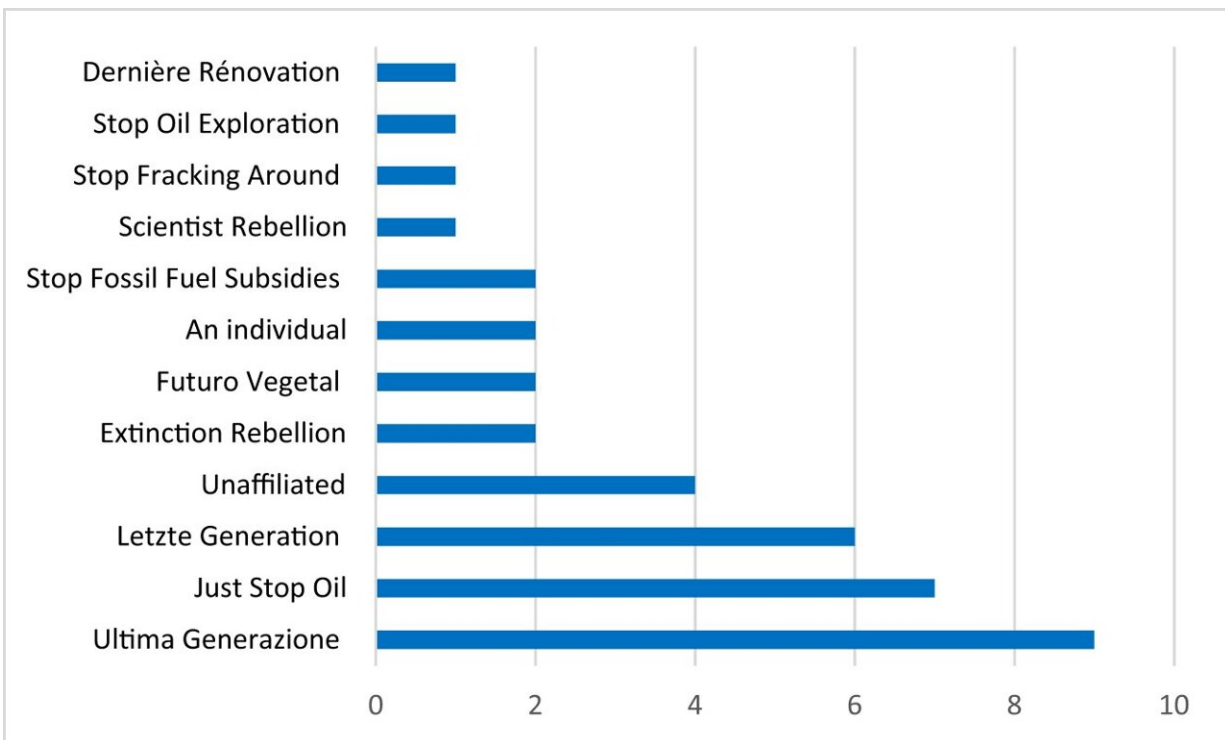


Who are the climate activists vandalizing art and museums, and why?

September 18 2023, by Stephanie Baum



Activist Groups Conducting Museum Vandalism. Credit: *npj Climate Action* (2023). DOI: 10.1038/s44168-023-00054-5

Environmental advocacy, with roots in Rachel Carson's 1962 book "Silent Spring" and the first Earth Day observances in 1970, has manifested in various forms over the years, including boycotts, blockades, and protests. In 2022, some environmental activists began

vandalizing art and museums in a new form of protest.

Who are these activists? When and where have they acted? Beyond that, what's behind this new tactic?

In an attempt to shed light on this topic, a trio of researchers from the University of Washington (UW) in the U.S. has undertaken a comprehensive review of articles, books, and social media postings. Their findings appear as a Brief Communication in *npj Climate Action*.

Frustrated with slow progress on [emission reductions](#), some climate activists have staged various forms of non-violent but disruptive (NVD) action in recent years. Radical actions such as disrupting [road traffic](#), stopping trains, the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline, and Greta Thunberg's "Fridays for Future" school strikes have all garnered considerable media attention.

Whether such actions have helped or hindered the activists' goals is a matter of debate. While the researchers rightly observe, "After all, a lack of public awareness is not hindering climate progress," they also note that gas and oil drilling continues, and that a number of U.S. states have enacted legislation criminalizing protests against fossil fuel pipelines.

However, they write, some scholars argue that such actions by radical groups might make more well-known, mainstream groups—Greenpeace and the Citizens' Climate Lobby are two examples—appear to public officials to be more reasonable, and their demands more moderate. Earlier research has dubbed this the "radical flank effect."

A look at the numbers

At the time they submitted their findings in May 2023, the UW researchers had found 16 groups linked to 38 documented incidents

during 2022, with 36 of these attributed to organized groups acting in museums within their countries of origin. Three additional incidents occurring in 2023 were not included in the findings. Of note during 2022 were:

- Ultima Generazione (Italy and Vatican): Nine incidents
- Just Stop Oil (U.K.): Seven incidents
- Letzte Generation (Germany): Six incidents
- Stop Fossil Fuel Subsidies (Australia): Two incidents

One-time actions by other groups, actions attributed to same-name unaffiliated groups in other countries, and two actions carried out by single individuals comprised the other 14 incidents.

Furthermore:

- Five of the seven U.K. incidents occurred within a seven-day period in July 2022.
- In Italy and Vatican City, four incidents took place within a 31-day period during July and August 2022.
- Beginning immediately after the final August incident in Italy, four incidents in Germany occurred during four consecutive days in August 2022.
- A single incident occurred in Italy during September 2022, eight in various parts of Europe and one in Australia during October 2022, and 11 worldwide during November 2022. Eight of the November incidents took place during the U.N.'s [Sharm El-Sheikh Climate Change Conference \(COP 27\)](#) in Egypt from November 6–18.

The researchers note that the A22 Network may provide a means of coordination for the groups Ultima Generazione, Just Stop Oil, and Letzte Generation, which it lists as members. The organization's website

describes it as "a group of interconnected projects engaged in a mad race: to try to save humanity."

Interestingly, activists made specific demands during only nine of the 38 documented incidents in 2022, and all but one of those came from groups or individuals other than those associated with the A22 Network. The three A22-affiliated groups are generally concerned with rapid emission reductions by the fossil fuel sector.

The [research team's data](#) is available at the Harvard Dataverse.

The big question: Why vandalize art and museums?

Within the movement for environmental advocacy—which seeks to protect pristine nature, to create [sustainable development](#) in [modern society](#), and to call attention to the effects of environmental issues on the day-to-day existence of poor and underprivileged individuals—the researchers note the difficulty of understanding the place of these museum protests.

But it may be simpler than that. A statement by a Just Stop Oil activist, who had taken part in vandalizing a work by Vermeer in The Hague, may hold a clue: "How do you feel when you see something beautiful and priceless apparently being destroyed before your eyes? Do you feel outraged? Good. Where is that feeling when you see the planet being destroyed?"

The team's work ends on a note of uncertainty. If climate policy progress remains slow, will we see further radicalization of activist tactics and goals, or collaboration among activists, governments, and corporations? Will the "radical flank effect" motivate governments to respond in meaningful ways? Ultimately, the disruptive tactic of vandalism raises more questions to be answered.

More information: Lily Kinyon et al, When, where, and which climate activists have vandalized museums, *npj Climate Action* (2023).
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