

# Leaderless movement proves illusive

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Ask the FBI, and they will contend that a dangerous wave of “ecoterrorism” has swept North America in the past decade. Ski resorts, new condominium developments and corporate logging headquarters have all been the target of arson attacks, pushing the damage tally of a shadowy organization called the Earth Liberation Front past the \$100 million mark. The FBI’s concern has reached such a fervor, in fact, that it labeled environmental terrorism as the number one domestic terrorism threat in 2005.

A new study by University of Alberta researcher Paul Joosse cautions against any surety about the ideological motivations behind the arsons, however. “While many of the acts were purportedly done in the name of the Earth Liberation Front, this doesn’t necessarily mean that the acts were actually committed for environmental reasons,” says Joosse. The reason for the confusion?

The Earth Liberation Front (or ELF, for short) uses an organizational strategy called ‘leaderless resistance,’ whereby small cells choose when, how, and against whom to act—and then make a claim of responsibility on behalf of the mother group. This means that the individual arsonists are not bound by the ethical guidelines of the larger organization, and that they may be acting for entirely personal reasons. “In the past, people have spoken in the name of the group” says Joosse, “but actually it’s a movement bereft of leaders, so you can’t pin the movement to a single issue, or even a common ideology.”

When perpetrators have been caught, however, they often bear the full

burden of being associated with and “eco-terrorist organization.” Take the case of Jeffrey Luers, for example. In 2000, he was sentenced to a 22-year prison term for his role in fire-bombing three SUVs, causing \$60,000 in damages to property, but harming no one. He never claimed affiliation with the ELF, but because his actions looked very much like them, his sentence ranked in the same category as those regularly given in the state of Oregon for attempted murder, manslaughter one, rape one, and kidnapping. Other convicted ELF arsonists have been subjected to a ‘terrorism enhancement’ clause that has added decades to their sentences.

Many in the environmentalist community have described Luers’ and others’ sentences as draconian, and have decried the bullish surveillance and investigative practices of state agencies such as the FBI. “To them, we are in a time of the ‘green scare’” says Joosse—an allusion to the ‘Red Scare’ of the McCarthy era earlier in the twentieth century. American state agencies, on the other hand, have justified their investigative practices as being necessary in the time of the “war on terror,” and maintain, as FBI Director Robert Mueller did, that “Terrorism is Terrorism, no matter what the motive.”

Source: University of Alberta

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