



*Battling the blazing remnants of the oil rig Deepwater Horizon (April 2010).*

TopFoto

# What is green criminology?

**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?

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.

## Signposts

Before reading this article, you may be unable to answer the question posed by the title. However, this is an important new aspect of the sociology of crime and deviance, and one that you should be aware of. Gary Potter gives a clear exposition of both the meaning of green criminology and of why, as sociologists, we should recognise the importance of studying it. This is an area that lends itself to the use of relevant examples, and you should be able to think of others in addition to those mentioned in the article. As well as its obvious link to 'Crime and deviance', this article contains useful information for students taking the topics of 'Power and politics', 'Stratification and differentiation' and 'Global development'.

## 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



*An open copper mine in New Mexico.*

discussed in many more general criminological works than previously. University courses are beginning to feature green criminology on their syllabuses.

Many students, arriving with a more traditional view of what constitutes crime, may question what environmental issues have to do with their wider criminological 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 relating directly to environmental issues.

- Second, we can see the study of environmental harm in general as an extension of the well-established (and indeed fundamental) 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 benefit from the experience of sociologists and criminologists working within more traditional 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 activity 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](http://www.politics.co.uk) reported back in September 2008 that the New Labour government of Tony Blair had created 3,605 new offences since coming to office, 'One new crime for every day in power'. The Home Office — the government 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 responsible for generating legislation for the largest number of 'new crimes' in this period was, at 852, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. This message seems clear: if sociologists and criminologists are concerned with crime, then this statistic alone is reason enough to become interested in the environment.

It is obviously the case that making something 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 environmental criminals. With some types of environmental crime, such as the dumping of toxic waste, the trafficking in endangered species (or their body parts), or the cutting down of trees, we might even see the emergence of new forms of organised and corporate crime.

Aside from increasingly applying criminal 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.*

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



Protesters at the 'Wave', the biggest ever demonstration on climate change (London 2009).

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

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.

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