

Radical Environmentalism & Eco-Terrorism

Direct Action, Backlash, and Change

Colin Kroll

Thesis Advisors: Dr. Joseph Storlien & Dr. Corrie Gross

Abstract

Radical environmentalism, or eco-terrorism, is a movement often regarded with a sense of fear, yet is historically known to inspire positive environmental change. Through direct action such as monkeywrenching, tree-sitting, protesting, and more, organizations such as Greenpeace, Earth First!, and Animal Liberation Front strive to counter environmental threats and environmentally damaging conflicts. However, although these actions often offer answers unattainable through traditional means, they have also landed these groups on the FBI's domestic terrorism list. Through case studies comparing member interviews and the rhetoric utilized by these organizations against court cases and the rhetoric used within news and government publications, this study strives to understand how radical environmentalism has influenced the current environmental movement today.

Introduction

The radical environmental movement is one rooted in disdain of slow reform and disenchantment with the systems of government currently in control. Through bringing the public's awareness to issues, groups such as Greenpeace, Earth First!, and the Earth Liberation Front have forced positive changes. Yet, although there are positive benefits, the actions of these groups have also had a negative effect on environmentalists today. Positively, they have allowed for a community to form around environmentally minded people, and are a structure for individuals to align with. Yet, the actions of these groups, which have led to the term eco-terrorism within the United States, poses several negative influences such as a polarization of the environmental movement, an opposition to environmental organizations, adverse views of members within these groups, and a wary disdain for environmentalists overall.

ELF member gesturing towards BP sign



Earth First!er hanging sign to protest logging



Results

Below are examples of the rhetoric utilized by these organizations while portraying themselves, versus the rhetoric seen within the media and government when discussing these organizations and their actions.

GREENPEACE

Organization

- "Bear Witness"
- "Expose Threats"
- "Find Solutions"
- "Greenpeace has indeed changed the world"
- "Challenges the systems of power and privilege"

Media & Government

- "Activists arrested after hanging 'Resist' banner"
- "Taking a stand"
- "Risking not only their own safety, but also the safety of [others]"
- "Dodge government oversight"



Organization

- "Wilderness has a right to exist for its own sake"
- "All human decisions should consider Earth First, humans second"
- "Not afraid to say what needs to be said"

Media & Government

- "Truth is still elusive"
- "Large shadow of controversy over... environmentalists in general"
- "Group of protestors had chained themselves together"
- "Extreme Treehuggers"



Organization

- "Defend and protect the Earth for future generations by means of direct action"
- "*Primum non nocere*... 'first do no harm'"
- "Total disregard and impunity to humans and the environment"

Media & Government

- "From tree-hugger to terrorist"
- "Serious terrorist threat"
- "Same threat category as assassins, airline hijackers, and international; mass murderers"
- "Threatened lives & caused over \$100 million in damages"

Analysis

This analysis found an innate bias ingrained into the rhetoric, personal accounts, and journals of Greenpeace, Earth First!, and the Earth Liberation Front. These organizations are aware their radical actions are aggressive and potentially harmful to businesses and individual goods, yet these actions are often utilized for the "greater good." This conflicts with the bias against these organizations found within news articles, court cases, and government publications. The media and government view these organizations as radicals who are fighting for what they believe in, but are doing it in a negative way.

Copyright: Steve Morgan. Greenpeace Arctic Oil Protests



Conclusion

Often presented by the news and government as figures who create damage and fear in order to inspire an environmentally beneficial shift, Greenpeace, Earth First!, and the Earth Liberation Front give the environmental movement a negative perspective in the eye of the general public. As many people are uneducated of the reasoning, influences, and motives behind the actions of these groups, they often perceive them as radicals who do not understand how the world works. Yet, this is inherently untrue. As this bias has spread to the environmental movement as a whole, it negatively impacts how future environmental progress is obtained, and plays a role in hindering environmental growth. I argue for a more accurate portrayal of these groups by the media and news, and for a less violent, yet still radical, shift within these organizations to decrease fear and disdain, yet continually acquire awareness and change.

Resources

- archives.fbi.gov/archives/news/testimony/the-threat-of-eco-terrorism
- Devall, Bill. 1991. "Deep Ecology and Radical Environmentalism." *Society and Natural Resources* 4 (3): 247-258.
- www.earth-liberation-front.com
- www.earthfirst.org/about.htm
- www.greenpeace.org/usa/about