

## **GREEN DREAMS**

### **The Wobbly Year: Wisconsin's Wolf River**

*Text by Paul Buble*

*Cartoon by Sue Simensky Bietila*

#### **Sue Simensky Bietila as Eco-Artist: An Introduction**

Eco-art has a long history, right back to the cave-drawings. Even in the short history of the U.S. with its paucity of interesting work until the radical Ash Can School of the 1910s, Shaker artists captured a sense of wholeness absent from (white) society, and 19<sup>th</sup> century Luminists brilliantly portrayed a supernatural Naturalism without clumsy theological reference. Joseph Keppler, a popular magazine illustrator, offered as early as the 1880s in the satirical *Puck* what may be described as the earliest vernacular drawing aimed at halting the destruction of forests and wildlife.

The underground comix of the 1970s, before an early economic crash, went steps further with *Last Gasp Eco-Funnies*, and Leonard Rifas' *EduComics* continued to publish eco-comics by himself and others. Recently—thanks in large part to the boom of the graphic novela—a new generation of eco-comics is much in evidence.

Sue Simensky Bietila is herself a political veteran. Growing up in Brooklyn in the 1950s and 60s and attending Brooklyn College, she joined Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and was a leader of the free speech fights and anti-draft/anti-war activities of the middle 1960s there. As she honed her new political skills, she rejected the Abstract Expressionist's ideology and joined her political ideas to her art, striving to find outlets for artwork in the emerging political movements. She drew for the *National Guardian* as it took up the task of flaying the Empire, and for the *RAT*, its New Left/Feminist underground counterpart. Over the years, Simensky Bietila has drawn for and organized many art-political projects, including "Drawing Resistance," a traveling show that she co-curated, and *WOBBLIES! A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (both a book and a show). Like so many other radical artists of several generations, she has found in the periodical "*World War 3-Illustrated*," a center for artistic and political activity.

Simensky Bietila's drawn history of the struggle against sulfide mining in Wisconsin reflects her deep sense of place, having moved to Wisconsin 20 years ago. "I joined the coalition against the mine in Crandon when it was already a powerful movement. The core activists involved came from environmental groups, Native American tribes, the tourism industry, hunting and fishing associations, anti-racist movements and even the entire local township governments. They were pitted directly against the most powerful international mining corporations, and these corporations recognized this movement as a serious threat. This movement was doing things right, and I wanted to be part of it. There was a potential here for me to further explore the power of artwork to help make this diverse grassroots movement get its story out.

“I created a traveling installation of ‘tombstones’ inscribed with the dates and locations of rivers worldwide poisoned by mining waste. These were set up all over Wisconsin wherever anti-mining activity was happening. I did posters and banners and silkscreened placards with an image of a live trout on one side and fish bones on the other, visually representing the impact of sulfide mining on the waters. The Wolf River Story’s graphic history format was inspired by the artwork of my friends at *World War 3-Illustrated* magazine.”