2025 ANNUAL REPORT

Sacred Land Film Project

Around the world,
indigenous people stand up
for their traditional sacred lands
in defense of cultural survival,
human rights and the environment.

A Day in the Life of Edward Abbey's Monkey Wrench Gang

BY CHRISTOPHER McLEOD

IN 1968, while I was in high school at the tender age of fifteen, my godmother in Aspen, Colorado, did what godmothers are supposed to do—she sent me a copy of Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* for my birthday. Into the flat, dreary Midwest, Utah's canyon country reached out and grabbed me. Soon I was exploring Arches National Park, listening to coyote song, and envisioning a move west. Abbey's writing inspired an entire generation of nature lovers and planted a seed in my soul.

When I entered journalism school in Berkeley in the late '70s, I read Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and that seed sprouted and grew. I gave copies of the book to my filmmaking partners, Glenn Switkes and Randy Hayes, as we started work on *The Four Corners: A National Sacrifice Area?* On the paperback's title page, I wrote: "This film will be our monkey wrench."

The exploits of ecowarriors Hayduke, Bonnie, Doc and Seldom Seen Smith inflamed my imagination as they cut down billboards, poured sugar into the gas tanks of earth-destroying machines, and railed against the industrial rape of the Southwest. The Peabody Coal Company's stripmine on Black Mesa was singled out as a target, but Glen Canyon Dam stirred the ire of the monkeywrenchers like nothing else. The U.S. government had mindlessly killed 180 miles of the Colorado River and flooded an ethereal sandstone cathedral—sacred land. Hayduke and friends were determined to blow up the damned dam, the destroyer of a revered ecosystem.

As we prepared for a film trip in March of 1981, I wrote Ed Abbey a letter requesting an interview. He sent back a plain, white postcard. "OK. Come to Oracle." He included his phone number. I called him a few days before we started a marathon six-week shoot.

"Will you be up north on the Colorado Plateau any time soon?" I asked the reclusive writer. "I'd rather do the interview in canyon country."

"Yeah. I will," Abbey replied. "Meet me at Lone Rock Campground, nine miles north of Glen Canyon Dam on the spring equinox. We have something planned."

Okay!

At dusk on March 21, Glenn, Randy and I turned off two-lane Highway 89 and bounced down a steep sandstone slope in our borrowed white van with "East Wind" painted on the side. In a circle around a fire stood seven men, each holding a can of beer, shifting back and forth in the cold, looking suspicious and looking suspiciously at us.

Four of them—Dave Foreman, Mike Roselle, Bart Koehler and Howie Wolke—ambled over as we were setting up our campsite and asked who we were and what we were doing with all the electronic gear.

PHOTO BY RANDY HAYES

Christopher (Toby) McLeod and Ed Abbey scrutinize Glen Canyon Dam

Clearly, Foreman thought we were cops.

Glenn offered them bottles of home-brewed beer. Mike Roselle told me years later that from that moment on, everything was fine. Before that, we were FBI agents.

The first two nights were awkward. We spent the evenings standing around the fire downing beers. I didn't feel much kinship. This was a raucous bunch of desert rats, noticeably lacking a female presence. I remember feeling more than a little uncomfortable. Unbeknownst to me, this scruffy collection of wilderness defenders was about to introduce Earth First! to the world. I had no idea who they were or what they were up to.

Dave Foreman recalled years later that his doubts persisted until Abbey finally arrived and told him, "Relax, they're my film crew. I invited them."

By the campfire that night, I stood next to Ed, nervous and unsure what to say to the great author. Tall and thin, with a bushy, salt-and-pepper beard, he seemed to be hiding quietly under his well-worn cowboy hat, the shadow of which failed to conceal piercing blue eyes reflecting fire as they took everything in—all of it.

I asked if he thought a feature film would ever be made of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Ed said he'd sold the film rights, but so far no one could figure out

ALL PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER McLEOD

Lone Rock and Lake Powell as Glenn Switkes does tai chi

how to handle a story about anti-corporate sabotage.

"I keep getting checks each time they have to renew the rights," he laughed. "I like that."

I told him it was my dream to make *The Making of The Monkey Wrench Gang*, to explore the backstory and underlying ethical issues. He told me he would do what he could to help make that happen if a Hollywood film ever got off the ground.

I asked about the risks of advocating monkeywrenching.

He smiled. "I think we need to resist to the best of our ability. I'm against passive nonresistance."

The full moon rose over the canyon rim.

"I swear it gets warmer when the moon comes out," he remarked, changing the subject. I felt the same thing and shivered in agreement. We both laughed and clinked our beer bottles.

Abbey's books made more sense after meeting him. His humor was ironic, biting, and constantly flowing. Satire seemed intrinsic to his being.

As the night wore on, there was cryptic talk about a guerrilla theater action on the dam in the coming days. We agreed to film it—whatever they were cooking up. There were few details and I was afraid to ask.

The next day was windy and stormy. Abbey emerged from his pickup truck camper with a woman thirty years his junior, his soon-to-be wife, Clarke. A twelve-foot-wide roll of black, visqueen plastic sheeting emerged from another truck and was rolled out on the desert sand. It was pretty banged-up. We contributed two precious, expensive rolls of gaffer's tape. They inspected the long strip of polyethylene and reinforced it with our black tape. I still had no idea what was being planned, but we broke out the film gear and documented the preparations. Looking at the film in 1997 with Canadians who'd come to interview me for a documentary about monkeywrenching, I see four main actors working on the plastic sheeting: Foreman, Roselle, Wolke and Koehler, with Edward Abbey, holding a beer, bemused, standing tall and observing from afar.

That night, inside our van, we recorded a song performed by Johnny Sagebrush aka Bart Koehler, who crooned a perfect soundtrack: "Were you there, when they built Glen Canyon Dam? Were you there, when they killed this river dead?" The van was a natural echo chamber. Randy struggled to capture the reverb voice and booming guitar as the van rocked in a howling wind. As fate would have it the haunting echo turned out to be a splendid sound effect.

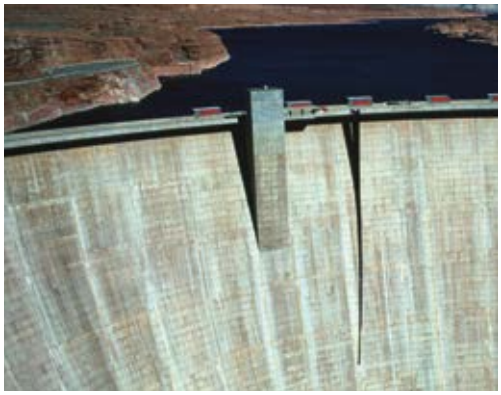
Abbey came by the van and I suggested we record an audio pre-interview. Sitting inside the van on a blustery night, we had a wide-ranging conversation. I could tell Ed was a shy author who didn't like being interviewed by strangers. He was serious, spoke cautiously, working his ideas out as he talked, clearly more comfortable with written pages that could be edited and refined. He sat in the passenger seat of our van, thoughtfully stroking his beard, his soft voice a deep baritone. Abbey's most telling comment, for 1981, was this early stab at articulating the rights of nature:

Humans see everything as a resource to be used for human pleasure or profit. Even wilderness is regarded as a resource. I think we have got to find our way to some different point of view. Somehow we have to transcend our human limitations and achieve a—what should we call it?—a transhuman point of view—*a recognition and acknowledgment of the existence of other things and their right to exist. Everything on this planet has a right to exist for its own sake, and to continue to exist, even inanimate objects, rocks and rivers, and certainly all forms of life, plant and animal, have an inherent right to exist and go on existing. I don't know how to defend this attitude philosophically. There are people who are working on this problem. It's a philosophical challenge. I'm not ready. I don't know how to defend it in a logical way.*

The next day unfolded like a military operation. There were cryptic logistical discussions over breakfast. The vibe was somewhere between tight security and laissez-faire. I agreed to set up our camera downstream of the dam to film whatever they had planned.

Later that morning, on the steel bridge that spans Glen Canyon, I aimed my lens through a small window in the eight-foot chain-link fence and focused on the towering dam. It is a massive monstrosity, flouting nature in heavy silence. The amount of sparkling blue water behind the 700-foot concrete wall, and the empty chasm yawning below me, seemed a physics-defying trick of black magic.

Off to the west, marching down an access road, came four antlike figures hauling a long black tube between them. They met up with their advance man, and then out onto Glen Canyon Dam the five monkeywrenchers carried their load. I filmed as they paused to figure out which way to unroll the mass of plastic. They turned the heavy cylinder around, raised it to the edge, and voila! It was amazing to see the black strip unfurl 200 feet down the loathsome dam, creating a giant "crack" on its colossal face. I got the shot.



The cracked dam

Now what? Where were the cops? Nowhere.

We gathered in the visitor parking lot overlooking the hated dam. The crack was gently swinging in the breeze. There were about seventy-five people there, backcountry guides, desert lovers, and river runner friends who'd been tipped off. Abbey climbed onto the back of an old green pickup truck and pulled out some yellow pages of scribbled notes. We started filming.

Ed rarely gave speeches, but this one was fantastic and we filmed most of it. Four hundred feet of film lasts only eleven minutes so we had to be economical. We caught the climax:

The industrialization, urbanization and militarization of the American West continues. More dams are proposed, more coal-burning and nuclear power plants are projected, more river diversion projects, more stripmining of our mountains, clearcutting of our forests, the misuse of water and abuse of the land. All for the sake of short-term profit. All to keep the industrial-military empire going and growing until it finally reaches the point where it must self-destruct and destroy itself.

What is the use of building a great city if you haven't got a tolerable planet to build it on? Earth first! How can we create a civilization fit for the dignity of free men and women if the globe itself is ravaged and polluted and defiled and insulted? The domination of nature leads to the domination of human beings.

Meanwhile, what to do? Here I can offer nothing but more of the same. Oppose. Oppose the destruction of our homeland by these alien forces from Houston, Tokyo, Manhattan, Washington, D.C., and the Pentagon. And if opposition is not enough, we must resist. And if resistance is not enough, then subvert! (Cheers)

After ten years of modest environmental progress, the powers of industrialism and militarism have become alarmed. The empire is striking back. So we must continue to strike back at the empire by whatever means available to us. Win or lose, it's a matter of honor.

At that point in Ed's rousing speech, law enforcement arrived: one sheriff's deputy and a park ranger. As we rolled film the ranger questioned Dave Foreman and the sheriff's deputy ambled over, shook Abbey's hand, and with a big smile said, "I've read all of your books."

We'd filmed the birth of Earth First!

This was macho resistance based on love of land. And beer.

Dave Foreman, Ed Abbey and Bart Koehler at the demonstration

Early the next morning we had breakfast in a Page, Arizona, diner with Ed and Clarke, and then went out to the canyon rim to interview Abbey with the dam behind him. It was a filmmaker's dream come true. Ed delivered the goods in true Monkey Wrench Gang style.

"I think we are morally justified to resort to whatever means are necessary in order to defend our land from destruction, invasion. I see this as an invasion," he said as he gestured toward the enormous dam and buzzing transmission towers. "These look like creatures from Mars to me. I feel no kinship with that fantastic structure over there, no sympathy with it whatsoever." He paused in silence for five seconds. "Yeah, I would advocate sabotage, subversion, as a last resort, when political means fail."

"So, what's your strategy now?"

The cop said, "I've read all of your books."

I asked. "We're making a film. Those guys unfurled a crack down the dam…"

"My strategy is to go home and try to write another funny book," he replied. "All those who care are morally obliged to resist in whatever way they can, whatever way they're best at. It's a kind of campaign, or war, that is so huge in extent that none of us can take part in all of it, or even follow events in all of it. So each of us has to choose a sector or front to participate in. Decide what you care about most and get involved in that. I think life is much more enjoyable when you're participating in something bigger than yourself, outside yourself."

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Back in Berkeley, as we closed in on finishing our hour-long *Four Corners* documentary, Earth Firster Ron Kezar offered us $600 to cover expenses to complete a short Glen Canyon Dam film in time for Earth First!'s summer road show. It was a fortuitous experience that allowed me to edit, sound mix, and complete my first film, nine minutes in length.

When Dave Foreman arrived in June at Dwinelle Hall on the U.C. Berkeley campus, the 500-seat theater was packed—a full house! Johnny Sagebrush (Bart Koehler) belted out his ballads and roused the boisterous crowd.

We showed the film for the first time and a growing wave of laughter rippled through the audience as the black crack unfurled and rolled down the dam. Then, wild hoots and hollers. Later, Foreman prowled across the stage, raging against Ronald Reagan's Interior Secretary James Watt, the born-again Christian who had infamously foreshadowed our current quandary. "My responsibility is to follow the Scriptures," proclaimed Watt, "which call on us to occupy the land until Jesus returns.… We will mine more, drill more, cut more timber."

Foreman, the Antichrist, was a growling grizzly, inspiring the throng of tree huggers. He called for a new activist movement that would "make the Sierra Club look moderate," as he ranted about environmental insults from clearcutting to Glen Canyon Dam.

For the audience, watching our short film was like being there at the dam with Ed Abbey and the Monkey Wrench Gang. We had captured a mythic moment in time, to be shared over the decades—seen by thousands though fewer than a hundred were actually there.

In city after city that summer, the reaction was the same on the Earth First! roadshow. At the moment the unfurling crack seems to reach its full extent, it suddenly erupts with new life and rolls down another fifty feet, and the audience bursts into laughter and cheers. A truly catalytic event.

As the crowds celebrated, I experienced the power of film—and the magic of having been in the right place at the right time.

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After we completed *The Four Corners: A National Sacrifice Area?*, we premiered it in the Hopi and Navajo Nations and then took the film on the road for six weeks of screenings in the big cities and small towns of New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Arizona. Near the end of our Southwest Tour, I called Ed Abbey to invite him to our Tucson screening. He was out rambling in the desert, but his wife Clarke said, "He'll be there."

They both came and after *Four Corners* ended, Ed stood up in the middle of the crowded theater and said, "That is a beautiful, impressive, and thoroughly honest film. I hope millions of people see it."

We closed out the night with a screening of *The Cracking of Glen Canyon Damn—with Edward Abbey and Earth First!* I still love Ed's closing lines in that film, as relevant today as they were forty-two years ago:

> *Oppose, resist, subvert, delay, until the empire begins to fall apart.*
>
> *And until that happens, enjoy what's left of the great American West. Climb those mountains, run those rivers, hike those canyons, explore those forests, and share in the beauty of wilderness, friendship, love, and the common effort to save what we love. Do this and we'll be strong and bold and happy. We will outlive our enemies, and as my good old grandmother used to say, "We'll live to piss on their graves!"*

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"Surely, no man-made structure in American history has been hated so much, by so many, for so long, with such good reason, as Glen Canyon Dam!"

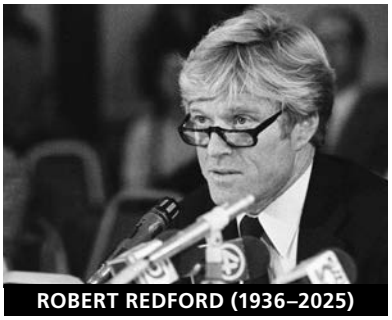
—EDWARD ABBEY

In Memoriam

A cruel gust of wind swept through our world this year and knocked down a grove of giant trees. Death takes us all, but seven dear friends, allies and mentors in one season? We mourn the loss of these seven environmental heroes and feel profound gratitude for their invaluable support over the decades.

JOANNA MACY (1929–2025)

Beloved teacher, deep ecologist and Buddhist practitioner Joanna Macy died peacefully at home in Berkeley in July. In 2015, five Earth Island project directors approached Joanna and asked if we could meet with her to help cope with the grief, sadness and anxiety we encounter in our work on climate change, indigenous rights and other environmental issues. This began ten years of monthly meetings in Joanna's living room, which continued until this past June, a few weeks before she passed away. Joanna taught us to embrace grief as a manifestation of our love for the world. She helped thousands of people transform pain into action. Our group spent the last sessions talking about death, finding meaning in community, and seeking the courage and strength to resist fascism.



ROBERT REDFORD (1936–2025)

When the U.S. government proposed siting a high-level nuclear waste dump next to Canyonlands National Park in southern Utah in 1984, we traveled to Salt Lake City to film a Congressional hearing where the charismatic activist spoke forcefully against the proposal. (The government soon abandoned the plan.) Bob generously provided thoughtful endorsement quotes for *In the Light of Reverence* and *Standing on Sacred Ground*.

GRAHAM GREENE (1952–2025)

In 2013, Peter Coyote, who had narrated all of our films for 30 years, stepped aside, saying, "Sacred sites need an indigenous voice." We have long appreciated actor Graham Greene's impeccable talent, humor, wit, and generous spirit—from *Dances with Wolves* to *Reservation Dogs*—and we were thrilled to work with him as narrator of our four-hour series *Standing on Sacred Ground*.

MALCOLM MARGOLIN (1940–2025)

The author of *The Ohlone Way* was an inspiring colleague and enthusiastic supporter of our film projects. For the last eight years we worked together to support Lisjan Ohlone leader Corrina Gould's successful fight to protect the West Berkeley Shellmound. Our podcast with Malcolm came out this summer, and when I asked him what he thought of it he exclaimed, "I loved it!" A week later he passed away.

BILL MOYERS (1934–2025)

When we mailed out the first funding proposal for our global film series on threatened sacred places in 1991, we didn't know that Bill Moyers was head of the Schumann Foundation. Bill had just broadcast the six-part series *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*. He loved our proposal and Schumann gave us a $50,000 research grant. When deciding who to interview for the final episode of his long-running PBS show, *Bill Moyers Journal*, he wisely chose our dear friend Barry Lopez (1945-2020).

JANE GOODALL (1934–2025)

In 2016, sacred site guardians teamed up with the legendary Jane Goodall at the IUCN World Conservation Congress to call for habitat protection in alignment with indigenous values. Seen in this photo are Sarayaku leader Patricia Gualinga from Ecuador, Jane Goodall, and traditional leader Appolinaire Oussou Lio from Benin.

SUSAN NEWMAN (1953–2025)

Thanks to the friendship and generosity of Susan Newman, Paul Newman's oldest daughter, the Newman's Own Foundation has been an important supporter of the Sacred Land Film Project for two decades. Susan and I spoke on the phone several times a year for the last 20 years. I miss those phone calls. She was a force of nature.

—CHRISTOPHER McLEOD