

Protection of Wealth or Protection of People?

Biodiversity Ain't Even on the Radar Screen

Karen Pickett

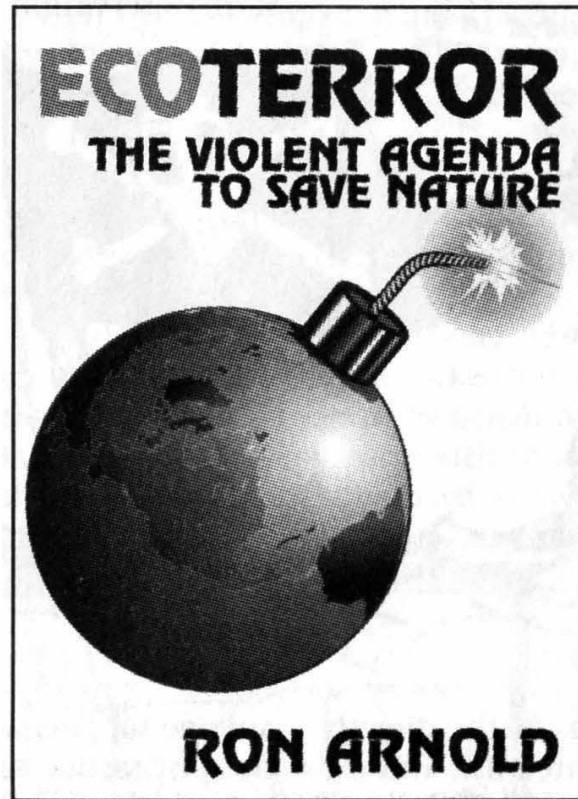
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When the FBI announced in 2004 that the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) was its number one priority for domestic terrorism, it was clear the government would ultimately produce warm bodies to shore up this illogical prioritization. A difference between the current criminalization of dissent and past COINTELPRO operations is revealed in the drive to put property damage on par with injury to life.

Galloping in to help the FBI is the business lobby, represented by groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a conservative public policy lobbying organization funded by more than 300 corporations. ALEC, in collaboration with the US Sportsman's Alliance, has written model legislation upping the ante for action taken against corporations in the business of development, logging, mining and vivisection. Thanks to ALEC, legislation has been introduced in nine states in the last couple of years seeking to brand politically motivated property destruction, trespass or arson as acts of domestic terrorism.

Of course, arson, trespass and vandalism are already illegal, but ALEC wants to add codified layers so that those who support those activities— financially or otherwise— could also be prosecuted. The terrorist label, addition of conspiracy charges and aggressive public relations surrounding the grand jury indictments (like the Washington, DC press conference with Attorney General Alberto Gonzales and FBI Director Robert Mueller on January 20) are meant to marginalize and vilify people already facing criminal charges and to enhance sentencing options. This effectively denies the accused their right to a presumption of innocence until a trial, thanks to the Bush-crafted culture of fear.

Branding property destruction as terrorism rather than sabotage heightens the sensationalism surrounding this politically charged situation, and it is designed to send potential support running in the opposite direction. The authorities even call those arrested “The Family” in an undisguised attempt to evoke images of the notorious Manson Family. But the Manson Family were cold-blooded murderers. There's no body count or bloodletting connected with the alleged ELF actions. Yet those actions are called “terrorism” even as violent attacks by right-wing militants have gone unprosecuted— 7,400 hate crimes motivated by race, ethnic, religious or sexual orientation, according to the FBI's own 2003 statistics. The National Abortion Rights Organization cites seven murders, 17 attempted murders, 41 bombings, 100 acid attacks and 655 anthrax threats, in addition to literally thousands of incidents of kidnapping, burglary and stalking over the last 25 years. And burning SUV tires and a horse corral is terrorism? “You betcha,” say ALEC and the FBI because it's corporate property— sacrosanct in the capitalist US.



Right-wing ideologue Ron Arnold is credited with popularizing the “ecoterrorism” label.

Criminalization of dissent has long been within the purview of the FBI, but the agenda flying under the radar screen is the protection of wealth and private property. ALEC would put damage to property on par with threat or actual harm to life. Nowhere in the FBI's demonization of these acts it calls "terrorism" is a body count or even a litany of injuries. The "injury" is defined in millions of dollars lost by corporations that are in the business of building multi-million-dollar developments on endangered species habitat.

If property destruction is put on par with threat to life, the question must be asked whether the next step will be increased prosecution for the revered tradition of nonviolent civil disobedience or vilification of the successful market campaigns carried out by the likes of Rainforest Action Network and ForestEthics. After all, those activities, as well as boycotts and strikes, put a dent in the bottom line of profit margins. In fact, attacks disguised as Internal Revenue Service investigations and other back-door strategies are already on the rise against organizations that carry out civil disobedience and market campaigns.

A bill before the governor of Pennsylvania right now makes terrorists out of those arrested for civil disobedience and increases penalties for actions that interfere with resource extraction, agricultural research or animal experimentation. A similar bill is under consideration in Maine's state legislature.

"Ecoterrorism," a term trumpeted in the media, was invented in the early 1990s by the public relations firm Hill and Knowlton, while employed by corporations in the extractive industries. It was then put into popular use by right-wing ideologues like Ron Arnold, long known as a vehement anti-environmentalist whose self-professed goal is to destroy the environmental movement. Property destruction is sabotage, not terrorism. Dump "ecoterrorism" from the vernacular. Ecological terrorism is perpetrated by the likes of ExxonMobil, Monsanto, Louisiana-Pacific and Union Carbide. Seize the moment. Seize the language.

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