NO PEOPLE ALLOWED
A radical environmental group attempts to return the Southwest to the wild.

BY NICHOLAS LEMANN

In April of 1998, to celebrate his early retirement as a mail carrier for the United States Postal Service, Richard Humphrey took his family on a camping trip. The Humphreys loaded up the car—husband, wife, two daughters, two dogs, tent, food, a rifle so that Humphrey could teach the girls to shoot, books for home schooling—and drove up into the Apache National Forest, north of Tucson, near the Arizona-New Mexico border. They found a campsite, put their tent up, and went to bed. The next morning, Humphrey got up early to cut some firewood. Not far from the tent, he saw an animal that looked like an underfed, wrong-colored German shepherd: a Mexican gray wolf.

Richard Humphrey is the kind of rough-hewn, matter-of-fact guy whose official persona doesn't leave room for fear, but that morning he was afraid. A wolf is an almost primal sight. Humphrey ran back to the tent, woke his family, and loaded the rifle. Through an endless morning, the wolf, which was soon joined by its mate, circled the tent while Humphrey shouted and threw rocks, hoping to scare them away. That didn't work. After a while, he gave up and went back into the tent to start his daughters' lessons.

Soon afterward, his wife, who had gone outside, shouted, "Dick! Come! Get
the rifle." Humphrey heard a rustling noise and saw one of the wolves running up a hill. Then he turned around, and saw the other wolf come out from behind a tree. He shot it dead. A moment later, one of his dogs limped up, bleeding; it had been attacked.

Last spring, a year after Humphrey killed the wolf, an organization called the Center for Biological Diversity took out a full-page ad in the New York Times. In a black banner across the top was an adorably photograph of a wolf and the headline "LAST CHANCE FOR SOUTHWEST WOLVES AND WILDERNESS." The ad laid out this story: the United States Bureau of Fish and Wildlife released eleven Mexican gray wolves that had been raised in American zoos. The wolves had been in the Apache Forest for only a few weeks, and now they were being subjected to a "wild wolf massacre," probably conducted by saboteurs leasing out of pickup trucks.

A hundred years ago or so, wolves were arguably the lords of this patch of American territory, and humans the interlopers. Today, it's the wolves that are encroaching on human prerogatives, such as raising cattle, which wolves prey upon. No wonder people like Richard Humphrey regard them as hostile and threatening. Since the Humphrey incident, five more of the reintroduced Mexican gray wolves have been killed: four were shot, and one was run over while crossing a highway. Two more wolves are missing and three have died of a virus; all in all, the wolves are batting .500 on survival. On the other side of the ledger, the wolves have killed three head of cattle, and roused with several others and a few dogs besides Richard Humphrey's.

The Center for Biological Diversity has demanded that Humphrey be prosecuted. Under the boldface heading "PROSECUTE THE KILLERS," its Web site states: "The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has sent a signal that killing wolves is not a serious crime. Humphrey initially reported that he shot the wolf because it attacked his dog. This is not a legally sufficient reason to kill an endangered species." When I talked over the question of campers and wolves with the center's executive director, Kieran Suckling, he told me, "Wilderess doesn't just mean living with bunny rabbits. It means living with dangerous animals."}

The confrontation between Humphrey and the wolf was a small skirmish in a larger conflict that is going on in the Southwest—a war between a group of people who imagine themselves to be living in the movie version of the West, in which men wrestle sustenance from the magnificent but unforgiving land, and a group of people who imagine themselves to be the authentic tribunes of wild nature, restoring mountains and rivers, plants and animals to their rightful, primary position in the order of things.

Kieran Suckling—trickster, philosopher, publicity hound, master strategist, and unapologetic pain in the ass—is the most visible member of the latter group. The Center for Biological Diversity, founded ten years ago, has become the most important radical environmental group in the country and a major force in the fight for the life of Arizona and New Mexico. What's unusual about the center is not so much its agenda, which is shared by the rest of the so-called deep-ecology wing of the environmental movement, as its effectiveness.

In 1995, it persuaded a federal judge to enjoin, for more than a year, all commercial forestry in the United States Forest Service's Region 3 (Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Texas—eleven national forests in all) and in the entire Navajo Indian Nation. The injunction dealt with logging and commercial logging in the Southwest. Eleven sawmills in Arizona and New Mexico, including all but one of the biggest, have been closed since 1992, and Suckling is hardly exaggerating when he says, "We've basically crushed the timber industry."

Suckling and the two other principal figures at the center, Peter Galvin and Robin Silver, say they don't want to eliminate logging—just logging whose goal is to cut down big trees. Their views about ranching—the center's next target—are less subtle. "You cannot ranch economically in the desert without devastating the ecology," Suckling says. The center has won a series of legal victories that have severely restricted cattle grazing. Ranchers have started a whole range of organizations—belligerent, combative ones and kind, genteel ones devoted to "conflict resolution" and ecological awareness—

to protect themselves from the center.

After ranching comes development. The center blocked the construction of a high school in Tucson. It helped force the University of Arizona to scale down severely a state-of-the-art astronomical observatory complex. It is trying to prevent new golf courses from being built in Palm Springs, California, and high-end gated communities in San Diego. It is a prominent member of a coalition of groups whose determined and furious opposition on behalf of several rare-bird species finally caused DreamWorks SKG to abandon plans to build an old-fashioned Hollywood studio complex on one of the last wetlands along the Pacific Ocean in Los Angeles. During the summer, the center won another landmark victory, getting seven hundred and thirty-one thousand acres, including a large portion of the Tucson metropolitan area, put into an environmentally sensitive legal category; as a result, the center will have an easy time challenging almost any building project there grander than a single-family home. And, just last month, a federal judge's ruling effectively stopped the Army Corps of Engineers from granting any sizable development permits in Arizona until it has conducted an elaborate environmental review of streams policy—a review that could take two years to finish.

By now, it isn't just loggers, ranchers, and developers but also many officials in Arizona and New Mexico, and even people in the established, liberal wing of the environmental movement, who don't like the Center for Biological Diversity. Suckling, Galvin, and Silver have been threatened, their offices and homes burgled and vandalized. Once, a government lawyer lost it in a meeting with them and headbutted one of their lawyers.

"They hate the fact that people are coming to the Southwest," says Harold Vangilder, a member of the city council in Sierra Vista, Arizona, and one of the center's many vividly expressive opponents. "They go to the court system because they can't win their agenda with the human race at the voting booth." Bill McDonald, an Arizona rancher whose reputation for environmental sensitivity is large enough to have won him a MacArthur "genius" grant, says, "Kieran Suckling wants to change society, and he believes the environment is the way to do it. When you talk to him about species, his
Our Fair-Flung Correspondents

...the world. Derrida used Heidegger as a jumping-off point and then went much further, into a complicated, playful examination of the ways in which ideas, social structure, and language are used to enshrine power relations. Lots of radical environmentalists use Heidegger's denunciations of the technological outlook and human supremacy as a premise of their beliefs. Suckling realized that, in addition, to add some fun to the conversation, one could conceivably adjust the nature in the way that Derrida conceives of words and their meanings— as existing in an endless relational flux, rather than in any natural order of primacy.

After graduating, Suckling moved to Montana. On the way, while camping out in the Badlands National Park, in South Dakota, he had described to me as an epiphany. "For the first time in my life, I realized that land is not scenery," he said. "Wilderness is an experience. It's not something you can control. It's like grace, like love—it happens to you. There are large animals there like bison and buffalo. They could kill you. You're not going to get help. So it deciphers you. This isn't a stage for humans. It's their stage, too—the plants and animals. I'm part of it. It's humbling, but also very wonderful and exciting. I'm part of something bigger."

Suckling spent a couple of years in Missoula, where he supported himself by working for a caterer and got involved with the radical wing of the environmental movement. He then won a fellowship to the University of California at Irvine to study critical theory—one of the most abstract, daring, and recondite fields in academe, made much fun of by outsiders for its impenetrable dense and jargony mode of discourse, but, for the participants, the humanities' equivalent of quantum physics. For Suckling, the move was a big disaster. The city of Irvine and U.C.-Irvine are the closest thing the United States has to Brasilia, having been constructed on empty ranchland in the mid-sixties, according to a master plan. "I
felt I'd arrived in Descartes-land," Suckling says, and he left after a day and enrolled in the theory program at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. (Yes, Long Island suburbia seems organic compared with Irvine.)

He stayed at Stony Brook for two years and then, in the summer of 1989, headed west again. In his Montana days, Suckling had joined Earth First!, a group that differentiated itself from mainstream environmental organizations by engaging in direct action; its signature activity was getting members to lie down in front of logging crews or to climb trees so that they couldn't be felled. At one such event in northern New Mexico, Suckling was arrested and spent the night in jail.

During that protest, he met and fell in love with a woman who introduced him to Peter Galvin, a young man his age from Massachusetts who had moved out West to become an environmental activist. They got summer jobs together counting spotted owls in the Gila National Forest, under contract to the United States Forest Service, and set up an encampment on an eighty-acre tract of land outside Reserve, the biggest town in Catron County, New Mexico, on the Arizona border. Catron County is bigger than Connecticut and Rhode Island put together, but fewer than three thousand people live there. It is high, dry country, with peaks above ten thousand feet. Up in the mountains, there are trees, which get larger and lusher as you rise in altitude, but the valleys are wide, scrubby, and dry, and that means that the eye commands great, unimpeded vistas. It's a blank-canvas landscape that gives rise to a certain "Mine, all mine!" feeling, an urge to control land and turn it to your purposes.

Suckling lived in a tepee, Galvin in a cabin nearby, and a constantly changing cast of friends, allies, and lovers moved in and out of the compound. Galvin started an organization called Friends of the Owls, and through that he met Robin Silver, a doctor who worked twelve-hour shifts in an emergency room in Phoenix, and in his off hours went up into the mountains to take nature photographs.

Having formed a loose cadre, the three gave themselves a name—the Greater Gila Biodiversity Project—and began to gnaw their way toward their tactical breakthrough. Robin Silver's photographs and Galvin and Suckling's nocturnal counts, with other evidence, could be used to make a case that some parts of the Gila National Forest were the habitat of rare species, such as the Mexican spotted owl, the Northern goshawk, and the Southwestern willow flycatcher. As Earth Firsters, Suckling and Galvin had been trained to stop logging by direct action, but one day a friend told Silver, as he remembers it, "We're crazy to sit in trees when there's this incredible law where we can make people do whatever we want."

The "incredible law" is the Endangered Species Act, passed in 1973, at the high-water mark of the environmental movement. Anybody who has evidence that a species is imperilled in a particular habitat—not in danger of total extinction, just in danger in that one place—has the right to petition the Fish and Wildlife Service to declare the species to be endangered. Plants are covered, too. Fish and Wildlife is legally obligated to research every petition it gets. Even if the organization decides not to declare a species in danger, the decision can be challenged in court and overturned. And with every endangered-species designation comes a designation of "critical habitat." (An oddity of the law is that an area can be designated critical habitat for a species even if there are no members of the species living there.) The desert Southwest, because it's so empty, has an enormous diversity of species, and, because it's so dry, species are precarious and need a lot of room to survive.

Suckling, Galvin, and Silver realized that it would be possible to obtain endangered-species designations for dozens of species, whose critical habitat, if put together, would represent a significant portion of the Southwest.

The center's ideas about the moral superiority of untouched nature to human civilization seem commonplace, but they're actually rather new. According to the standard history of the subject, "Wilderness and the American Mind," by Roderick Nash, nature in its unadulterated form was regarded by humans as frightening, and even evil, up to the mid-eighteenth century. Since then, the celebration of
wild nature has had a direct line of descent. Nash says that Henry David Thoreau was the first American thinker to embrace wilderness wholeheartedly. Thoreau lived at Walden Pond on land owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson later travelled to Yosemite and met John Muir, the essential early advocate of wilderness in the West. Muir was a friend and, later, a combatant of Gifford Pinchot, the first head of the Forest Service. Pinchot was a friend and, later, a combatant of Aldo Leopold, the apostate forester who helped found the Wilderness Society. One of the world’s first designated wilderness areas, created in 1924, in Catron County, was named after Aldo Leopold.

The current system of government control over the West was set up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A few scenic areas were set aside as national parks, and a series of new federal agencies regulated and managed the land that was being worked for profit: the Forest Service (logging and rangeland), the Bureau of Land Management (mining and rangeland), and Fish and Wildlife (commercial fishing).

The wilderness idea is profoundly different, because it holds that very large tracts of land should be set aside in an untouched condition, with all commercial activity and all but the hardiest tourists banned. (National wilderness areas, by law, can have no roads.) A further step down the wilderness path is the ideal of biodiversity, in which humans foreswear their dominance over the land and over other species. Aldo Leopold’s career as a wilderness advocate began with a scene that was a mirror image of the one between Richard Humphrey and the wolf: Leopold, in his youth, encountered a wolf in the Arizona mountains and shot it as a matter of course, but then, “seeing the green fire die” in its eyes, he experienced an overwhelming pang of regret. Afterward, he adopted what he called a “land ethic,” which “changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.” This isn’t different in kind from Kierán Suckling’s deconstructionist idea of a West in which there would be “a decentering and disempowering of the human”—though Suckling’s vision of wilderness as the site for a wondrous interplaying of species, languages, meanings, and myths is more theoretically elaborate than Leopold’s. Here, for exam-
need to please loggers and ranchers—in other words, it’s the enemy.

The Forest Service, in turn, dislikes the center in a mystified, tight-lipped way. Bob Leaverton, a district ranger, described to me one of many failed attempts to placate Peter Galvin during the many years of their confrontations about logging permits: “I’d walk up to a specific tree and say, ‘Peter, this tree’s diseased. Why not cut it down and make a two-by-four so somebody can build a house in Phoenix?’ And he says, ‘No. Can’t do it. There’s still mistletoe in it. Mistletoe is part of the ecosystem.’”

In 1993, when the center finally succeeded in getting the spotted owl listed as an endangered species, Suckling and Galvin were catapulted into public-enemy status in Catron County. Among the places most affected was the county seat, Reserve, home to a sawmill, one bar, two cafés, and two motels. The sawmill, which was close to the tepee where Kieran Suckling was living, shut down, and Reserve lost jobs and revenue. The townspeople turned against the environmentalists. In their midst, there were threats and stormy, cold looks on the street. Tires were slashed. Phone lines were cut. Sometimes Suckling would make the long walk out from his tepee to the road where his car was parked and find that somebody had defecated on it. Once, a makeshift wanted poster appeared in the Catron County courthouse, featuring Suckling’s and Galvin’s photographs with crosshairs superimposed on them.

They decided to move out of town. A sympathetic ranch owner outside Luna, New Mexico, a nearby town, agreed to rent them a little ramshackle complex of buildings at the end of a seventeen-mile dirt road. After a year, during which Suckling and Galvin filed their myriad petitions from a place with no electricity and a solar-powered fax machine, their landlord came to them and said, “Boys, I’m going to have to ask you to leave”—they guessed it was because he was getting too many complaints from the neighbors about harboring them. In 1993, the center relocated its headquarters to Silver City, New Mexico, a medium-sized town just outside the Gila National Forest, and in 1995 it moved again, to Tucson, a place from which managing a sizable operation is feasible.

Since the center is endeavoring to undo the dominion of man over animals and plants, it’s appropriate that, after its move to Tucson, it began to turn its attention from forests to water—the opposite of the order in which God proceeded. First, it got such water-proximate species as the Southerwestern willow flycatcher, the Huachuca water umbel (a small grassy plant related to parsley), and the loach minnow placed on the endangered list. Then it went after cattle grazing. If the Southwest’s riparian areas—wide floodplains through which usually tiny streams flow—are declared to be critical habitat for endangered species, they can be fenced off from cattle. This would have a devastating effect on ranchers, because their herds, roaming over vast areas of desert, drink from the streams. If the cattle can’t get into those areas, they can’t drink, and that means that owning grazing permits to all the land surrounding the streams does the ranchers no good.

As much as ranchers need water, they need very little compared with cities and towns, which in the Southwest depend completely on dams and the tapping of underground aquifers. In the environs of Tucson, the center has won endangered-species designation for the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl, a bird with a large population in Mexico but a tiny one—perhaps forty birds—in southern Arizona. When the center was able to prevent the construction of the new suburban high school in Tucson by hoisting the pygmy-owl banner, Harold Van-gilder, the city-council member from Sierra Vista, said, “They shut down a high school to save a pygmy owl nobody’d ever seen.” In the future, because any substantial building activity in Tucson requires a federal water permit, the center could plausibly swoop in and try to stop a project by arguing that the permit would threaten the pygmy owl.

Fifty miles away, in Sierra Vista, the center is waging its most intense fight of the moment, again over water—in this case, the San Pedro River. Sierra Vista, just north of the Mexican border, sits surrounded by mountains, on a high table of land so broad, flat, and pale that everything there that was built by people looks from a distance like confetti scattered across the dun-colored ground.

You could live in Sierra Vista without realizing that there is a San Pedro River. It meanders, small and green, through the desert ten miles to the east of the town, a creek such as you might find running through somebody’s back yard in the East. To the center, however, it is maximally important, because it is the
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only remaining undammed, free-flowing major river in the Southwest. One morning, I met a woman, Sandy Anderson, who belongs to the center’s informal gang of compadres. She took me to the river, and at one point in our walk she stopped and delivered a short speech: “When I stand on the bank of this river, I feel an overwhelming sadness, which quickly turns to anger, at anyone who wouldn’t say we’ve got to save this river at all costs. It’s a national and international treasure, as important as Yosemite and Yellowstone, the Eiffel Tower, or any of these things.”

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LTHOUGH the center group has settled down, comparatively speaking, Robin Silver’s suburban-style ranch house, in central Phoenix, feels like a center command post where he happens to nest. Silver’s room looks like a sleepable sliver of bed surrounded by camping equipment. Interns and other friends of the center are constantly in and out. There is a surprisingly complex security system. Silver, explaining why he never married, waved his hand helplessly in a way that connoted the gestalt of the house and said, “I can’t blame some of these women—it just gets too intense.”

Kieran Suckling, though, is married and a homeowner, and he has gone from subsistence wages to a salary of thirty thousand dollars a year. The center has begun attracting funding from foundations, such as the Patagonia Inc. Foundation, the Rockefeller Family Fund, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and Ted Turner and Jane Fonda’s philanthropic operation. (Turner owns one percent of the state of New Mexico.) There are new branch offices in San Diego and Berkeley, and many new activities. The center is trying to get a hundred new endangered-species designations in California alone. It is at the peak of its influence, which can be a perilously exposed position.

The obvious irony about the center is that the means to its desired end of a de
technologized society require the most complicated, technical, top-down procedures imaginable: scientific studies of species and habitat, legal petitions, court orders. Suckling cheerfully admits that he’s “using one side of industrial society against itself,” but only temporarily; in the long run, he says, there would be a new order in which plants and animals are part of the polity. For example, legal proceedings could be conducted outdoors—in which case “the trees will make themselves felt.”

Another possibility, though, is that the center’s use of the techniques of power in modern society is appropriate, because, rather than being mere representatives of nature, Suckling and the others are actually higher-order creatures engaged in a power struggle with other higher-order creatures over who gets to control the Southwest. If you deconstructed the center’s activities, you might conclude that it is part of the entirely human ecology of a region where it isn’t possible for people not to be in charge. The human ecology of the Southwest has got out of balance, because the Center for Biological Diversity has been spectacularly good at amassing disproportionate power for itself. In the end, perhaps, other humans will figure out how to reduce the center’s power.

In May, Senator Pete Domenici, of New Mexico, proposed federal legislation that would surgically deprive the center of its main tactic by making the designation of critical habitat a separate process from the designation of endangered species. If this bill passes, winning an endangered-species designation would no longer bring it with it an automatic gift of territory. The old-line environmental groups have been warning Suckling for years that he was going to overplay his hand and get the Endangered Species Act watered down, and now it looks as though they may have been right.

Even if Domenici’s bill becomes law, the center will still have made an enormous difference. The Southwest, and the agencies that control so much of it, have moved in the center’s direction. People who want to use the land to make money have less influence; people who want to preserve it as an aesthetic treasure have more influence. Precisely by being so self-righteous and impossible, the center has been an important part of the change. This isn’t the same thing as ushering in an era of biodiversity, though. Another metaphor, more appropriate to the history of the region, captures better what Kieran Suckling and his mates have done. They’re outlaws. Outlaws cause trouble, alter the established order, and make authority figures angry. And, in the end, they get dealt with.