

Eco-Terrorism: Is it totally unethical?

Introduction

Eco-terrorism has proven to be a pressing issue for countries around the globe, particularly in western nations such as the United States. The FBI maintains that eco-terrorism is the top priority amongst domestic terror threats, and radical eco-terrorist groups such as the ALF(Animal Liberation Front) and ELF (Earth Liberation Front) are subtly wreaking havoc. Arson, bombings, vandalism, and harassment have cost the United States millions of dollars in damage, all done with the intent to preserve the environment and protect the health of animals¹. Although Islamic terrorism has captured most of the media attention, **eco-terrorism remains a legitimate issue**. Conflict has arisen in the sentencings of convicted eco-terrorists. **Socially, perspectives tend to vary drastically towards one end of the spectrum**. **Governmental officials carry the belief that eco-terrorists deserve severe sentencings, in correlation with the severity of the crime. Others take the stance that the motives behind their actions are just, and in the name of protection of the Earth and its animals, even though their crimes are unlawful**. Therefore they believe the offenders should receive less of a sentence². Although clearly unlawful, are the actions of these eco-terrorists unethical? Especially because they're doing it in the name of the Earth?

ALF and ELF Perspective

¹ "Ecoterrorism:Extremism in the Animal Rights and Environmentalist Movements," Anti-Defamation League(ADL), http://archive.adl.org/learn/ext_us/ecoterrorism.html#GreenAnarchy.

² Katu.com Staff, "Woman Sentenced to Five Years for Ecoterrorism Fires," Katu.com, last modified January 27, 2014, accessed January 26, 2015, <http://www.katu.com/news/local/Woman-sentenced-to-5-years-for-ecoterrorism-fires-242314191.html>.

Radical groups such as the ALF and the ELF view their crimes as means to help save the Earth and its inhabitants. They feel that humans are perpetrating a war on nature, and as the defenders of nature, they feel that they have the right to fight back. Organizations such as these, however, often do not stop at simply the release or rescue of cats and dogs. Activity amongst these groups was at its peak in the late 1990's to early 2000's, and since then, countless attacks of arson, vandalism, and even bombings have been reported. In many cases they then attack the professors, corporations, or research facilities involved, in an effort to also inflict economic damage as well as physical destruction of property. These attacks are referred to by the FBI as "economic sabotage"³, and, per the Animal Liberation Front website, the goal is to cause, "financial loss to animal exploiters, usually through the damage and destruction of property."⁴

The ELF is a leading eco-terrorist group known for their protests in the fields of agricultural production of GMOs, pollution, and energy. The ELF is notorious for violent, organized attacks, often leading to massive amounts of damages. Bron Taylor, a nature and religion professor at the University of Florida explains: "Generally speaking, the Earth Liberation folks are motivated by a deep kind of affective connection to nature that many of them would characterize as spiritual or religious. They believe that the human species is perpetrating a war on nature and that those who are connected to nature and belong to it have a right to defend themselves."⁵ On New Years Eve of 1999, activists attacked Michigan State University's Agricultural Hall, causing nearly \$1 million in damages. The ELF claimed responsibility for the attack, and stated that it was in response to Michigan State's involvement in

³ Miller and Byrne, "Domestic Eco-terrorism Has Deep," Forbes.

⁴ Animal Liberation Front.com, accessed January 25, 2015, http://www.animalliberationfront.com/ALFront/mission_statement.htm.

⁵ "FBI: Eco-Terrorism Remains No. 1 Domestic," Fox News.

attempting to force developing Eastern countries to change from naturally harvested plants to genetically modified corn, pineapples, sweet potatoes, and bananas⁶. As of late, there has been a resurgence in calculated attacks on specific organizations over the issue of GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms). In June of 2013, unidentified eco-terrorists ravaged two different Oregon research field trials of genetically modified sugar beets, with the hope that they would become immune to the herbicide glyphosate⁷. Although to some it may be severe, the ELF see these drastic courses of action as more than necessary if they are protect the Earth from those waging war against it.

The ALF has been a prominent group in eco-terrorism since its beginning. Socially, they feel it is their responsibility to fight back against the inhumane care and slaughter of domestic farm animals. Their mission statement speaks on their distaste for the treatment of animals as the “property” of humans, and is as follows: “To effectively allocate resources (time and money) to end the ‘property’ status of nonhuman animals.”⁸ In July of 2013, animal-rights activists vandalized a family owned, San Diego based fur retail store, and damaged the homes of the store-owners⁹. The attackers painted over slogans, and the inside of the store was sprayed with acid, and the Animal Liberation Front eventually claimed responsibility for the attack. As shown by their mission statement, it is evident that the ALF feels as though they have a social responsibility to help animals in need, and to prevent others from treating them as their own personal “property”.

⁶ Henry I. Miller and Jay Byrne, "Domestic Eco-terrorism Has Deep Pockets. And Many Enablers," Forbes, accessed January 22, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/henrymiller/2013/07/10/domestic-eco-terrorism-has-deep-pockets-and-many-enablers/>.

⁷ Miller and Byrne, "Domestic Eco-terrorism Has Deep," Forbes.

⁸ Animal Liberation Front.com.

⁹ Mike Freeman and Teri Figueroa, "Animal Liberation Front Attacks Fur Buisness," U-T San Diego, last modified July 22, 2013, accessed February 19, 2015, <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2013/jul/21/Animal-rights-vandalism-attack-homes/>.

Government's Perspective

From the government's perspective, violent crimes committed by eco-terror groups are severe, and unethical, no matter what the motive is. While some may be reluctant to refer to radical environmentalists such as the ALF and ELF as "terrorists", most government officials see no issues in using the term, considering many of the ELF and ALF's attacks are violent in nature. Despite their interest in preserving the Earth, FBI, law enforcement officials, and many political leaders argue that arson, bombings and vandalism are not valid methods of conveying a message. Politically, government officials are unafraid to show their opposition towards extreme methods of exposing cruelty towards animals or pollution of the Earth. In March of 2012, Iowa Governor Branstad approved a bill that, "could result in penalties on animal rights activists who pose as employees or attempt to get inside agricultural production facilities in other ways to expose possible animal cruelty," according to Kay Henderson of Reuters.com¹⁰. Despite loud protests from PETA(People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), and the bill being dubbed "Ag Gag" by protesters, Branstad stayed firm on his stance: "If somebody comes on somebody else's property through fraud or deception or lying, that is a serious violation of people's rights and people should be held accountable for that."¹¹ Governor Branstad makes it clear that although the owners of farms may be exercising cruelty towards their animals, the prevailing crime is the fraud and intrusion committed by the intruders is the prevailing crime. As a leading agricultural state, Iowa could prove to be an example for other states to follow¹².

¹⁰Kay Henderson, "Iowa governor signs law penalizing animal rights activists," Reuters, last modified March 5, 2012, accessed January 28, 2015,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/06/usa-iowa-agriculture-idUSL2E8E605920120306>.

¹¹ Henderson, "Iowa governor signs law penalizing," Reuters.

¹² Henderson, "Iowa governor signs law penalizing," Reuters.

Acts of violence by eco-terrorists have declined in recent years, mainly due to the influx of severe sentences being handed down by the courts. For example, in February of 2012, Victor VanOrden was sentenced to prison for the maximum of 5 years for attempting to release minks from an Iowa fur farm.¹³ 15 members of ELF were sentenced in 2007, with sentences reaching as long as 13 years.¹⁴ Also, many environmentalists turned on one another to gain shorter sentences, putting the social integrity of groups like the ELF at risk amongst other radical activists.

Although government officials have seen court victories against eco-terrorists as of late, conviction of ELF and ALF members is usually a challenge, due to the underground nature of the group. Because many eco-terrorist attacks violate the law, members tend to work alone or in smaller groups¹⁵, making arrests even more of a challenge. The eco-terrorists ability to actively spread their message via the internet and facebook makes it easy for like minded activists around the world to adopt the ALF or ELF mission, and become a part of the movement. This also makes eco-terrorists even more unpredictable, since there are no largely coordinated attacks, and thus even harder for government officials to track down¹⁶.

Solution

Socially, radical activists such as the ALF and the ELF face an uphill battle in their efforts to protect the environment and improve the rights of animals. They feel that their acts of

¹³Juliet Eilperin, "As eco-terrorism wanes, governments still target activists groups seen as threat," The Washington Post, last modified March 10, 2012, accessed January 28, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/as-eco-terrorism-wanes-governments-still-target-activist-groups-seen-as-threat/2012/02/28/gIQAA4Ay3R_story.html.

¹⁴ Eilperin, "As eco-terrorism wanes, governments," The Washington Post.

¹⁵ Animal Liberation Front.com, accessed January 25, 2015, http://www.animalliberationfront.com/ALFront/mission_statement.htm.

¹⁶ "Ecoterrorism:Extremism in the Animal Rights and Environmentalist Movements," Anti-Defamation League(ADL), http://archive.adl.org/learn/ext_us/ecoterrorism.html#GreenAnarchy.

violence are justified by their concern for the environment, whereas many people see them as terrorists, dangerous to society. **Compromise by people on both sides of the argument is essential for any progress to be made.** Eco-terrorists must understand that violence is not the answer to ceasing the exploitation of animals and the environment, and skeptics must be aware of the eco-terrorist point of view. Upon saying this, however, free speech amongst all people in the United States should be kept in mind. Eco-terrorists reserve the right to voice their opposition in response to animals being eaten and worn, but must also remember that it is within a person's Constitutional rights to feel differently. Also, economic sabotage on the part of eco-terrorists must cease, as it harms not only major corporations, but the lives of many hard-working people employed at those companies. Sabotage on the part of the ALF and ELF will only make skeptics even angrier, and **cooperation is key if a resolution is to be made,** and all acts of violence to be stopped. Patience from all parties is essential, and future solutions must be made with the views of all groups in mind, in order to show the ethical purpose of eco-terrorists, while ceasing the unethical, violent methods by which their protests are often done.

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Reflection

Personal Research

Once our group firmly decided to focus on global terrorism and how it relates to globalization as the topic of our project, I immediately hoped that my sector of terrorism that I would be researching would not be one I was familiar with. The issue of terrorism has always interested me, but prior to this project, my knowledge was limited to mostly Islamic terrorism than anything else. I attribute this largely to the fact that I've grown up in the United States, watching the September 11 memorial on TV each year, and during a time when US involvement in the Middle East has been at its peak. Thus, my knowledge of terrorism was relatively one-dimensional, and I wanted to find out more.

Once my group and I decided I would be researching environmental terrorism, or eco-terrorism, I could not have been more ecstatic to begin research. Not only was eco-terrorism a subject that I had hardly been exposed to before, but it also provided me with an opportunity to expand my knowledge of terrorism beyond what I see on the evening news. **As my research progressed, and I continued to learn more about the motivation behind eco-terrorism, I found myself becoming less biased towards the eco-terrorist cause and more neutral on the entire subject as a whole.** I began to realize that the strong negative connotation of the term "terrorist" caused me to be biased on the subject before I even began research, and this led to the formation of my individual paper topic, which focused on the ethics of eco-terrorism. However, as with my own bias, I noticed that many of the sources that I was drawing my information from had strong biases themselves. To counteract this, I tried to find sources that were for eco-terrorism, such as the ALF and ELF websites themselves, and some that were against it, such as Fox News. Later, in our team paper, when I then connected my topic of eco-terrorism to how it relates to globalization, I found that researching was more about finding specific data from which I could

then draw my own conclusions. I found that my research for the team paper was more challenging, since I was not only researching eco-terrorism, but I was also trying to examine the ways in which it pertains to globalization. I think this particular part of the project has helped me with learning how to draw conclusions from certain pieces of text and data myself, rather than relying on using and citing the ideas of others. This project has allowed me to deepen my understanding of the differing types of terrorism throughout the world, as well as how globalization affects not just terrorism but also many other aspects of society. Also, in future research projects, I now know that my biased prior to researching a specific topic may not be entirely fair or accurate, and it is best to try to stay neutral on a issue until you have learned more information. This will not only help with the writing of my final paper, but also my general mindset as a citizen of the world.

Group Work

At the beginning of this project, I will admit I was nervous as to how the dynamics of the group would go. All of my group members were strong-minded and opinionated. I knew that we would all have to compromise at times throughout the project, and each one of us would be key to having a successful result. However, as we progressed through the project, I soon realized that my worries prior to the start of the project were unnecessary. We found that we all worked at a similar pace, and there was no one in the group lagging behind, and no one moving too far ahead. The overall dynamic of the group throughout the project was relatively conflict-free, and any arguments we had were over where each of us thought we should take the project, not because of group members falling behind in their work.

I admit that some days we fell too off topic, and it cost us some time towards the end of the project. We were, however, able to come together as a group and meet the required deadlines of the project, which I know is something that we are all proud of. We exchanged constructive criticism very well, and no one was offended when other group members had suggestions on how to improve their writing. Our overall communication throughout the entire project was great, and we always left class with homework assigned for each of us to complete. I have never worked so closely with a group to achieve a common goal as I did in this project, and our teacher's inability to get too involved in our project I think brought us even closer together. We understood that we could depend on each other for help, and that if we were to succeed we would have to come together as a group. In the end, this project has was a major challenge for my group members and I to overcome. The work that we were able to complete has given me confidence for future challenges that I face, both in school and out, and I know that my group members would likely say the same thing.