USA: Rainforest Action Network under corporate attack

Some corporations are trying to adapt to a more environmentally-conscious public opinion. Others are still unwilling to acknowledge that they cannot continue destroying the environment with impunity. The latter are not necessarily the most dangerous, but they can certainly be the most virulent. The situation being currently faced by a WRM founder organization --the Rainforest Action Network (RAN)-- constitutes an example of such virulence.

For years RAN has been campaigning to protect the world's rainforests. In doing so, it has obviously run up against some of the major forest destroyers and has in many cases been successful in halting their destructive activities. Some of these corporations are now trying to get RAN out of the way through the only strategy they understand: money.

A conservative group called the Frontier Freedom Foundation (FFF) --heavily supported by tobacco, oil and timber money-- is lobbying the Internal Revenue Service to revoke RAN's non-profit status. The FFF was founded in 1995 by former Senator Malcolm Wallop, a Wyoming Republican and friend of Vice President Dick Cheney. Its biggest contributors include Philip Morris, Exxon Mobil Corporation and RJ Reynolds Tobacco Holdings.

But in this case, the hand behing the FFF is logging company Boise Cascade, which is orchestrating a campaign against RAN, together with another group called the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise (CDFE) to do their most unpopular dirty work. Boise Cascade is a founder and funder of CDFE. To have an idea about this organization it's sufficient to quote its vice president Ron Arnold who told the Boston Globe in 1992, "We are sick to death of environmentalism, and so we will destroy it." And he told The New York Times in 1991, "We want to destroy the environmentalists by taking away their money and their members."

As part of its campaign, Boise Cascade has also aggressively targeted RAN's funders with threatening letters. This company is currently RAN's public enemy number one for its role as a "global forest destroyer." According to RAN, "data shows that Boise Cascade engages in global rainforest timber trade and contracts with companies that cut down old growth forests in the U.S., Chile, Indonesia, Canada, Brazil and Russia." Furthermore, Boise Cascade was the lead plaintiff in the effort to reverse the Clinton Administration's Roadless Initiative for National Forests, strongly supported by the American public in polls.

If the FFF is successful, RAN would not be out of business, but would have to raise what's known as "hard money" from its donors and members. Put simply, donors wouldn't be able to claim a tax deduction for supporting specific RAN activities, which could discourage them from giving. However, this tactic doesn't seem to be working. Michael Klein, a business entrepreneur and one of RAN's key funders said: "I don't think there is any merit in this case and feel confident that the IRS will rule in RAN's favor. But I stand behind the RAN's work in this area, and would be willing to more than make up whatever shortfall might result."

What the FFF and its corporate funders don't seem to understand it that the only way of stopping

organizations such as RAN from attacking them is to change their own destructive practices. According to RAN's director Chris Hatch, rather than admitting that the strong public sentiment against irresponsible forestry might be cutting into its bottom line, BCC (Boise Cascade) is trying to blame RAN for its economic problems. (BCC lost $35.5 million in the first quarter of 2001.) Clearly, RAN's success in reducing demand for products made from old-growth wood --including its groundbreaking agreement with Home Depot and a deal in Canada to preserve large portions of the Great Bear rainforest-- has motivated BCC. But instead of working with RAN to clean up their act (which numerous companies have done), BCC has chosen a more hostile route. The response from RAN is clear: "Let there be no doubt. The work to protect our forests will not only continue, but escalate.", stresses Chris Hatch.

Article based on information from: Don Hazen, "Green Group Comes Under Right-Wing Attack", AlterNet, June 26, 2001: Anne Marie Chaker, "Conservatives Seek IRS Inquiry On Environmental Group's", Wall Street Journal, June 21, 2001. Molly Ivins, 28 June 2001;