

The Obedient Limbs of YSEC

Yale's Powerful Environmental Movement

Neomi Rao

From advocacy of tree-spiking to teaching New Haven kids how to plant flowers in the spring, environmentalism at Yale encompasses a whole spectrum of opinion and degrees of activism. The Yale Student Environmental Center (YSEC) forms a network of more than fifteen environmental groups that make use of the Center's laserprinter, fax machine and copier. According to YSEC Public Relations director Peter Colavito (SM'93), "We formed a coalition to work together more effectively, and pool our resources and ideas."

The result of this coalition is the creation of a widely-accepted environmental orthodoxy preached from somewhere in the basement of Pierson where YSEC is headquartered. Discussions and publications downplay the scientific doubt in many environmental claims. Preferring to err on the side of perceived safety, the organizations collectively espouse an often extreme brand of environmentalism, untempered by doubt. The greater the sensation, the greater the reaction from previously uninvolved students. Colavito affirmed, "We are an advocacy organization. . . our job is to present our side of the facts."

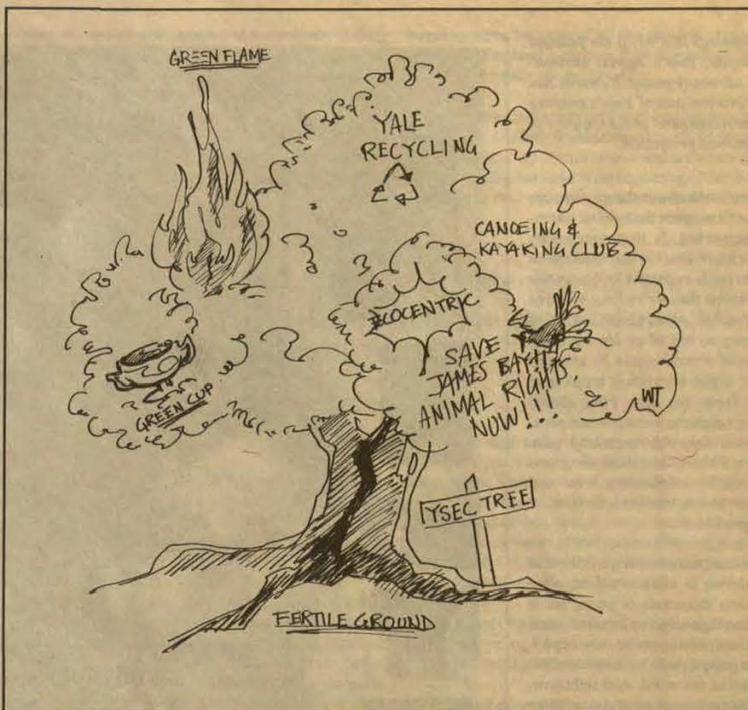
The danger occurs, however, when these environmentalists make decisions for their listeners and readers. Often the full facts are not presented, and widely disputed environmental claims are simply given as truth. This one-sided interpretation of the facts leads to a indisputable brand of environmentalist thought that remains unquestioned on campus. Peter Braasch, chairman of YSEC, denies any environmentalist orthodoxy, saying, "Sure, there is some consistency between groups, but it's not really an orthodoxy."

Yet a review of Yale's environmental literature fails to reflect a diversity of views. The three major environmental bogeymen, the greenhouse effect, the depleting ozone layer, and the dangers of acid rain, are all cited in the Green Cup manual though all three theories have come under serious scientific attack (see article, page 10). Both the Green Cup manual, however, and publications like *Ecocentric* accept issues such as global warming as truth with no reference to the prevailing scientific doubts. *Ecocentric*, a quarterly magazine affiliated with the *Yale Herald*, has also failed to include arguments for free-market environmentalism despite the growing acceptance of this form of environmentalism in government policies.

Marjorie Dial, editor-in-chief of *Ecocentric*, admits that her magazine operates as an opinionated advocate. "We are part of advocacy journalism, but we strive to promote a dialogue. . . we don't want people to feel on the margins of environmentalism, because it involves everyone," Dial said. Currently the magazine is examining the environmental positions of presidential candidates, so that students may ostensibly vote with greater consciousness. Dial stresses the importance of shaping the opinions of students on environmental issues: "In the closed environment of the university, students can really get a handle on the issues. It's important to realize the hazards to the environment, because eventually we will be in prominent positions, be able to affect other people by our decisions."

Not all YSEC organizations work to shape student beliefs on the environment. Though not nearly as prominent on campus as *Ecocentric* and Save James Bay, some YSEC organizations provide a refreshing grass roots environmentalism. Fertile Ground was founded last semester by Caitlin DeSilvey and Jen Fong to teach third graders at the Vincent Mauro school about the environment. Twice a week Fertile Ground members take the children on field trips to plant flowers and plants.

Fong, dissatisfied with mainstream environmentalism at Yale, prefers the down-to-earth character of Fertile Ground, "I have a lot of problems with the environmental movement here, because it seems like a lot of talk and not much action. I like Fertile Ground



because it is something tangible and result-oriented."

The most prominent and publicized environmental project of the past two years has been the Green Cup campaign. The idea originated in YSEC and has since been turned over to the university, which pays conservation committee coordinators in each college. Planners of the Green Cup hope that by providing economic efficiency for the university and intra-college rivalry for the students, the Green Cup will establish environmental awareness as a permanent part of the institutional framework. Other efforts to institutionalize environmentalism include proposals to make environmental education mandatory through freshman counselors. "It would make these programs part of every student's introduction to Yale, so that in several years it [environmentalism] will be an accepted fact on campus," proposed Dial.

The challenge so far has been to build genuine support for the project. Fong, who was also recycling coordinator for Pierson last year, observed, "You really need people to care. All the publicity thrown in their faces won't do any good unless they really want to do something about the environmental problems around them." While the Green Cup has attempted to reach the greatest number of students through the residential colleges, the true test of student involvement will come after several months of competition, when conservation figures can be accurately tallied, showing the amount of absolute dollar savings to the university from the venture. Even if the Green Cup saves money, however, measuring the educational effects of a program that has reduced environmentalism to intramural rivalry will be difficult.

In the short term, YSEC has planned an extensive Earth "Week" agenda, one that organizers hope will compare to the 1990 Earth Day extravaganza that brought 10,000 people to its celebration. Music will be prominently featured during the week's events including a concert with folk-singer Richie Havens and an Old Campus Earth Jam with Yale student bands. Additional Earth Week activities include (barring rain) an Old Campus "Underneath the Stars" sleep-out and various camping trips to Sleeping Giant.

Conveniently, the last day of Earth Week will

coincide with Commiversity Day, the traditional celebration of Yale-New Haven relations. YSEC hopes to integrate the New Haven community into its environmental education campaign. Braasch emphasizes, "We have to start with the environment as New Haven. It is an ecosystem in itself."

Stretching the scope of Earth Week to its limit, YSEC has also made efforts to link its environmental movement to alleviating poverty, teaming up with the Yale Hunger and Homelessness Action Project to conduct a clothing drive.

After an overwhelmingly successful Earth Week in 1990, YSEC suffered some difficult transitions. The Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC), a national organization, rose to prominence on campus and created a great deal of doubt and instability within the other groups. Including groups as disparate as the sports-oriented Canoeing/Kayaking Club and the radical Save James Bay Student Network, YSEC's diversity threatened the coalition's existence.

According to Braasch, the coalition could have disappeared in December, 1991 had YSEC not redefined their purposes and procedures. The elimination of SEAC from the campus, accompanied by new leadership and the establishment of an office in the basement of Pierson gave the center a new impetus. They are currently rebuilding their forces and Braasch feels that "Earth Week will be the real litmus test."

The determination and hard-work of members of Yale's environmental movement has paid off. YSEC has created a permanent, powerful, and respected presence at Yale. Its impressive organizational strength is matched by few student groups at Yale. Unfortunately, like environmentalism outside of Yale, YSEC and its member groups have promoted a dangerous orthodoxy that includes the unquestioning acceptance of controversial theories like the greenhouse effect. With their powerful network and growing influence, YSEC's subtle promulgation of this orthodoxy deserves careful review.

—Neomi Rao, a freshman in Silliman College, is publisher of the Yale Free Press.