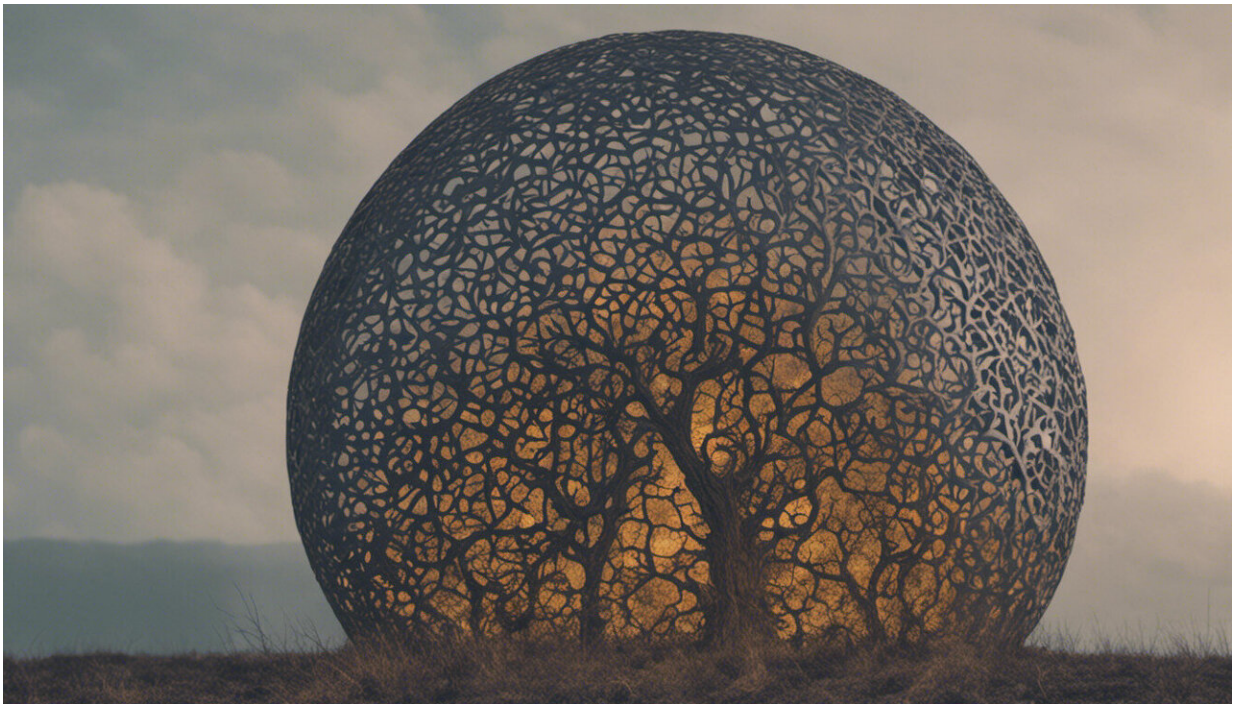


Radical environmentalists are fighting climate change – so why are they persecuted?

December 12 2018, by Heather Alberro



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Climate change, deforestation, widespread pollution and the [sixth mass extinction](#) of biodiversity all define living in our world today – an era that has come to be known as "the Anthropocene". These crises are underpinned by production and consumption which greatly exceeds global [ecological limits](#), but blame is far from evenly shared.

The world's [42 wealthiest](#) people own as much as the poorest 3.7 billion, and they generate far greater environmental impacts. Some have therefore proposed using the term "[Capitalocene](#)" to describe this era of ecological devastation and growing inequality, reflecting capitalism's logic of endless growth and the accumulation of wealth in fewer pockets.

As social inequality and ecological breakdown [escalate](#), steady change may no longer be enough to avoid [civilisational collapse](#). Environmentalists cannot rely on timid appeals to power any longer.

Enter 'radical' greens

I've had the pleasure of getting to know radical environmentalists from numerous groups throughout my doctoral research. I'm especially interested in uncovering their worldviews – how they diagnose the root causes of ecological decline and what motivates them to engage in often high-risk interventions on behalf of the natural world and other species.

They reject human superiority and separateness from other species. They blame such views, in addition to capitalism and endless economic growth, for the dire state of modern ecosystems. Many follow a burning desire for a more viable and inclusive future for all.

Notable radical green groups include [Earth First!](#), [Extinction Rebellion](#), the [Hambacher](#) forest occupation, and [Sea Shepherd](#).

Early Earth First! activists in the US sat in trees and dismantled tractors to prevent old-growth forests from being felled. For years, Sea Shepherd vessels successfully intervened and protected countless whales from Japanese whalers in the Southern Ocean. However, last year they [ended their anti-whaling campaign](#) due to, among other things, advancements in military grade technology by the Japanese whaling industry.

Activists have occupied the ancient Hambach forest in Western Germany for a remarkable six years in an ongoing effort to keep coal giant RWE at bay. Many were [violently evicted](#) by police recently.

Traditional environmental organisations like the [WWF](#) tend to focus on making industrial capitalism more sustainable rather than questioning capitalism itself. The radical green movement was born in response to the perceived inability of these mainstream environmental organisations to curb ecological decline. They advocate direct action in the form of civil disobedience, blockades, tree-sits, and even the dismantling of machinery for halting ecological destruction.

The resurgence of the 'Green Scare'

[Criminalising](#) and [repressing](#) non-violent activists could fatally delay an effective response to [climate change](#). In the UK, anti-fracking activists were arrested recently after blocking a convoy delivering equipment to the Preston New Road fracking site in Lancashire. They were initially given excessive prison sentences but were eventually [released](#).

Political theorist Steve Vanderheiden referred to such incidents in his [2005 article](#) on the "[Green Scare](#)". The "Green Scare" at its height in the mid-2000s saw the US government mount full-scale persecution of environmental activists. The FBI classed radical environmental groups such as the Earth Liberation Front as the nation's lead [domestic terrorist threat](#), even though it never targeted living beings.

Even the legal definition of "terrorism" was altered to include [property destruction](#). This sought to target radical greens and their attacks against ecologically harmful infrastructure. Lengthy prison sentences and fines befell "[eco-terrorists](#)" caught engaging in direct action deemed threatening to economic interests.

These are desperate times. We've lost a staggering [60% of monitored vertebrate life](#) within just 40 years. Climate change will endanger [millions](#) through [disease](#), [extreme weather](#), [starvation](#), and rising seas.

Occupying trees or blockading a road to a fracking site is clearly justified resistance during times of widespread injustice. These are the ideas that environmental protectors are attempting to bring to the forefront.

As George Monbiot noted, a "[hopeless realism](#)" in the form of piecemeal "tinkering around the edges" has led us to our present predicament. Similar approaches simply won't fix the mess. Radical responses – direct action and mass political mobilising – might be our only hope for building the better world that is still within our reach.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Radical environmentalists are fighting climate change – so why are they persecuted? (2018, December 12) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-12-radical-environmentalists-climate-persecuted.html>

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