

# Report back from **Earth First! the Gathering**

July 2023, Abenaki land, Vermont

This report back is co-written by Megan (**M**), who helped organize this year's EF! gathering, and Shannon (**S**), an attendee who was participating in an EF! event for the first time.

## **(SOME OF) THE FACTS**

**S:** This year, the annual Earth First! gathering took place across nine early July days in rainy Vermont. The mountains were real fucking pretty and shit. There was a creek. It got *\*wet\**.

**M:** What Shannon said—but actually, after a rainy prep week, it didn't rain as much during the event itself as we had feared! (Notably, the six inches of rain we expected on cleanup day came just a few hours after the cleanup crew had left, resulting in devastating flooding in the area.)

We had an average of maybe 75-100 people in attendance on most days, with a peak late in the week around 130+.

## **THE GATHERING AS AN EVENT**

**S:** The atmosphere, solidarity, and day-to-day organization of the camp were extremely solid, in my opinion. The camp ran a tight ship of volunteer shifts covering security, infrastructure, and a kitchen churning out great quantities of fucking bomb ass food (including for vegans like myself). A conflict engagement (not resolution) team seemed proactive and successful in their job. Medics kept us healthy. The welcome tent's beautiful faces shared camp norms; I generally saw people respect those norms and/or be open to correction. (At least one person humbly recused himself from a gathering he didn't fit into—a skill worth respecting imo.) Some morning circles could have been quicker—in my opinion, facilitation really is a skill, and it's okay to let it be done by those who are best at it without overly rotating roles—but then, who expected to have leftism without a little bit of meetings?

**M:** This year's Earth First! The Gathering took place in the Green Mountain National Forest at a site with beautiful meadows and lots of hills. Much of the infrastructure was similar to years past—tarps, trench shitters, breakfasts and dinners provided with some unofficial lunch salads to supplement. We ended up hauling water from a local farm, 275 gallons at a time. We may have underestimated how far away some of the group camp sites would feel—the sites at the top of the hill were a 15-20 minute steep walk from the morning circle area and kitchen—but it may have felt less dispersed if we had more attendees, which is hard to predict. Case in point, halfway through the week, the folks running the BIPOC kitchen space decided to move down the hill to be closer to the main happenings. It was great that folks identified that need, picked a new spot, and got things moved in half a day!

## **THE VIBES**

**S:** Such solid infrastructure allowed participants to easily make an absolutely beautiful atmosphere. The deep ties between many (movement) veterans sometimes made things a little intimidating to newcomers like myself, but welcoming veterans and fellow newbies meant that I was soon able to feel very at home and surrounded by excellent people. We played games, from aggressive Toe-Touch (touch opponents' toes) to Hoopstick (hit hoop with stick) to Magic The Gathering (gather ... magic? I don't really know actually). We swam in a beautiful creek. We joked and told stories around fires sober and rowdy. As a straight edge person, I regret that "sober" fire can sometimes mean "boring" fire, and "rowdy" fire often conflates "substances" and "fun," but I leave it up to readers to gauge how and how much one gathering might counteract that tendency with such deep roots.

**M:** Well, I can tell you that the vibes in the kitchen were good! We listened to a lot of Carly Rae Jepsen, and had a box trailer equipped with solar and a tiny fridge for bulk food storage and making (and remaking) ice packs. We had a lot of donated cheese and bread, which always makes for great times. Outside of the kitchen, I can't speak for much, but people did seem to overall be having at least an alright time. The Gathering was definitely smaller than years past, but there was a good mix of old faces and new, and it never felt like too few people to be worth the effort.

## THE CONTENT

**S:** Among the beautiful atmosphere and solid infrastructure, I feel that if one thing was lacking, it was unfortunately the political content of the weekend. Some workshops were absolutely killer, for sure. My favorites were offered by people with decades of experience in this or related movements, teaching Earth First! history or tactics for direct action. But after last year's gathering was smoked/wildfired out, this year got a late start to planning and did not culminate in an action. I think that allowing any participant to host any workshop helped this challenging time frame for advance planning, for sure, and allowed younger folks and newcomers especially to contribute. Nonetheless, I feel the gathering's incredible organization and atmosphere created more potential than it completely lived up to.

Nine days and two dozen workshop blocks could allow presenters to dive deep across multiple sessions or days—even while allowing people to benefit from attending some and not all in a series. (More) speakers could be invited to fill in gaps that might be less obvious to Earth First!ers and build bridges across movements. It was clear to me that the organizers already made such invitations; I think they led to some of the strongest sessions. There's room for more!

Make no mistake that, although I sometimes wished for more political content, there was political content that I felt I got a lot out of, and the social and fun aspect of the week was really incredible. I'm super grateful to have met and seen such interesting and beautiful comrades. On a personal note, that community was just exactly what I needed at the time, and I feel really fulfilled and happy for it. Thanks so much to the organizers for all their hard work setting up such a great gathering—and the participants for bringing it to life! See y'all next time.

**M:** This year, after much discussion, the local organizing crew decided not to plan an action. We didn't have a specific, engaged local campaign that we were working with to build capacity. There are always action targets to be found, but we didn't want to scrounge something up just to meet expectations if it

wasn't a thing that made sense. Instead, we decided to encourage folks to head to other campaigns—perhaps Atlanta or Appalachia—if they felt like they had that kind of capacity to give.

I think that was the right decision. And also, I think that Shannon's right about some lack of political focus of the week, and I suspect that not having an action contributed to that in some way. There were a lot of incredible workshops, there was a lot of EF! community building, but it felt more like a "let's take a breather" event than a "let's ramp up for a thing" event, and there are pros and cons to that.

All that being said, we made new friends, we definitely built our own capacity as a local organizing crew/affinity group, and we ate (and threw) a lot of salad greens. Yay!

## WHAT'S NEXT?

2024 Organizers Conference: April, so-called Maryland

2024 Gathering: Summer, hosted by the NYC crew,





# Earth First!

SUMMER GATHERING

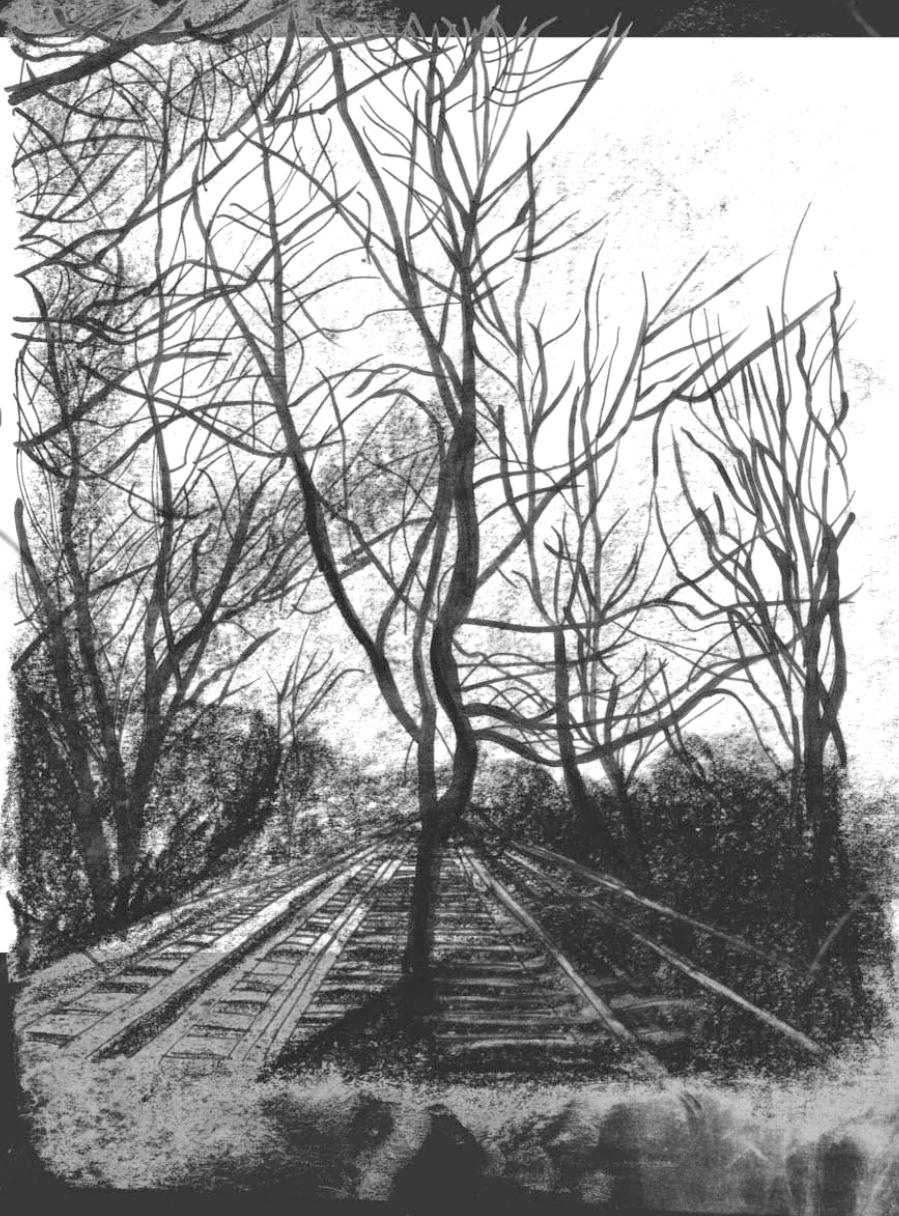
so-called

HUDSON VALLEY

july 2-9, 2024

come grow

life in the ruins



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