The list of environmental problems we face seems to grow by the day. Climate change, species decline, habitat loss, pollution (the current oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico is a particularly striking example here) and depletion of natural resources are among the most high-profile. But we could include numerous other examples. Scientists tell us that many of these problems are increasingly urgent, with potentially disastrous consequences if we don’t act.

The recent global climate talks in Copenhagen demonstrate that environmental issues are firmly on the international political agenda. Despite the failure to reach an agreement in Denmark, the calling together of so many global leaders to discuss environmental issues represents a significant landmark in itself. In the UK, the election of the first Green MP in 2010 illustrates how environmental issues are becoming increasingly central to political and public concerns.

Gary Potter

There has been a surge of interest in ‘green criminology’ in recent years. But why should sociologists of crime be looking at environmental problems?

What is green criminology?
A sociology of the environment

This popular interest in ‘green’ issues has, at its core, been fuelled by scientific research highlighting the dangers associated with various forms of environmental degradation. More recently we have seen an increase in interest in environmental issues within the social sciences. It seems fairly obvious that a sociology of the environment is important: environmental damage has implications for people and societies the world over.

One line of reasoning here is summed up by Ulrich Beck’s (1986) statement that ‘Smog is democratic’, which suggests that traditional social divisions — class, ethnicity and gender — may be relatively unimportant when considering the impact of many environmental problems. The argument is that we are all potential victims from harms to the natural environment — we depend on it for the food we eat and the air we breathe. In a shared environment, all of us are equally vulnerable — rich and poor, old and young, black and white.

An alternative analysis argues that current social divisions are actually reinforced in the face of environmental harms, with poor people bearing the brunt of harms (that are mostly caused by the rich). There are many examples in the literature of what is known as ‘environmental racism’, where those suffering the worst effects of ecological damage are of a different ethnicity to those causing the damage (the latter, most often, being white).

It is similarly argued that women suffer disproportionately to men, while men are often more heavily implicated in causing environmental problems. Whichever perspective on the relationship between environmental harm and social divisions we prefer (and there is evidence to support both), it is clear that sociology should take an interest in environmental problems. Even if, as some argue (despite the weight of scientific evidence), many environmental concerns are overstated, there are still important questions for sociologists to address, such as:

- Why are concerns about environmental issues so prevalent in modern society?
- How have environmental issues become so central to contemporary public discourse?

Criminology and the environment

What is less obvious is why criminologists (or at least some of them) are taking an increasing interest in environmental issues. Yet there has been a noticeable increase in interest in green (or environmental) criminology in recent years. A number of specialist textbooks and readers have been published on the subject and green criminology is now...
discussed in many more general crimino-
logical works than previously. University
courses are beginning to feature green crimini-
ology on their syllabuses.

Many students, arriving with a more tra-
ditional view of what constitutes crime, may
question what environmental issues have to
do with their wider crimino-logical studies.
I owe a debt of thanks to my own students
for helping me think this through. Simply
stated, the link between environmental
issues and criminology takes place on three
levels.

First, we can identify a range of crime and
criminal justice activity directly related to
environmental issues.

Second, we can see the study of environ-
mental harm in general as an extension of
the well-established (and indeed funda-
mental) tradition within both sociology and
criminology of critically questioning the
very definition of crime and the core subject
matter of criminology.

Finally, it is possible to identify a number
of areas where environmentalists can ben-
fit from the experience of sociologists and
criminologists working within more tradi-
tional notions of crime.

Increases in environment-related
criminal activity

First, then, criminology and environmental
issues overlap where criminal activity clearly
takes place, or where the agents of criminal
justice are called into play. At first glance we
might not see much obvious criminal activ-
ity in relation to the natural world. Most
crime is, after all, an urban affair. Besides,
most environmental harms stem from legal
economic activities.

But in recent times we have seen an
increasing use of the criminal law to protect
the environment. The website www.politics.
co.uk reported back in September 2008 that
the New Labour government of Tony Blair
had created 3,605 new offences since com-
ing to office, ‘One new crime for every day
in power’. The Home Office — the govern-
ment department we might expect to be
most centrally concerned with crime — had
been responsible for producing legislation
for 455 of these ‘new offences’. The then-
named Department for Business, Enterprise
and Regulatory Reform was responsible for
legislation for 678 of these new offences,
reflecting growing concerns with corporate
and financial crime.

But the government department respon-
sible for generating legislation for the largest
number of ‘new crimes’ in this period was,
at 852, the Department for the Environ-
ment, Food and Rural Affairs. This message
seems clear: if sociologists and criminolo-
gists are concerned with crime, then this
statistic alone is reason enough to become
interested in the environment.

It is obviously the case that making some-
thing a criminal offence does not necessarily
stop that activity from happening — if it did
we wouldn’t need a criminal justice system.
So, with the creation of new environmental
offences, we might expect to see an increase
in environmental crime and environmen-
tal criminals. With some types of environ-
mental crime, such as the dumping of toxic
waste, the trafficking in endangered species
(or their body parts), or the cutting down
trees, we might even see the emergence
of new forms of organised and corporate
crime.

Aside from increasingly applying crimi-
nal law to environmental issues, we can also
identify other types of crime that relate to
environmental problems. In recent years we
have seen food riots around the world as

![Children collecting water from a contaminated spring in Uganda. In 'environmental racism' those suffering the worst effects of ecological damage are of a different ethnicity to those causing the damage.](image-url)
agricultural production has been given over to producing bio-fuels. Closer to home, the fuel price protests by lorry drivers of a few years ago demonstrated how competition over natural resources can produce social unrest and public disorder.

There were many reports of theft of fuel around this time, and it is easy to imagine that more crime — both acquisitive and violent crime — may have resulted from a longer period of disruption of fuel supplies, or from shortages of other resources.

Protest against environmental issues (or other issues, for that matter) is also of interest to criminologists. Legitimate protests such as marches and public rallies need to be policed — and as we have seen recently in the UK and elsewhere, the policing of protests can be controversial and the police themselves have often been accused of committing serious crimes when policing protest.

Some protesters engage in ‘direct action’ when campaigning against or trying to prevent environmental harm. Direct action can be simple civil disobedience, such as trespass, but this still needs policing. Direct action can also incorporate overtly criminal activity, including criminal damage, arson and violence. Other protesters and campaigners around the world find themselves victims of intimidation or assault or worse, and there are instances in which environmentalists have been murdered because of their protesting activities.

Sometimes the victims of environmental harm may turn to crime to try to exact revenge or reparation for their sufferings. Drug cultivation — and drug crop eradication — involves a whole range of environmental problems. The recent ‘climate-gate’ scandal involving the University of East Anglia scientists was sparked by an illegal incident of e-mail hacking.

There are clearly many ways in which environmental issues cause, or are otherwise related to, criminal activity. As environmental issues become (or are perceived to become) more urgent, so we can expect an increase in many of the types of crime discussed here.

**Criminology beyond crime**

Many green criminologists extend their interests to include legal activities deemed harmful to the environment. Indeed for many (but by no means all) environmental criminologists harm to the environment is the defining feature of their subject matter. Only a minority of instances of environmental harm are accounted for by criminal activity — the vast majority of fishing, deforestation, pollution and so on are actually legal, and are often seen as important economic activity. More traditionally-minded criminologists do not see this sort of activity as the business of criminology at all.

But radical and critical criminologists and sociologists have long challenged narrow, legalistic definitions of crime. What constitutes a ‘crime’ varies between different societies and over different times. Our concern with ‘crime’ focuses on particular types of behaviour, some of which are relatively harmless, while ignoring other, arguably similar, types that are much more harmful.

Radical criminologists argue that the working of the criminal justice system — and the definition, creation and enforcement of the criminal law — replicates and reinforces social divisions within society. In short, the criminal law can often be seen to be acting, predominantly, against the interests of the lower classes and the poor while serving the interests of the powerful. It was this line of reasoning that led many criminologists to consider corporate crime as part of their remit, even though many white collar and corporate ‘offences’ do not result in criminal justice processing or end in criminal justice sanctions and, as such, do not fit within the strict legal definition of ‘crime’.

An extension of this approach has led to alternative ‘benchmarks’ to legal definitions of crime. Some have argued that we should think of crime differently — in terms of human rights abuses, or in terms of social harm. These other instances of societal harm are considered as crimes by many criminologists.

Green criminologists make the point that most, if not all, environmental harms incorporate harms to individuals and social groups and that many entail human rights abuses. People lose their livelihoods, property and way of life as traditional lands are cleared for agriculture or development. We can count millions of avoidable deaths around the globe that are linked to preventable environmental problems, such as the absence of clean drinking water or exposure to pollutants.

It is nearly always the poorest people of the world who suffer most from environmental harms, and it is almost always the

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*Protesters at the 'Wave', the biggest ever demonstration on climate change (London 2009).*
case that the rich corporations responsible for much harm avoid any kind of criminal — or other — repercussions. The situation where the poor are the victims of harmful activity perpetrated by the rich, but where that activity is not readily defined as a crime (and therefore the perpetrators are not treated as criminals), relates as strongly to environmental issues as it does to corporate crime or state crime. Green criminology is merely following a well-established criminological tradition in this sense.

**Lessons from sociology and criminology**

The link between the social sciences and environmentalism can be seen to act in two directions. Whether or not we think disciplines such as sociology and criminology have anything to gain from studying environmental problems, we can recognise that environmentalism may benefit from drawing on social science ideas. After all, when we consider environmental harms we may easily identify victims of those harms. We may also see those responsible for causing environmental harms as offenders, whether or not they are legally defined as such.

Environmentalists also talk about justice — not necessarily criminal justice, but environmental and ecological justice. Criminological theory and knowledge relating to victims, offenders and justice will be of some relevance to environmental problems involving offenders, victims and justice. Likewise, those hoping to reduce or prevent particular environmental harms may learn lessons from studies in policing and crime prevention. Questions around how best to deal with ‘environmental offenders’ may be informed by those who have studied criminal justice, penology and the effective treatment of offenders.

**Conclusions**

There are clearly many areas where criminology, sociology and environmentalism have overlapping interests. Increasing numbers of activities considered harmful to the environment are subject to criminal control, and other types of crime occur in response to environmental problems. Even where environmental issues are not criminalised we can recognise that the sociology of crime has much to contribute to environmentalism. With environmental problems likely to intensify in coming years, the links between sociology, criminology and environmentalism are also likely to become increasingly important.

**References and further reading**


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