
Standing over three hundred and fifty feet tall, enormous redwood trees grow in the thick fog of California’s North Coast. The groves of two-thousand-year-old redwoods are quiet, the soft, thick beds of redwood needles absorbing nearly all sound. In *Defending Giants: The Redwood Wars and the Transformation of American Environmental Politics*, Darren Frederick Speece explores how this landscape, so remote residents call it the “Lost Coast,” became the locus of the forces of global capital, explosions of violence, and presidential intervention. Centered on the attempts of an informal coalition of activist groups to stop the Pacific Lumber Company and other multinational timber corporations from “liquidating” or clear-cutting thousands of acres of old-growth redwood groves in the 1980s and 1990s, Speece makes a valuable contribution to the historical study of environmental justice, community activism, and the dynamic and overlapping responsibilities of individuals, corporations, and governments. Combining interviews with meticulous archival research, Speece provides a nuanced, yet incisive analysis of how a local community’s struggle for justice in the ‘Redwood Wars’ catalyzed changes in environmental governance at the state and federal levels that continue to this day.

Speece’s work challenges the conventional historical accounts of the American environmental movement and its evolution. He rejects the standard narrative in which the activist-led environmental movement transformed into a professionalized cadre of Washington, DC-based lobbyists, lawyers, and administrators on Earth Day 1970. Instead, Speece argues that community organizers and activists have continued to remain the heart of the environmental movement, organizing creative campaigns that both induce and make use of political change at multiple levels of government. In doing so, he credits small, strategically-diverse citizen groups with playing a central role in transforming the form of American environmental governance from one of Congressional legislation to executive branch negotiation and regulation.

*Defending Giants* is structured chronologically although Speece frequently breaks from his narrative to better contextualize events. The first half of the book examines the broad historical trajectory of efforts to protect old-growth redwoods on the North Coast. The opening chapter begins with an overview of the ecology of the redwood forests, their colonization and expropriation by European settlers, and the development of a thriving timber industry fed by San Francisco’s frenetic expansion during and after the Gold Rush of the mid to late nineteenth century. By the early 1900s, the pace with which forests were destroyed generated growing concern among both rural residents and wealthy urbanites. This produced stirrings of collective action from women’s clubs and pro-environment groups, who teamed up with philanthropists to purchase small areas of particularly magnificent groves from timber companies such as the Muir Woods National Monument though logging continued around them. Speece emphasizes that while a handful of conflicts led to occupation and tree-sits by local residents, especially women, the first half of the twentieth century saw these transactions generally take place among social elites in a spirit of voluntarism, philanthropy, and corporatist governance.

The inflection point in Speece’s narrative is the harsh winter of 1954–1955, when massive floods decimated the protected grove of Bull Creek and left thousand-year-old redwoods “strewn around the alluvial flat like toothpicks” (p. 64). Precipitated by clear-cuts above the basin, the floods revealed the shortcomings of attempting to simply preserve ‘majestic’ monuments without considering the health of the larger ecosystem. Groups like the Sierra Club
an early 1960s from a strategy of preserving monuments to protecting ecosystems.

The consequences of this transition flow rapidly in the book’s second chapter. Protecting ecosystems requires immense expanse of land, far larger than environmentalists could purchase through philanthropic benefactors. Moreover, timber companies showed little interest in curtailing the rate at which they chewed through the forest, introducing bulldozers and mechanized logging techniques in order to increase their annual yield and, by extension, their profits. Lacking both funds and a willing negotiating partner, the North Coast’s environmental activists turned instead to the government, and especially the California Board of Forestry, to step in and force timber companies to stop cutting down their old-growth redwood forests.

Initially, this strategy seemed to be a dead-end, as the Board of Forestry was a close ally of the logging industry and refused to impose restrictions on the timber companies. But new environmental laws in the late 1960s and early 1970s empowered citizens to sue the government if regulators failed to follow the proper permitting procedures. This gave the activists traction and led to what became known as the Redwood Wars, a cyclical series of interactions between 1978 and 1996 in which activists used the California state courts to drive a wedge between the timber companies and their government regulators.

In the latter half of the second chapter, Speece provides a colorful history of how the Redwood Wars’ skirmishes occurred. Each cycle would begin when a timber company submitted their logging plans to the Board of Forestry, which would immediately approve them. Environmental activists would file a lawsuit against the Board of Forestry and obtain a restraining order on the logging plan. But the restraining order frequently expired before the trial began, at which point activists would physically occupy the woods, chain themselves to trees, and engage in ‘ecotage,’ destroying workers’ tools and driving spikes into trees to prevent logging. After the activists were arrested, the court would grant another restraining order. After a long trial, the regulator would be obliged to reject the harvest plan, the company would file a new harvest plan, and the cycle would begin again.

The third chapter focuses on the central battle of the Redwood Wars: the struggle over the Headwaters Forest. By 1985, only ten percent of the old-growth redwood forest remained, and the Headwaters Forest, secluded far from human settlements, contained the last unprotected, sizable old-growth redwood groves. Speece provides an in-depth profile of the owner of the Headwaters Forest, the Pacific Lumber Company, and its CEO, the corporate raider Charles Hurwitz. Presented as an almost cartoonish villain, Hurwitz takes over Pacific Lumber through a hostile takeover in 1985 and soon reveals his plan to lay waste to the company’s assets to pay off his creditors. In his first speech on the company floor, Hurwitz explained his managerial philosophy by saying, “There’s a little story about the golden rule. Those who have the gold, rule” (p. 67). Hurwitz and his lieutenants soon develop a new forestry policy for Pacific Lumber: clear-cut of all the company’s remaining old-growth groves within the next two decades, most of which were located in the Headwaters Forest.

The fourth chapter centers on the mobilization of the North Coast’s environmental movement in response to Hurwitz’s clear-cutting plan. Speece focuses on two main protagonists, Daryl Cherney and Judi Bari, leaders of the North Coast branch of the organization Earth First! Initially, Cherney and Bari helped organize regular protests in California’s Humboldt and Mendocino Counties to convince their fellow residents that Hurwitz’s plans meant the imminent foreclosure of their communities’ future. But the conflict became violent once Pacific Lumber countered the protests by calling Earth First! a terrorist group and tacitly encouraging
employees to attack the activists. In a particularly vivid scene, Bari was driving with her four children when she was rear-ended by a logging truck, whose driver hopped out yelling, “I didn’t see the children!” (p. 162).

By 1990, the activists had gained considerable momentum. A “guerrilla war” was developing in the forest, Hurwitz suffered a debt default, and the Headwaters Forest conflict appeared consistently in the national press, including Fortune, Rolling Stone, and Reader’s Digest. Events took an unexpected turn on May 24, 1990, when a car bomb exploded under Bari’s seat when Bari and Cherney were in Oakland recruiting activists. The Oakland Police and the FBI presumed the bomb belonged to the activists and failed to investigate the case beyond searching Bari’s house. The perpetrator was never found but, a federal jury ruled in 2002 that the FBI and Oakland Police had committed fraud against Cherney and Bari’s estate, awarding them $4.4 million.

The book’s final chapter is a whirlwind of activity, as the activists pursued state referendums, legislation, and judicial action, all in the context of ongoing direct action that generated hundreds of arrests and spurred the Clinton Administration to become involved. Through direct negotiations with Pacific Lumber, the executive branch agreed to compensate the company for placing the core of the Headwaters Forest in government protection and creating the first multi-species Habitat Conservation Plan to limit the company’s old-growth logging in the future. Ultimately, the government, activists, and corporation reached an agreement that none found entirely satisfying, but all were able to accept, at least for the moment.

Speece’s argument regarding the impact of the Redwood Wars on the national environmental movement is persuasive, although it is at times overwhelmed by the author’s attention to nuance and willingness to explore tangential narratives. The reader is also left somewhat unsure at the end of the book how to distinguish the Redwood Wars’ broader impact from that of contemporaneous events, such as the more extensively studied stand-off over the Northern Spotted Owl in the Pacific Northwest. Despite these shortcomings, Defending Giants is a strong contribution to the historical study of environmental justice as a process rather a single event. As the relationship between private property and public goods continues to be better understood, Speece provides an excellent case history of how small groups can exercise transformative power over time and across multiple scales.

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