

CEDAR STEVENS

Earth First! 1981-1997

Potioneer and Witch Priestx, Botanist,
Gardener, Writer, Instructor

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Barefoot with Bugis

Before we were activists we were immersed in the pure natural, physical beauty and bliss, and thrilling danger of Barton Creek.

We headed to Twin Falls from New Manor, the clothing optional apartment complex on Manor road. My group headed down the trail to the Falls, from loop 360 across from the accursed Barton Creek Mall. Bugis and I took a detour from the path while our friends continued their merry way to the swimming hole. He convinced me to take off my clothes (not a difficult thing to do) and my shoes (now we are having trouble here) but I insisted on keeping my glasses on, and we headed across the slope of the watershed, in an upstream diagonal using no trails. His feet were trail-hardy from many barefoot miles across wilderness parks in Hawaii, but my feet, only used to barefooting across the cruel pebble cobble of UT campus, slowed us down. Being slowed down traversing the wilds of Barton Creek is never a handicap, and we wended our way through the limestone and cedar brakes enjoying the way down to the creek, well upstream from our party. It must have been early summer, and even naked we were sweaty and glad to plunge into the creek, which nobody nowadays will know, how fresh and clean and sweet, how no algae or slime or silt covered the rocks, and how two nude nymphs could just frolic in the creek. I had never skinny-dipped in quite this wild of a way, but following Bugis was as easy as falling in love, and we then gently “croc-walked” like crocodiles floating, swimming, crawling as creek flow and depth indicated. We were trying to be as undetectable and unnoticed, or at least accepted as one of their own, to the riparian wildlife. Not speaking, we floated by a Green Heron, who 4 ft. away from us speared and ate a Sunfish as we slinked by.

The creek shallowed as we drifted near Twin Falls. Back then you would find nobody in a swimsuit there, and we climbed out of the creek onto the trail with no shame of our nudity. Hikers, though, would be clad, and we climbed into a Sycamore tree over the trail. We pelted hikers and our own sunbathing friends with twigs, bird calls and Sycamore seed balls, but nobody thought to look up. Eventually, we climbed down, joined our party, and after sunset and a few beers and numerous tokes, we headed back up the trail to our van. Bugis and I retrieved our clothes and shoes before emerging at the now illegal trailhead on loop 360.

In countless carefree expeditions like this, we explored every nook and canyon of Barton Creek, from the Springs upstream to Dobie Paisano Ranch, falling in love with the beauty, wildness and biological diversity of Barton Creek.

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Identifying the Enemy

I used to read the Austin American-Statesman regularly, often to see if Earth First! had made the news.

What I saw one day chilled me to the bone. Gonzalo Barrientos, one of our most beloved Texas senators, was pictured in the photo next to Jim Bob Moffett at a podium on upstream Barton Creek. A huge land development deal had just transpired, and one of our Democrat "heroes" was collaborating with the enemy.

I knew this was trouble, of a kind we had never encountered, in our years of activism to this date. I remember thinking, and pontificating at the top of the Hill of Life trail and at more than a few recruitment and agitating events, **"We must go out to meet the enemy, vanquish him, and if need be, we must go out for more reinforcements."**

This is what we did. We were now on the opposite side of mainstream Democrats and local politicians, who we had already learned were mostly in the pockets of developer money, which was now booming again after the late 80s bust of the Austin Bust and Burn cycle. Even Ann Richards was involved, back then as a County Commissioner, in creating the Road District that eventually enabled Jim Bob to build out. It is a very lonely, abandoned feeling when Ann is not on your side.

Organize, Educate, and Agitate: the activist duty of escalation

We organized protests, demonstrations, wrote newsletters, fundraised, led nature hikes and collected signatures. We sought first-class botany and wildlife experts, and got ourselves trained up in field surveying and bird identification.

We trespassed across hill and dale of Barton Creek. Tim Jones became our "Ground Truth" expeditioner and chronicler. Robert Singleton led us on session after session after session at City Council. Neal Tuttrup and I were on the phone constantly.

We organized old-Austin nature-lovers and new college environmentalists. We worked part-time jobs (me at Wheatsville Food Coop, which provided all sorts of support to me as an environmental activist as well as being an employer-haven to many musicians who are still standing).

We organized our group using consensus-process decision-making to run our meetings, and this training would keep us safe from infiltration for a long time, as well as training up hundreds of people who would go on to organize other resistance groups.

At the time, it seemed like we were in this forever.

We organized politically, but also culturally as we put on music events, party fundraisers. ALL of our budget was small donors and in-kind donations. We were the anarchist arm of the Barton Creek Rebellion in resistance to both the developers and our erstwhile allies, the moderate activist groups like Save Barton Creek, Austin Sierra Club, and others. We held punk rock parties with bands and produced spoof comedy theater on the West Mall and for housing co-ops. We organized travelling roadshow protests to Jim Bob Moffett's home base of New Orleans for the Freeport McMoRan annual BOD meetings.

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Saving Our Springs

Then, there was the big “stakeholder” meeting with us and all the groups and that led to the creation of the Save Our Springs Alliance, and the citizen-written Save Our Springs Ordinance. Although Earth First! was a no-compromise group, most of us poured ourselves into this drive to regulate development. (We had already begun a petition to the State of Texas to BUY AND PRESERVE THE WHOLE BARTON CREEK WATERSHED! and make it a state park.) The petition would later be given to Gonzalo Barrientos on the front steps of the State Capital and there is an Austin American- Statesman photo. The total count was over 19,000 if I can recall. Gonzo got the stack at a news conference we arranged, and that was the end of that. But we for sure had gotten really, really good at getting people to sign petitions!

We rallied a huge part of the crowd that testified all day and all night at the famous Barton Springs Rebellion city council hearing, and so many of the posters in those pictures are ones I made! It has been called a high-water mark of community activism in Austin history, and I will add that all of the groups from us radicals to the mildest conservationist were for once singing the same song, in tune, together at that time.

The whole Barton Springs Rebellion was just a facet of what Austin Earth First! was doing. We had been working with other groups and around the world, and began identifying as movements in opposition to Corporate Dominance. The big fight on the west coast against Maxxam Corporation’s clearcutting of the old growth redwoods became our fight too, as the corporate HQ of Maxxam was in Houston. Our protests at HQ Freeport McMoRan were one of the battlegrounds among our bigger fight against Corporate Dominance. We Austin Earth First! organizers took on the Corporate Fall campaign in 1995 and later tuned it, to organize worldwide day of action in 1996 and the End Corporate Dominance International Days of Action in 1997, as we learned how to use the new internet as an organizing tool. Freeport McMoRan was a huge global target, being involved in rapacious mining and manufacturing in Papua New Guinea, Louisiana and elsewhere.

For us, the battles of Barton Creek and Gary Bradley’s Circle C were also in context of the creation of the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan. Between them, these two huge developments, over 8,000 acres together, threatened the habitat of all eight endangered species of central Texas. We had been at the beginning of the BCCP process, with the lockdown of the building of Steiner Blvd. in ‘87(?) and the occupation of the caves at 4 Points in ‘88. We began as advocates of the plan and ended up fighting against it as the size of the preserves shrank to the point that “recovery” of the endangered Golden-Cheeked Warbler would be declared when the preserves would save less habitat than when the birds were first declared endangered! The issuance of the BCCP Habitat Plan by U.S. Fish and Wildlife would mean that developers could destroy all the land that was not included in the preserves, and we saw how easily mainstream environmental groups compromised with the developers, and we saw the land acquisition ambition of the plan dwindle throughout the process.

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The Barton Creek lands owned by Freeport MacMoRan were prime Golden-Cheeked Warbler habitat. By our reckoning, we should focus on acquiring the best habitat for the species, Barton Creek and the land around 4 Pts, not land out by Oatmeal, Texas that was not being threatened by any development. One peninsula on Barton Creek was the most densely inhabited GCW habitat in the birds' whole range. Jim Bob ended up building a road down it and called the road "Warbler Way" just to piss us off all the more.

We (the coalition of eco-groups from across the spectrum) ended up winning the Save Our Springs Ordinance, in 1992, and it was a huge victory. I had done a lot of research about citizen-created ordinances as part of my work for the Hill Country Foundation, and what SOS did was on a scale much more than anything like it, that had been done by citizen initiative in the nation. You could create a whole semester of graduate-level study of what we did to accomplish the Save Our Springs Ordinance.

But, as much as we had gained, what we lost was heartbreaking on just as big a scale. After the BCCP permit was issued in 1996, we had no legal recourse to stop the development that in fits and spurts claimed the non-preserved lands of western Travis County, Barton Creek lands included. We could protest, get ourselves thrown in jail, and accomplish nothing. I retired as an activist after organizing the Month of Global Action to End Corporate Dominance in October of 1997. We had coordinated hundreds of demonstrations in dozens of countries across the globe, including at least three Freeport McMoRan targets. When I retired, Austin Earth First! dissipated, but the training we had done for ourselves went on to help organize other local groups like the Yellow Bike Project, Copwatch, Monkeywrench Books, and the Rhizome Collective, to name just a few. The 1999 WTO protests in Seattle were the antecedent of our Austin EF! Organized End Corporate Dominance campaigns, and that movement in turn informed the hugely influential Occupy movement.

I try to remember this when I drive out to hike the Barton Creek Greenbelt, past all the strip malls and upscale houses along Loop 360. I still give botany and nature hikes and still occasionally hear a Golden-Cheeked Warbler near Dam 1, and I know a couple of secret spots for skinnydipping amidst the hordes of hikers, bikers, swimmers and parties who no doubt love this place as much as I do.

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BARTON CREEK

TIME STREAM