runs the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center in Northern California, and he waxes eloquent about all the people who got their start via Earth Island: “I've seen dozens of young people come in with big ideas and receive a warm welcome. They get encouragement, they get space in the *Journal*. ... This is a key moment in a young activist's life — either he or she gets drawn in, encouraged, helped — or he or she burns out and the idea dies.

“The brilliance of Earth Island and Dave Brower was — is — its open-door policy. Kids come with ideas that are new, fresh, maybe crazy, often impractical. The prudent response would be to turn them away, but Earth Island says, ‘Let's give it a try.’ I'm sure half of them tank right away, but I could name you dozens of people who have gone on to become very important and effective activists.”

Another person with a typical story in this most atypical history is Eric Kessler, who in 1990 was a student at the University of Colorado. Brower came to give a talk and, as always, invited everyone to continue the conversation at a bar after the speech concluded. Kessler, like so many before and after him, talked late into the night over Tanqueray martinis, and was hooked. He hitchhiked to San Francisco the following summer to volunteer for Earth Island and was put to work organizing a contingent of scientists and conservationists to visit Lake Baikal in Siberia, the world's largest and deepest freshwater lake, which had mounting environmental problems.

“Just as I was getting ready to fax the list to the consulate so they could issue visas,” Kessler says, “one of the participants dropped out. I took a deep breath and added my own name to the list.” He was instrumental in starting a new Earth Island project



Drew Altizer

called Baikal Watch, still going strong, that works to protect and preserve that magnificent place.

As Brower's health began to decline in mid-2000, Phillips, Knox, and others began thinking about how best to honor his life and to continue the tradition of nurturing fledgling activists. They hit on the idea of recognizing the work of young people. (Another typically wry Brower quote was: "People have alleged that I have inspired many young people over the years, but I say that it was just the opposite." Both, of course, were true.) The idea piqued the interest of Kessler, who helped raise the initial money to launch the Brower Youth Awards, which honor six young people between the ages of 13 and 23 each year with a gala awards ceremony and a cash prize. The awards are in their ninth year, and are Earth Island's most popular annual event.

The Brower Youth Awards honors young people who are taking the lead in protecting the environment. Pictured here: Some of the 2007 awardees with Joe Brower, Dave's brother.

Perhaps the most influential and successful alumnus of the Brower Youth Awards is Billy Parish, the first Youth Award winner to start an Earth Island project. As a student at Yale, Parish brought together nine student organizations in the Northeast into a climate coalition to combat global warming. He applied for a Brower Youth Award and was selected in 2004.

Not long after that he took a trip to India, visited the headwaters of the Ganges, and saw firsthand how the glacier at the source of that great river is disappearing because of global warming. The experience was an epiphany, Parish says. He returned to the US, dropped out of college, and approached Earth Island about establishing an organization he would call Energy Action. This past November, Energy Action brought 6,000 young people to Washington, DC to rally and lobby legislators, an event that added a powerful jolt to the effort to reverse the warming of the planet.

One of the most tangible of the Institute's projects is the magazine you have in your hand. The original idea, according to Gar Smith, the first editor, was to provide publicity support to the projects while at the same time looking out over the horizon to report on emerging environmental problems and prospects before other publications noticed them. A cover story on climate change in 1988 was only one example of the *Journal's* ability to spot trends before they became national headlines. Other unconventional stories investigated the environmental impacts of golf, high-definition television, pet food, cow's milk, toothpaste, and jet planes, as well as examinations of green sexism and the idea of outer space as wilderness. The *Journal* under Smith also pioneered the use of what he calls "tree-free" paper made from kenaf (a fast-growing African native that looks like hemp but is in fact related to okra), and various waste materials. Smith even tried a video version of the magazine, but it was too far ahead of its time.

Smith left in mid-2002, to be replaced by Chris Clarke, the editor of a widely admired magazine called *Terrain* and manager of a Web

...a highly ranked magazine called *Rolling Stone* and manager of a website called Faultline, also an Earth Island project. Clarke was recently replaced by Jason Mark, who spent several years writing and editing for Global Exchange. All have won awards. They point proudly to the raft of Project Censored awards the *Journal* has received over the years; Project Censored annually recognizes publications that have published important stories that have been ignored or woefully underreported by the mainstream media. The *Journal* has made the Project's Top10 list a dozen times, and its Top 25 list at least two dozen more times, according to Smith. The magazine has won many awards from the Alternative Press Association, and from Utne Reader, including that magazine's top environmental award for 2007.

How well has Earth Island Institute worked? All things considered, it has succeeded beyond what any reasonable person had any right to expect. (Being reasonable, by the way, was another thing Dave Brower didn't have much time for. Former EPA Administrator Russ Train's backhanded compliment was one of Brower's favorites: "Thank God for Dave Brower. He makes it easy for the rest of us to appear reasonable.")

About a year from now, in the spring of 2009 if all goes according to schedule, Earth Island will move its offices to the new David Brower Center in Berkeley, across Oxford Street from the University of California. The Center will house not only Earth Island, but also other environmental groups and social justice organizations, a 180-seat theater, an organic restaurant, and a gallery. The Center is being offered as a meeting place for some groups, a home for others, and is a logical expansion of the Institute and Dave Brower's vision. The building will be four stories tall, as green as

Here are some numbers: In the last 25 years, there have been in the neighborhood of 130 projects approved by the Earth Island board. To qualify, an applicant must persuade board members there is a need for the project, that the applicants can carry it through, and that it is a good fit with other projects. As Dave Henson suggested, some projects never get off the ground; Dave Phillips estimates that number at around 15. Others — now approximately 20, including RAN, the International Rivers Network, Bluewater Network, and Sea Turtle Restoration Project — have chosen to become independent. Some finish their work and shut down. Today, 46 projects are operating under the Institute's fiscal sponsorship, and between four and eight new projects are added each year.

When I accepted the offer to write this piece, the editor stressed that he didn't want a paean that sounded as if it came from the fundraising department, and I wholeheartedly agreed. I confess, however, that I made no serious attempt to find Earth Island detractors, and I suppose there must be some, just given the nature of human beings. The people I interviewed for this story — board members, staff members, project directors and onlookers, including a few not quoted strictly because of space limitations — are unanimous in their praise and admiration for the organization. Two comments stand out:

possible over its 50,000 square feet, and will definitely be worth a visit once it's finished. John Knox sees it as an extension of the institute's efforts at public education. "A key feature of the center will be public programs," he says. "It's a place where interested people can come to find out what the environmental movement is all about."

"Earth Island has been a wonderful home. They do my taxes, help with fundraising, provide introductions to people who may be helpful, provide monthly reports on my group's finances, all for a small percentage of our income," says Gershon Cohen of C-SAW, the Campaign to Safeguard America's Waters. Cohen's group concentrates on reforming the cruise-ship industry in Alaska and elsewhere. Cruise ships have for years dumped sewage and refuse overboard. C-SAW has made considerable headway in bringing that practice to a close.

"It works incredibly well," says Chad Hanson of the John Muir Project, whose aim is to end commercial logging in the national forests. "If a new group's idea is to get very big, then maybe it doesn't work so well. But if the idea is to have

the maximum amount of time to do program work, it's great. It allows new and important groups to come into being — groups that otherwise would probably not exist. It's just too difficult to take care of all the details on a shoestring budget."

It's hard to believe that it has been more than seven years since Brower died, which he did two days before the election that started the international nightmare that is the Bush administration. There was considerable trepidation around Earth Island, according to Bob Wilkinson, who was president at the time, that the organization might not survive Brower's passing. It is a tribute to all involved that it has continued at full speed. Happy anniversary to all.

Tom Turner went to work for David Brower at the Sierra Club in 1968. A year later, Brower was forced to resign and Turner was fired. He was one of the first employees of Friends of the Earth and worked there for 17 years, mostly as editor of the journal Not Man Apart. Since 1986 he has worked at Earthjustice, previously known as the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, and has written three books, with a fourth scheduled for publication in 2009.

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