

# Addressing some Community Concerns about Fertile Ground

*A note on how and why this paper came into being:*

*This paper was written as a response to comments and criticisms about Derrick Jensen, Lierre Keith, Aric McBay and Fertile Ground after Jensen, Keith and McBay's visit to Bellingham on May 15-16, 2009. We felt it important to formulate a response that is consistent with the mission and vision for Fertile Ground so that we may address these comments and concerns in a way that will hopefully lead to more understanding about our group. The collective "we" is used to denote that the Coordinating Council of Fertile Ground reached a consensus that this paper represented the general perspective of our group, although not necessarily the views of every single member.*

## **PART 1 – The Radical Critique of Civilization**

One of the many inspirations for the creation of Fertile Ground has been the work of environmental author and activist Derrick Jensen. There are some aspects of Jensen's work that are extremely controversial. Probably the most controversial is his call for a "resistance" with the goal of collapsing civilization in order to protect what is left of the natural world. (Jensen defines "civilization" as a culture . . . that both leads to and emerges from the growth of cities . . . with cities being defined—so as to distinguish them from camps, villages, and so on—as people living more or less permanently in one place in densities high enough to require the routine importation of food and other necessities of life." (Endgame, *Volume I: The Problem of Civilization*, Seven Stories Press, 2006, p. 17)

His premise is that civilization itself is not sustainable; that the very nature of civilization is to dominate and thus destroy the natural world. Jensen presents both historical and scientific data to support his claim. He believes this is true of all civilizations, but that modern industrial civilization is exponentially more destructive than any other civilization in the history of the planet.

Jensen believes that civilization will inevitably collapse under its own weight due to resource depletion, overpopulation, toxins, and instruments of war. However, in the meantime these same aspects will also create a world that will be so toxic and so ecologically impoverished that it will no longer be able to support the human species and countless others. Thus, the sooner civilization is brought down the better the chance for survival.

To achieve the goal of ending civilization sooner rather than later he feels that destruction of critical infrastructure components is a rational and appropriate strategy. These include actions to disrupt or wipe out key economic, communication, and energy systems – in other words destroying the very pillars upon which industrial civilization is built. Jensen equally advocates for other less radical measures such as fighting timber sales in court and cutting down on greenhouse gas emissions as quickly as possible. His basic point is that we are in dire straits; that each of us needs to figure out what our role is and then get to work because time is running out.

Jensen does not believe that civilization would be able to re-assert itself after a complete collapse because all of the easily available resources upon which it is built (oil, copper, platinum, silver, gold, zinc, etc) are already exhausted (or nearly so) and the natural capital upon which it depends (fertile soil, healthy functioning ecosystems, clean water) will take centuries to regenerate, not to mention how long it may take the climate to stabilize. He believes that what will inevitably replace civilization (if there are any humans left after the collapse) will be small populations in diverse locations, each adapted to their own environment and each with its own culture that reflects the land base on which it depends.

Jensen points to the “dominator” mentality as the root cause of the rise of civilization and its many ills. He believes that this mentality took hold when humans began to impose their will on natural systems in order to remain sedentary and develop agricultural practices. The dominator mentality is also responsible for the oppression of women, the genocide against native peoples, racism, and every other atrocity from factory farming to torture to cutting down forests for profit. The institutions and power structures that have resulted from this dominator mentality are, in Jensen’s view, the true enemy of the plants, animals, microbes, and fungi and indeed the entire web of life that inhabits the biosphere. Including us.

## **PART 2 - How does Fertile Ground fit in with this critique?**

The above analysis of Jensen’s work is a little oversimplified - his books are very long and contain literally thousands upon thousands of pages of research, analysis, history, philosophy and stories. He also writes about a myriad of other topics that are not covered here. However, the explanation above should be adequate to address how Fertile Ground views his philosophy and perspective and how we address common concerns with his approach.

We need to point out here that Fertile Ground is made up of diverse individuals who may view Jensen’s work with very different eyes. There are some who reject a lot of it, some who accept part of it, some who accept most or all of it, and some who think Derrick doesn’t go far enough. However, there is a certain critical analysis that runs through all the work that Fertile Ground does (a common denominator, if you will) and which all members will need to more or less agree with in order to be integrally involved with the group’s goals and strategies.

Of the overview given here, probably the most important point to keep in mind is the final sentence in Part 1 above: “the institutions and power structures that have resulted from this dominator mentality are . . . the true enemy of . . . the entire web of life that inhabits the biosphere. Including us.”

This is one of the main premises upon which Fertile Ground is founded. One may disagree with the word “enemy” (maybe substitute “adversary” or “primarily responsible for the destruction of” or whatever), or one may disagree with how to address this threat – but this particular premise of Jensen’s work is vital to understand what Fertile Ground is, what its goals are, and how it strategizes to deal with the ecological crisis.

If one agrees with this premise (regardless of whether one finds these institutions and power structures to be the most important factor or not) then they have a place in the Fertile Ground Community. If one does not agree with this analysis, then Fertile Ground would probably be a waste of their time (and ours). That said, if one is open to the idea that this may be true, Fertile Ground may be a place where they can explore this idea and see if they do indeed find it to be valid.

There are a couple of other fundamental premises to identify here before continuing this discussion. These premises are also fundamental to Fertile Ground’s philosophy:

**Premise:** The institutions and power structures mentioned above, and society at large, show no signs of being able or willing to make a voluntary transition towards sustainability; the culture is way too addicted to its comforts, substances and ways of living to actually undermine those same comforts, substances and ways of living. This isn’t to say that many people won’t or that people are not willing to. But, even if we believed that it could, there is pretty much no chance it would happen in time. And, even if it could happen in time, the sooner the transition takes place the more ecosystems, species and other natural systems would be left intact.

**Premise:** Humans are animals and (assuming we live sustainably) our existence on the planet is no more or less important than the existence of any other species inhabiting any other ecosystem on the planet.

So, in a nutshell the premises of Fertile Ground can be summed up as follows:

**Civilization has a dominator mentality. This mentality is destroying the earth. Civilization will not make a voluntary transition to give up this mentality and become sustainable. All species, including humans, share an equally important role in the health of the ecosystems upon which we depend.**

## **PART 3 – How does Fertile Ground respond to community concerns about these radical ideas?**

Listed below are the six most common concerns that we've heard about Jensen's work:

- 1) The "us" versus "them" mentality is counter-productive
- 2) Derrick Jensen advocates violence which, especially when it escalates, only leads to more pain, suffering, misunderstanding and destruction. Violence must be avoided at all costs.
- 3) Derrick Jensen focuses on "them" rather than asking "us" to look inward where the real change must begin.
- 4) "Resistance" implies all of the above and Derrick Jensen advocates for not only a "resistance movement" but for a whole culture based on it (a "culture of resistance").
- 5) Civilization does not need to be brought down; it just needs to be rehabilitated.
- 6) Destroying civilization means destroying the United States and thus a resistance movement would be viewed as a terrorist movement. Therefore, people who act on what Derrick calls for are eco-terrorists and being an eco-terrorist will likely get you put in jail or killed.

Let's now address how (or if) these six concerns listed about Jensen's work apply to Fertile Ground's three goals: to restore Earth, resist domination, and rewild humans. We will address them one-by-one.

### **CONCERN #1: The "us" versus "them" mentality is counter-productive.**

To a great extent, Fertile Ground's work is based on the concept of defensive rights. What this concept implies is that, for example, a woman's right to not be raped trumps the perceived right of the rapist to violate her. Or, that the right to breathe clean air trumps the perceived rights of others to pollute our air. Or, that the right of a baby to drink unadulterated mother's milk trumps the perceived rights of others to dump dioxins, pesticides, fire retardants and other toxic chemicals into the environment that end up in the mother's milk. Those people and institutions that violate the defensive rights of others are expressing the dominator mentality. "Resisting domination" is really another way of saying, "protecting the defensive rights of those who cannot (or need help to) defend themselves."

It follows that in order to resist domination, we need to know what institutions, power structures and individuals are responsible for the domination (and thus destruction) of the Earth and its many

populations (plants, human, other animals, etc.). In other words, it seems reasonable to assume that if you are going to change a behavior, then you need to know who exhibits the behavior.

We also recognize that sometimes, as the comic strip character Pogo says, “We have met the enemy and he (sic) is us.”

Fertile Ground does not seek to exacerbate the divisions that already exist within society. At the same time, we recognize that there is a time and a place to say, “Hey – stop that! What you (or “they”) are doing is destroying the Earth!” And, if “they” are not willing to change the behavior, then “we” will express our defensive rights.

**CONCERN #2: Derrick Jensen advocates violence which, especially when it escalates, only leads to more pain, suffering, misunderstanding and destruction. Violence must be avoided at all costs.**

There are some people in Fertile Ground who, to say the least, are violence-averse and embody this concern. There are others who are OK with the destruction of property, and others who are ready to do whatever is necessary to protect the planet. One thing that sets Fertile Ground apart from other groups is that we believe that each person must find what is morally right for them in this struggle and that we will accept them even if we disagree with them. If you are a non-violent pacifist who cannot accept that others in your community may consider more violent actions under some circumstances, then Fertile Ground is not for you. Or, if you believe that violence is the only way and that pacifism has no place in the “resistance,” then Fertile Ground is not for you either. We are an “each person needs to find their own gifts, their own moral compass and get to work while there is still a biosphere to protect” kind of group. Besides which, we clearly see that the most horrific violence is being committed against the planet right now because so few people are willing to stand up to it in any meaningful way.

**CONCERN #3: Derrick Jensen focuses on “them” rather than asking “us” to look inward where the real change must begin.**

As stated above, we are an “each person needs to find their own gifts, their own moral compass and get to work while there is still a biosphere to protect” kind of group. If people think that change from within will on its own change the dynamic of civilization destroying the Earth, then we would recommend joining a different group with others who hold this belief. Of course, we recognize that changing one’s own thoughts and behaviors can be an important part of the overall equation, but we also believe that this will not be enough in and of itself.

**CONCERN #4: “Resistance” implies all of the above (concerns) and Derrick Jensen advocates for not only a “resistance movement” but for a whole culture based on it - a “culture of resistance”.**

So do we. We really don't see another way to do it. (A later section of this paper will give more details on how we view a "culture of resistance.")

**CONCERN #5: Civilization does not need to be brought down; it just needs to be rehabilitated.**

Many people in Fertile Ground think that civilization needs to be brought down, and others feel that it needs to be rehabilitated. Both viewpoints work for us as long as our common goal is stopping the destruction and oppression and living sustainably. We all have a role to play.

**CONCERN #6: Destroying civilization means destroying the United States and thus a resistance movement would be viewed as a terrorist movement. Therefore, people who act on what Derrick calls for are eco-terrorists and being an eco-terrorist will likely get you put in jail or killed.**

Fertile Ground has no tolerance for illegal or "below ground" activities. Period. We don't want people to even talk about such scenarios in any context during any Fertile Ground activity. In fact, all Fertile Ground members must sign an agreement that states:

*"I agree that I will not in any way support or participate in any illegal underground activities while part of the Fertile Ground Community. Should I ever commit any crime while part of the community, I understand that my membership may be immediately revoked, that I will not be welcome at any Fertile Ground Community event, and I will forfeit any dues paid."*

## **PART 4 - What is a Culture of Resistance?**

In his seminal work, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, Marshall Rosenberg lays out a communication strategy that aims to see all of our actions as being based on human needs that we are trying to meet. In practicing nonviolent communication (or NVC), the strategy is to understand and acknowledge these needs with the goal of discovering "what is alive" within the other and to connect with that person on a deeper level. The tools Rosenberg offers are both effective and profoundly revolutionary. Indeed, it is the hope that those who participate in Fertile Ground will utilize these techniques in order to create more meaningful relationships between individuals and thus a stronger and more resilient community.

Fertile Ground expands on this philosophy and applies it to all aspects of the web of life. Our goal is to not only understand human needs, but also the needs of all living things (animals, plants, fungi etc.) as well as the systems that interconnect them – the very ecosystems upon which we all depend.

A “culture of resistance” has a parallel theory in NVC – it’s called “protective use of force.” To quote Rosenberg, “In some situations . . . the use of force may be necessary to protect life or individual rights. For instance, the other party may be unwilling to communicate, or imminent danger may not allow time for communication. In these situations, we may need to resort to force. If we do, NVC requires us to differentiate between the protective and punitive uses of force.” (Rosenberg, Marshall, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, PuddleDancer Press, 2003, p.161.)

In the culture of resistance that Fertile Ground supports, we believe that the first step in confronting the destruction of the natural world is indeed to connect with individuals who make decisions that negatively impact the web of life. This includes everyone from people on the street to those who sit in plush offices in skyscrapers. If people have a willingness to turn destructive actions into sustainable ones, that opportunity should not be squandered.

We do, however, distinguish between the people and the institutions. We do not in any way believe that any human institution has any rights that supersede those of the living world. For example, unlike the US Courts, we do not believe that corporations have “personhood.” In fact, we find this kind of thinking insulting, absurd, and insanely dangerous. Thus, we do not believe that we need to consider the “needs” of these institutions if they come into conflict with the real needs of people, other animals, and the entire natural world.

Ultimately, Fertile Ground seeks to be a voice and a force for those (both human and non-human) who are voiceless and/or powerless to stop the atrocities being committed against them.

The culture of resistance that we envision is one that identifies the people in power and the institutions of power that are unwilling to make meaningful, real changes to become sustainable. And by sustainable we don’t just mean less destructive; we mean that their net effect on the environment is, at best, neutral, and preferably, restorative. Once we have identified who these people and institutions are and what our strategic priorities are, members of a culture of resistance then counter them with tactical, oppositional actions with the goal of removing those people and institutions from places of power and influence.

Like NVC theory, we do not find punitive use of force to be productive. We do not in any way believe that punishment results in rehabilitation. In fact, we think that punishment is more likely to lead to even more destructive behavior. The only measure by which we judge our actions to be effective is to what extent the destruction and abuse have been stopped.

As we indicated earlier, the tactics we use are those that our community feels appropriate and moral to them. We do not promote or advocate violence, but we do feel that there are circumstances where it may be justified. However, if someone is *not* willing to take violent or destructive action as a protective use of force due to their own moral dilemma, it is fine with us.

Some may feel uncomfortable being in a group where there are people who advocate the use of violence. This is completely understandable. We hope that if this describes you that you will take “solace” in two facts:

- 1) You are already part of an extremely violent and destructive culture. In fact, you are part of the most violent and destructive culture in the history of the planet. And, the violence and destruction rarely even has the intention of creating a better world – it is almost always to expand power, make a profit, or repress others. By not acting against these atrocities, we become complicit and condone this behavior. By contrast, participation in a group like Fertile Ground is a very real way to participate in a movement that, even if violence was expressed, would at least be a protective use of force to help stop the atrocities.
- 2) Again, here’s the agreement that all Fertile Ground members must sign and that we do everything in our power to enforce:

*“I agree that I will not in any way support or participate in any illegal underground activities while part of the Fertile Ground Community. Should I ever commit any crime while part of the community, I understand that my membership may be immediately revoked, that I will not be welcome at any Fertile Ground Community event, and I will forfeit any dues paid.”*

So, at worst you would come in contact with people who advocate violence (and have the opportunity to have a dialogue with them). Regardless, you would be part of a community that takes protecting the Earth seriously enough to consider all available options.

Now that we’ve spoken to concerns of those who are “peaceful warriors,” we will now turn to the concerns of those who are advocating for violence. We really only have two things to say:

- 1) If you want to advocate for the defensive use of force, this will be a safe place to do so.
- 2) HOWEVER, if you have any intention to actually plan or commit a violent or illegal act, either quit Fertile Ground or don’t sign up in the first place. Go elsewhere – go underground, go home, go find another community, whatever. We will not allow you to threaten the security of the group.

## PART 5 - What sets Fertile Ground apart from other environmental groups?

The tragedy of the modern environmental movement is that in spite of widespread support for ecological protection and restoration, the destruction of the Earth's ecosystems has not only continued, but the rate of destruction has actually increased.

In light of this fact, some have postulated that the modern environmental movement has perhaps accelerated the destruction of the natural world because it has helped channel the untold energy of activists and supporters into actions that have been strategically flawed rather than into actions that could have made a meaningful difference. If this is indeed true, then it may be time to completely rethink the tactics. However, even if it is not true that the tactics have been counterproductive, it would be difficult to argue that they have been adequate to meet the challenge.

At the risk of oversimplification, one could divide the strategies available to environmentalists into one of two groups: "Bright Green" and "Deep Green."

The Bright Greens have dominated the environmental movement for the past 40 years. Bright Green tactics tend to rely on government legislation, technological innovations, and gradual structural adjustments to the fabric of society and its institutions.

Deep Greens, on the other hand, believe that technological innovations, even when developed for environmental purposes, inevitably lead to accelerated resource depletion and more pollution. The Deep Green movement is more focused on replacing oppressive power structures with community-based ones that tap the wisdom of the original peoples. Deep Green strategies also tend to reflect an urgency that is much more pronounced than that of the Bright Greens.

Below is a comparison of the Deep Green and Bright Green perspectives that was written by a member of Fertile Ground:

*"The Deep Greens want Monsanto shut down forever. The Bright Greens think Monsanto could become a responsible company (or at least that's what their tactics imply). Bright Greens think that if we just scream loud enough those in power will meaningfully address global warming. Deep Greens believe that we're going to have to stop the polluters ourselves. Bright Greens think that electing "good" government will lead to positive change. Deep Greens believe that it never has and it never will because it was never set up to be responsive to the real needs of people and the environment. Bright Greens think that with the right amount of education, people will voluntarily change. Deep Greens believe that the population displays highly addictive and destructive behaviors that can only be addressed through intervention. Bright Greens think that civilization is as real as nature.*

*Deep Greens believe that civilization is a social formation and that nature is real. Bright Greens think that adopting a green lifestyle will make a real difference for the planet. Even though Deep Greens may agree that it is the right thing to do, they believe that as a tactic to change corporate behavior it is delusional, and can even backfire - making those in power even more powerful.”*

Fertile Ground is part of the Deep Green movement. Even so, Fertile Ground honors and supports the efforts of the Bright Greens. Deep Green and Bright Green are compatible in numerous ways, and many people will find meaning in both camps. The role of Fertile Ground is to give a voice to Deep Green and, in doing so (to quote our Statement of Purpose and Intent), “to actively create a culture of resistance to those who rule by force and intimidation.”

## **PART 6 - So what exactly does a “Culture of Resistance” do?**

We are creating new social norms. In the resistance paradigm, acts of resistance are normalized and celebrated and the culture sees the political landscape that needs changing in terms of oppressive power structures that need to be taken down in order to achieve a sustainable society. This is as opposed to traditional activist work (at least in the US) where victories are achieved incrementally through legislation and modifications to the corrupt power structures, and where individual thoughts and actions are often seen as being more important than changes that actually make a real difference in terms of restoration.

How does this look “on the ground?” Here’s a scenario written by one of the members of Fertile Ground that combines above ground legal resistance with non-compliance activities that were inspired by the likes of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., but put in the context of the struggle for environmental justice in the United States of today. (Note that Fertile Ground only supports the legal activities.)

*“At first glance it appears to be business as usual. But peer a little deeper and you will see countless acts of defiance. People no longer talk only about how their actions impact the environment, but about what they can do to use protective force if others continue to do harm. People call in sick for work. Survey stakes disappear. People celebrate when the stock market falls. Important shipments end up at the wrong address. People pull all their money out of the banking system. Third party candidates get lots of votes. For some reason, the wireless internet doesn’t work at any Starbuck’s location. Thousands of people don’t pay their electric bill, and when their power is cut off they no longer need it to run their household. For some reason, the permit to build the new Wal-Mart store keeps getting lost. People’s courts get set up and CEO’s are publicly tried for environmental crimes and abusive behavior. Pirate radio stations pop up all over the dial. A boycott shuts down a specific corporately owned gas station in town and the employees are offered better paying jobs at local businesses. More and more people use local currencies. It becomes*

*normal to not pay taxes and there is little that the IRS can do about it. The police don't enforce certain laws. McDonald's is shut down by the health department as a threat to public health. The County Sheriff keeps misplacing directives from Homeland Security. Communities are more and more self reliant. The system doesn't seem to reward the same behaviors. The power structure begins to crumble, and people are there, ready to replace it with one that works for the people and the environment."*

This is only one individual's vision of what a culture of resistance could look like. There are many visions and possibilities of how it could unfold or what it could look like. We encourage all Fertile Ground members to bring their own visions forward. Some may be far more tame, and others more extreme. We recognize that there is no "one way" to create a culture of resistance. We just know that it is a collaborative effort and that we need all the help we can get.

## **PART 7 - Conclusion**

We hope this paper has been helpful in explaining what Fertile Ground is about, how it is different from other groups, and how we respond to the most common criticisms leveled against us. We also welcome your input, your criticisms and your praise. Deep Green, Fertile Ground and the resistance movement are works in progress. There is plenty of room for improvement and refinement.

Allow us to close by reiterating Fertile Ground's Statement of Purpose and Intent:

**We are people who share a commitment to restoring balance to the ecosystems in which we live and on which we depend for our survival. Although we recognize that human civilization has wreaked havoc upon the earth, we also believe that we have the ability, as our ancestors did, to live in ways where our lives enhance these natural systems.**

**We commit to creating a safe community – safe for women, safe for men, and safe for children. We understand that the current patterns of abuse and domination are destructive and need to be interrupted and transformed if we are to achieve our goals. Thus, we actively create a culture of resistance to those who rule by force and intimidation.**

**It is our intention to create an environment that supports living our lives to their fullest, and that doing so is a great gift to ourselves, to those yet born, and to the honor of those who have gone before us.**

**We live to deepen our relations with the natural world, with the mystery of life, and with this land we call home.**

**Fertile Ground; A Community of Whatcom.**