
U.S. activists stop Burger King from importing rainforest beef, 1984-1987

- [included innovative organizational forms/communication forms](#) [1]

Timing

April

1984

to:

May

1987

Location and Goals

Country:

United States

Location Description:

Similar actions occurred across the country in support of a nationwide boycott

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

Environmentalists sought to end Burger King's contracts with beef providers in the Central American Amazon rainforest.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches>speaking tour

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support>Rally
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches>speaking tour
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

Segment Length:

4 months

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Environment

Group characterization:

- Radical environmentalists
- consumers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Mike Roselle, John Seed, Randall Hayes, Rainforest Action Network

Partners:

Herb Chao Gunther, Public Media Center, People of the Earth, Gary Snyder

External allies:

Earth First!, Friends of the Earth, International Indian Treaty Council, Greenpeace

Involvement of social elites:

Pillsbury CEO J. Jeffrey Campbell announces Burger King will use only domestic cattle

Hayes convenes reputable environmental activists and researchers from multiple continents to discuss how to end deforestation.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Radical environmentalists

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Consumers

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Large environmental groups

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:

4 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Burger King

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

No known violence

Repressive Violence:

No known violence

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

10 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

While Burger King agreed to stop importing beef from Central American rain forests, widespread deforestation--what RAN and allies hoped to address--still continued.

The 1980s saw a new consciousness of environmental awareness, particularly around the Earth's rain forests. Scientists had discovered that, aside from their enormous biodiversity, rainforests also helped to keep carbon from being released into the atmosphere.

Industrial forces, however, saw the rainforests as a means for profit. While environmental groups in Europe and Australia had been actively fighting deforestation on a grassroots level, the U.S. environmental movements had failed to evoke widespread activism on the subject.

On a 1984 cross-country Earth First! "Rainforest Road Show," John Seed convinced fellow EF! member and tour mate Mike Roselle to begin further publicizing deforestation in Central America due to corporate interests. Prior to becoming involved with EF!, Seed had founded the Rainforest Information Centre, which brought together scientists, politicians and other public figures to speak out against worldwide deforestation.

Seed, Roselle and another tour member, poet Gary Snyder, pinpointed Burger King, the world's second-largest fast food corporation, as one of the worst offenders, and a strategic target given the company's widespread presence. Burger King and a number of other corporations were importing rainforest beef, which relied on Amazon deforestation to clear enough space to raise enough cattle for low-cost hamburgers popular with consumers in the U.S.

Roselle added a "Hamburger Connection" component to the road shows, and passed out sign-up sheets for people—consumers—to become active in anti-deforestation work in their own communities. These sign-ups resulted in the formation of local Rainforest Action Groups.

Drawing inspiration from Friends of the Earth in Holland, Roselle and Seed organized a rally and guerrilla theater demonstration outside of a San Francisco Burger King franchise in which two activists dressed in cow suits ate rainforest tree leaves and defecated the likeness of Whoppers, either cardboard containers or Styrofoam hamburgers.

In 1985, Roselle and EF! member and documentarian Randall Hayes met with Herb Chao Gunther of the Public Media Center, a media firm that ran publicity and raised money for non-profit organizations and their campaigns. Out of 30 or so local chapters, Roselle formed the Rainforest Action Network, (RAN). The Public Media Center, which had previously helped organized a successful boycott of Nestle, set up press conferences and worked with RAN's national boycott of Rainforest Beef with a focus on Burger King.

Word of the boycott began to spread, and people across the country, including people not affiliated with the Rainforest Action Network, began to stage demonstrations outside of their local Burger Kings. The Rainforest Action Network (RAN) also organized a letter-writing campaign using mailing lists purchased from other environmental organizations. Angry consumers began sending financial support to RAN's campaign and postcards to Burger King's corporate headquarters demanding an end to the use of Rainforest Beef.

As the Burger King boycott and campaign continued, Randall Hayes, now president of RAN, brought notable activists from a number of continents to Marin County, California to discuss the big picture of rainforest deforestation and formulate a strategy to stop it, with particular regard to the United States. The group came up with a three-part plan. The first was to pressure the World Bank to stop funding projects that contributed to deforestation. That part of the plan would be led by Friends of the Earth. Secondly, Greenpeace would work to reduce tropical wood imports to the United States. The third part of the plan was to end the importation of rainforest beef, a campaign already being led by RAN and its allies.

Working at various points with groups such as People of the Earth, an indigenous environmental support network, and Friends of the Earth, RAGs, campaigners increased demonstrations similar to the earlier San Francisco action. These actions culminated in the May of 1986, when RAN proposed “Whopper-Stopper Month,” which coincided with another Rainforest Road Show.

By the end of May, the company’s sales had declined by 11% (12% in some reports) due, by Roselle’s own admission, to a combination of unrelated internal issues at Burger King as well as to the boycott.

After a large rally and similar guerrilla theater demonstration outside of the board of directors meeting in Minneapolis of Burger King’s parent company (Pillsbury’s), the campaigners won a victory. The company announced it would use only U.S. domestic cattle, cancelling a \$35 million contract with Costa Rican beef suppliers.

The victory had a large impact on Costa Rica, which sold 60% of its beef to Burger King. In response to the announcement, the Costa Rican government contacted RAN and asked Roselle to attend a symposium in the country to discuss the implementation of a Costa Rican law that included most if not all of RAN’s and its allies’ demands. The guest list included President Oscar Arias, Minister of Agriculture and future president Jose Maria Figueres, as well as other dignitaries, executives and the vice president of Burger King.

The success with Burger King encouraged RAN to boycott other fast-food chains, eventually convincing them to pursue similar policies with regards to their rainforest imports. Because rainforest destruction and cattle ranching remain major social, ecological, political and economic challenges, RAN and its allies went on to support an ongoing grassroots response to deforestation.

Research Notes

Influences:

RAN's use of creative tactics would influence both later actions for the organization and others (i.e, Earth First!) on a variety of causes. See Australian Rainforest Action Groups boycott Malaysian rainforest timber, 1988-1994 and Julia Butterfly Hill defends California redwoods, 1999. (2)

Also, the campaign and RAN's formation began a grassroots environmental movement that placed strong emphasis on the economic implications of the extractive industry. See U.S. student Tim DeChristopher disrupts government auction of oil lands, 2008. (2)

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Additional Notes:

Earth First! and RAN began a wave of direct action campaigns in the United States around environmental issues that continue to this day, and that seek to situate environmental concerns within and beside those of social, economic and political justice, rather than simply in terms of conservation.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Kate Aronoff, 18/9/2011

[Back to top](#)

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