UC Berkeley attacks tree sitters despite court rulings

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
13 January 2007

Culture Change Letter #149

Which do you prefer, trees and acorns or asphalt and more buildings? What do students need to see on their campuses? Lacking wisdom or PR sense, the University of California at Berkeley has seen its tree-sit protest heat up on the ground and in court. On January 12, I attended an emergency rally called after a pre-dawn raid by UC Police who "confiscated"/stole the protesters' camping materials under the trees. After the rally, we marched to the Chancellor's office.

The tree sitters are still up in five oaks and a redwood in a grove of over three dozen old trees where UCB wants to build a parking lot and sports facility. In principle the scheme is bad enough; the wrong thing to do for the sake of educational integrity. But the University's legal trouble is that the City of Berkeley protects such trees by law. UCB administrators and their police force believe they are above both city law and the feelings and rights of the community's neighbors who love the rare native trees.

This small grove is one of the last remnant ecosystems of California Live Oaks in the urbanized San Francisco Bay Area, and the University wants to destroy the grove for "progress" in its athletics program. Some neighbors and students (and a few imported Humboldt forest defenders) are saying "No!" -- with mounting success

The University has blown it big-time with the attempt to destroy the grove, and the administration is losing in court lately. With the pre-dawn raid on Friday that violated the spirit of the current court orders, and the growing backlash by students and other parties, combined with much news media attention, UCB and its high-and-mighty attitude is about to get its wings clipped in a most public fashion. This will embolden community activists and possibly ignite student activism on broader fronts (the lack of which in recent decades was lamented in Culture Change's first article on this story in December 2006).

At this rate, hope is alive everywhere for all resisters of state environmental folly and terror. Although the protesters have been few, support has been constant, and now the students returning from the holiday break on January 16 are bound to join the escalating fight. Major media coverage, including by the Fox News affiliate, has helped and will only increase.

But if one relies on Fox and the San Francisco Chronicle's coverage, the amply represented view of the UC Police makes one think that the crackdown (not called a crackdown) had to do with public safety and enforcing the law for the benefit of the community. However, as is too often the case, such actions are against the community and represent nothing but the government's goals of control and manipulation in the service of industry.

"The students have growing enthusiasm and anger against the actions the University is taking," said Doug Buckwalder, of Save the Oaks at the Stadium, to Culture Change.

"On January 20th we'll hold a welcome-back party at the grove for the students." His group was the first to organize around this issue back in July, but it took a tree-sit started by Zachary Running Wolf, a Blackfoot tribesman who ran for mayor of Berkeley unsuccessfully in November, to protect the trees via direct action on Dec. 2.

Although the police did not directly go for the tree-sitters, later citing safety concerns, the raid was an attack because the sitters need shitters (makeshift hoistable toilets), food, and other supplies that have been provided and coordinated by the ground team and visiting neighbors. The police probably would have removed the tree-sitters and their platforms, as done with tree-sits in Humboldt in the "deep North," but on January 11th an Alameda Superior Court judge denied such a move by the University. Also denied was a motion to cut down the large redwood tree and erect a fence around the grove. So it "violates the spirit of the rulings" that the theft of camp belongings was carried out, according to Buckwald, who added that no time was allowed to retrieve anything, as the police acted so quickly and inconsiderately.

Other organizations involved in the lawsuit against UCB are the California Oak Foundation, Panoramic Hill Association,

the City of Berkeley, and soon, Friends of Tightwad Hill (above the stadium where people can watch games for free -- unless the UC administration carries out its grand plans). Another court date is scheduled for January 23 on the injunction to stop the University's tree-chopping/empire-building plans at least until the lawsuits can be fully heard. If the injunction is not granted, the trees could be killed immediately, so enough protesters are needed to stop UCB. (See below for contact info and directions to the grove.)

At the Chancellor's office building where the march paused on Friday, protesters leaned that he had suddenly high-tailed it to the Faculty Club, and when we marched there he apparently exited the back way with other "suits," according to another Culture Change volunteer on the scene. Why do we locals feel strongly about a patch of nature? I, for one, used to live a few blocks south of the grove. I would hand-truck our apartment's compost to People's Park where UCB has killed plum trees recently. The People's Park saga has continued into this post-radical/pre-collapse era in other disgraceful ways, such as the Free Box for clothing for the poor being destroyed by UC Police repeatedly.

Coastal Live Oaks are so named because they are evergreen, never losing all their holly-like leaves. One can see many such oaks from the Coast Starlight, Amtrak's train that goes between Lost Angeles and SeAngeles (L.A. and Seattle). But so few Live Oaks are left in the Bay Area due to ruthless development one lot at a time, one road at a time. Before extinction occurs what's called extirpation. Extinction can follow, as has happened so many times. The mascot of the UCB team, the Bears, is a grizzly -- extirpated from California although the bear is on the State flag, extant mainly in Yellowstone Park.

Assisting in this campaign for the oaks is Karen Pickett, a dynamic speaker long associated with the Bay Area Coalition for Headwaters Forest. CopWatch is another local group on the scene to protect freedoms of speech and assembly.

It cannot be repeated enough, especially to bureaucrats' ears, that the war on nature has to end here and now. Additional considerations include Sudden Oak Death that has killed over a million oaks on this coast, and must be countered by saving healthy trees such as these. Lastly, acorns are good food for humans, as known by the local native people who were obliterated except for their name: Ohlone. When oil supplies fail soon, trees and acorns will be more useful than derelict cars, parking lots and fancy buildings.

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Further Reading:

"UC Berkeley targets protesters for trees", by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #147:

culturechange.org/cms

Save the Oaks:has good contact/alert systems and good pictures on its website:

saveoaks.com

Sudden Oak Death (a UCB website!):

http://nature.berkeley.edu/comtf/

Story on Fox affiliate's website:

http://www.ktvu.com/news/10732667/detail.html

News release
Emergency Rally To Defend the Tree-sits at the Oaks in Berkeley

Friday Jan. 12, 2 pm

This morning before dawn, campus police raided the tree-sits at the threatened oak grove on the UC Berkeley campus and confiscated all gear and personal belongings at the support camp.
Supporters are NEEDED on site to continue to defend the tree-sits. Six trees still have sitters on platforms in them but police could return at any time.

PLEASE COME TO THE OAK GROVE on Piedmont Avenue just north of Brancroft Way (just north of the International House on Piedmont Ave., on the east side of campus) as soon as you can. We need LARGE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE at the RALLY at 2 pm.

We will march to the Chancellor's house to protest the removal of the tree-site encampment and to defend the oaks.

Info: 510-599-0044

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New song by Depaver Jan: "Protesting UCB" Download Here

(a slow rock number in G with a 4/4 syncopated beat using bar chords)

I'm a gonna save the old oak trees

With my friends protesting UCB

Sitting in more trees is what we need

If we want some atmosphere to breathe

Wake up you kids, put down your books

Bosses of society are violent crooks

I'm not done yet

After our protesting we drink beer

It's a must we must be of good cheer

Don't forget the poor in People's Pahk

They can't sleep or drink or smoke their pot

Come on you cops, give us a kiss

There is more to life than getting orders and kicks

Protect the Free Box!

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WHEN DOES A TREE HAVE RIGHTS? by Silver Donald Cameron,
The Chronicle Herald (Halifax, Nova Scotia), Jan. 8, 2007

www.precaution.org

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