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Collective Hindsight: A Review Of *The Grass Roots Primer*

JENIFER ROBISON

What do you do when the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers announces that its solution to the hurricane “problem” in New York (four major hurricanes in 200 years) is to build a wall around Coney Island? How do you fight it when a local landowner secures a zoning variance so he can open a game farm whose main access (for its projected 300,000 visitors in 100,000 cars) is the only street in your tiny village?

In the days before the citizen’s suit provisions of the present environmental laws there was very little recourse for people outraged by plans like those described. One could appeal a zoning variance or seek an injunction against a nuisance, but these are highly expensive tactics and almost hopeless in the face of such a formidable foe as the Corps.

‘You ever seen the Army Corps of Engineers? They’re very polite, they listen, they tape everything, and they never respond. We learned that you can go through official channels, but unless you have some political or social input nothing happens.’ (p. 56)

Today there are a variety of federal, state, and local laws under which concerned citizens can challenge projects they find unreasonable. For example, under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), the Corps would have had to file an environmental impact statement, whose adequacy could have been challenged by any individual or organization which could demonstrate that the wall would cause them “injury in fact”. Similarly, under Vermont’s Land Use and Development Law (Act 250), before the game farm could be built, the developer would have to prove that his “Wildlife Wonderland” would be damaging neither to the environment nor to the community for which it was planned. But not every environmentally unsound project comes within the legislative purview, and those that do still require legal and scientific expertise to meet the various burdens imposed on those challenging the project. Yet many of these projects *are* successfully challenged; many environmental laws are nullities until grass roots

environmental groups assert their rights under them. How was it done, and how can it be done more effectively in the future?

James Robertson and John Lewallen have put together the environmental do-it-yourself *Grass Roots Primer*. They describe it as “a practical book for people whose world is threatened, and who want to do something effective to prevent the piecemeal destruction of Earth’s natural environment.” (p. 7) And that is exactly what *The Grass Roots Primer* is: a practical key to effective action.

Robertson and Lewallen divided their book into five basic parts. The first, entitled “Grass Roots Heroes”, is billed as including “eighteen stories about local environmental activists from the United States and Canada—who is doing what and how.” Each story (I counted nineteen) is divided into two parts. The main body is a narrative account, gleaned from correspondence and interviews with the participants, of how people became involved in environmental battles, what tactics they used, and which of those tactics were the most successful. Arranged around these narratives are short articles and visual materials describing the particular piece of the environment involved, cartoons and photographs which appeared in the media during the controversy, profiles of the participants, and reproductions of some of the more concrete tactics used—like protest songs or especially effective leaflets and handbills. Many of these marginal notes, as well as one or two of the narratives, were contributed by the activists themselves. In each case it all adds up to much more than just *stories* about environmental activists—rather these are *case studies* ranging in application from battles under major legislation (like NEPA) and against formidable foes (like the Corps and the AEC), to fights without legislative cover against local projects, to campaigns aimed at passing a particular piece of legislation. No matter what the nature of your anticipated battle, whether it be blocking the bulldozers or petitioning the powerbrokers, in the first part of *The Grass Roots Primer* you will find the story of the tactics which will help you to be successful.

If the editors had just printed the stories of the “Grass Roots Heroes”, this would still be a worthwhile and highly readable book. It would be relatively easy to read all the case studies and pick out those tactics which could be adapted to helping you solve your local problem. But Robertson and Lewallen didn’t stop here. In the second part of *The Grass Roots Primer* they present twenty-three “broad categories, steps that we believe every grass roots environmental group should consider as early as possible in their efforts.” (p. 203) These are the twenty-three categories which the editors found to be crucial in all of the grassroots campaigns they studied. Some of them are aimed directly at the planning stage of grass roots action, like finding the dedicated workers (Step #1), defining and limiting your goal (Step #2), and organizing the group in a form appropriate to the people and issues involved (Step #5). But even the best planning is only a forerunner to—not a substitute for—action. Thus the editors present a “number of skills, techniques, and tactics which might be useful . . . as your enterprise progresses.” (p. 203) Like handling hearings (Step #14), getting a law passed (Step #15), acquiring land (Step #21), or publicizing your cause effectively (Step #20).

Again, Robertson and Lewallen could have included only the planning and the action, but they went on to pinpoint the two most difficult moments in any

environmental campaign—when you think you have already lost and when you are sure you have won. Titled “The Existential Moment” and “Eternal Vigilance”, these categories may be the most important of all. Too many grass roots campaigns either succumb to the pressure of a crisis (like the arrival of the bulldozers) or dissolve from inertia after the moment of crisis has passed. Yet these are the times when action is the most urgent, and here are the means for sidestepping the pitfalls.

These all-inclusive “Steps to Power” comprise the most valuable section of *The Grass Roots Primer*. These are categories which are applicable to any environmental campaign, at any level. If used as they were meant to be used—as guidelines for effectiveness—they will achieve this goal and help you to achieve yours.

The final three sections of *The Grass Roots Primer* can be lumped together under the basic category of information or source materials. The first, “Putting Teeth in the Law”, is a brief review of environmental law and legislation (written by a student of environmental law), including descriptions of the character and style of the various federal agencies in whose custody the environment has been placed, the federal laws involved—how they work and how they can be used to attack federal programs, and the state land-use laws. Finally there is a bibliography of primary and secondary legal sources that ought to be used when working under environmental laws.

The next section, “A Grass Roots Review”, presents a source list (including short reviews) of publications on such topics as energy, transportation, recycling, media access, etc.

The third part is a directory of those environmental groups who are currently active and who responded to the editors’ request for information. Obviously the listing is not inclusive; if it were it would fill the entire volume. But it gives some indication of the wide variety of special interests represented in an environmental campaign, and of the array of actions in which these groups become involved.

In all, Robertson and Lewallen have performed a difficult task—collecting, organizing, and publishing a true primer for environmental protest. Unlike the do-it-yourself handbooks of the protest movement of the late 1960’s, they have avoided the rhetoric of outrage. Instead they have concentrated on *effective* action and allowed their readers to decide for themselves what constitutes abuse of the environment within their range of interests.

There are several lessons which emerge from *The Grass Roots Primer*—some basic, some disheartening. For instance, “hindsight is better than foresight” is a tried and true maxim which can be applied in any situation. Unfortunately that’s all it is—a maxim—and as such is about as practical as “I told you so”. As the editors put it:

Nobody would set out to slay a giant, build a dam, log a forest, or even take a vacation trip without having a plan. So why do so many environmental groups go off ‘halfcocked?’ The answer, of course, is that they’ve never done what they’re doing before. They learn the hard way, if they learn at all. (p. 203)

After the publication of this book, there should be no justification for any environmental group going off “halfcocked”. For here is the collected hindsight which ought to become every present and future campaign’s foresight.

Another widely used but generally useless maxim is that “politics makes strange bedfellows”. Even more so the environmental movement. Use it. You are a group of basically liberal people who want to stop that dam or power plant or whatever. Look around you and you will find that there is a wide range of other not-so-obvious groups whose interests will be affected by the project just as much as yours. Organize the farmers, or the commercial fishermen, or any other special interest group; show them how the project will adversely affect them. The wider the range of interests you can get involved, the more people you will reach and the more power you will wield.

One lesson which emerges from the book as a whole, but is also pinpointed by the editors, is summed up in Rule 10, “What do you need to win?” Experts. (And money.) Don’t rely on simple analyses of the project’s impact. Get a marine biologist or a geologist or a nuclear physicist who is on your side and present a detailed scientific attack on the project’s reasonableness. Even more important, get a lawyer and get an economist.

The advice “get a lawyer” I find particularly disheartening; that in this era of effective citizen action, legal expertise is still so crucial in an environmental campaign. But the environmental laws are not clear, and they have been construed in such a variety of ways by the courts, that only an experienced environmental lawyer can unravel the provisions which will help you the most, or find the ones which do not seem readily obvious to you. The experience of the people battling “Wildlife Wonderland” expresses it best:

[Our lawyer] came in to one of our . . . meetings even before we hired him and said, ‘You don’t owe me a dime, but I just covered you on a deadline for filing an appeal.’ We’d had a different idea of when the appeal . . . was due. . . . We hired him. (p. 81)

Fortunately there are many experienced environmental lawyers who are willing to work *pro bono*, but until basic legal education is brought to the public at large a lawyer is still a necessity.

The editors also point out (Rule 19: “Who Benefits and Who Pays?”) that an economist is usually essential to a successful environmental campaign.

. . . Your opponents will usually say that their plans will bring the twin blessings without which America is doomed: *more taxes and more jobs*. (The thing is, they’re usually wrong. If there’s one message that comes through loud and clear in the grass roots accounts in this book, it is: *debunk the economic claims of the opposition*. Ask the fundamental question: ‘*Who benefits and who pays?*’ (pp. 202-3) (emphasis in the original)

This advice may or may not be disheartening, depending on your worldview, but it is extremely valuable in any environmental campaign and should be followed. Often the economics of a project are presented in what appears to be a straightforward, nothing-to-hide manner. But there are almost always glaring misconceptions (like

the Corps' interest and discount rates) or hidden costs (like computing the benefits of reservoir recreation without including the cost of losing wild river recreation). These need to be recognized and analyzed economically by an expert.

It is unfortunate that this range of experts is so crucial (and so expensive) for any environmental campaign. But whatever agency you plan to battle will be represented by its own array of in-house experts, and only another recognized expert will be able to provide effective refutation.

Despite the final disheartening lessons, the book as a whole leaves one feeling very optimistic. This is not the Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council, or Ralph Nader. These are your neighbors and your friends, regular everyday people who are taking on the giants of power and winning! When they started out, they knew no more about saving our natural environment than most people. Now that their experiences have been analyzed and published in *The Grass Roots Primer*, everyone can use the book and save a corner of the earth. Do it!

James Robertson and John Lewallen, *The Grass Roots Primer*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books. 1975. 287 pages.