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Pushing the boundaries of (a) Green Criminology: Environmental harm as a *cause* of crime.

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Elsewhere on this site, I have addressed the question '[What is Green Criminology?](#)', but here I want to suggest that my previous definition, whilst reflecting much (probably most, but by no means all) of the work of green criminologists to date, perhaps sells the idea of a green criminology short. Rather than seeing green criminology as “the analysis of environmental harms from a criminological perspective, or the application of criminological thought to environmental issues”, perhaps a better definition – or conceptual framework – would be the application of an ecological perspective to the problem of ‘crime’ in general. This can encompass everything within the earlier definition, but can also include a whole lot more. To put it another way, I would like to suggest that there is more to a green criminology than just the focus on green crime.

Let us explore this idea further by reference to one well-established typology of ‘green crime’ developed by Nigel South and colleagues in the book “Criminology: A Sociological Introduction” (Carrabine *et al.* 2004, Routledge). This contribution is particularly noteworthy as the first example of green criminology covered in some depth in a general criminology textbook, but is useful for current purposes because it included a discussion on ‘green crimes’ – those crimes that a green criminology might focus on. Carrabine *et al.* (2004) recognise two broad categories:

Primary and Secondary green crimes.

Primary green crimes are those crimes which constitute harm inflicted on the environment (and, by extension, those that inflict harm on people because of damage to the environment – our classic ‘environmental victims’ who suffer health or other problems when the land, water or air they interact with is polluted, damaged or destroyed). South and colleagues recognised four main categories of primary green crimes: crimes of air pollution, crimes of deforestation, crimes of species decline and crimes of water pollution. A narrowly defined green criminology would recognise that nations (and the international community) increasingly legislate to prevent these types of harm: (green) crimes result when such legislation is breached. A broader green criminology, following the traditions of critical and radical criminologies (discussed further [here](#)) might recognise that such harms are worthy of study by green criminologists whether or not there is legislation in place and whether or not criminal or other laws are actually broken (criminologists can look at actions that some people think *should* be defined as crime as well as those that *are* defined as such).

Secondary, or “symbiotic green crime is crime that grows out of the flouting of rules that seek to regulate environmental disasters” (Carrabine *et al.* 2004: 318). Examples given by South and colleagues include ‘state violence against oppositional groups’, such as when the French government bombed the Greenpeace ship ‘Rainbow Warrior’ to prevent its anti-nuclear campaigning activities. Their second example is ‘hazardous waste and organised crime’, such as when Mafia-esque organised crime outfits help corporations side-step strict laws about pollution and disposal of hazardous waste by accepting money to take such waste away – no questions asked. Similarly, we might recognize the involvement of organised crime in the smuggling of endangered species or restricted animal parts (such as elephant tusks or rhino horns) around the world. Another category of symbiotic green crimes might include corporate crime where, for example, fraud is committed to side-step restrictions on pollution, or where corruption occurs as part of an attempt to avoid regulation of polluting activities in the first place. These primary and secondary categories (the examples given for both do not have to be exhaustive) probably cover the vast majority of what we might think of as green crimes – crimes that are harmful to the environment, and crimes that stem from attempts to regulate such environmental harms. But they do not cover all the ways that a green perspective – an understanding of the science of ecology and the relationship between environmental harm and its impact on individual humans and on wider society – might provide insights into other areas of

criminological endeavour.

I explored this idea in my paper at the [Delft conference on Environmental Crime and its Victims](#). The concept is best summed up by the assertion that there is more to green criminology than environmental crime: there are many areas of crime, criminal justice and criminology where taking a green perspective provides us with new insights. For example, whilst much current green criminological work focuses on environmental harm as crime, the primary green crimes discussed above, attention has also been paid to environmental harm as a *cause* of crime. Whilst some of this fits into the concept of symbiotic green crime, this secondary classification as formulated by South and colleagues doesn't cover all of the examples of environmental harm causing crime that appear in the green – or broader – criminology literature.

Let me give a quick overview of the various ways that environmental harms (or at least the way human society interacts with the natural environment) may serve as a contributory cause, directly or indirectly, to 'normal' (i.e. non-'green') crime. The list is not exhaustive, nor is it considered here in proper academic fashion – I give examples, in no particular order, from the media and from personal observation and speculation as well as those from existing academic works, and I deal with them here uncritically to illustrate rather than fully analyse my argument (I will be writing this up in more detail for publication at a later date):

- Conflict over, and general shortage of, resources (land, water, minerals, food) can and does result in theft and also violence including interpersonal violence, riots and wars. This can include state repression, forced depatriation and genocide committed against local populations.
- Conflict over efforts to enforce environmental protection, for example, the Peruvian government recently tried to crack down on illegal gold-mining – something that should be applauded in general as the mining process results in mercury pollution in the waterways, leading to poisoning throughout not just local eco-systems but those down river, potentially all the way to the Amazon and the Atlantic Ocean. But this mining is a key part of the local economy sustaining many families: the threat to livelihoods and the lack of alternative employment resulted in civil unrest and riots.
- Crime committed as a response to environmental harm. Whether by victims, potential victims or sympathetic activists, criminal acts in the form of non-violent or violent direct action are increasingly popular tactics for protesters. Eco-tage or monkey wrenching (damage to property to try to prevent damage to the environment) is widely employed and more extreme examples including arson directed at expensive property developments and violence and threats of violence directed at those seen as

responsible for environmental harm are considered as such a potential threat that eco-terrorism is actually a recognised security threat in many nations.

- Crime and criminalisation as a response to environmental protest. Not only is direct action involving criminal acts an increasingly used protest tactic, other forms of protest that might previously be recognised as civil disobedience are increasingly restricted by criminal laws. Further, state, corporate and other actors commit crimes themselves in an effort to neutralise protesters. We already considered the example of the bombing of the Rainbow Warrior, but there are countless other examples of protesters being attacked – and even murdered – by powerful interests. Less dramatically, but importantly, we can point to the questionable tactics used to police protest movements such as ‘kettling’ or employing undercover officers to infiltrate groups.

The above examples are all fairly direct links between environmental harm, or conflict over the environment, and criminal activity. They fit more-or-less comfortably into our earlier conceptualisation of secondary green crime. But there are many more examples of how the effects of environmental damage or can contribute to the commission of crime less directly: environmental victimisation may lead to criminality.

- Criminologists and psychologists are aware of links between environmental conditions – i.e. the weather – and crime. Heat, in particular, seems to be a factor in some types of violent crime including riots, domestic violence and assaults; rising temperatures (and particularly hot, humid conditions) affect mood which in turn affects both individual and group behaviour. How might climate change – whether local or global – have an impact here?
- Degradation of environmental conditions increases domestic violence, for example when bread-winners struggle to support their families (because farming conditions are compromised or food supplies run low), or when home-makers struggle to provide sufficient firewood (because the trees have all been cut down) or clean drinking water (because the rivers are polluted or dried up).
- Displaced and dispossessed populations – those removed from their native lands, or whose traditional lifestyles are seriously disrupted – may turn to crime along various paths. Crime may be an economic necessity, or may be a symptom of culture clash, or a result of good old fashioned Mertonian ‘strain’. Native rainforest tribes in Peru, for example, steal from tourists because they see them as outsiders who are corrupting traditional ways of life, or as rich and therefore able to afford losses, or because they have no traditional concept of private property, or because they are suddenly exposed to a consumer culture that they don’t have the legitimate means to participate in – even though eco-tourism is one economic activity that contributes to the protection rather than the destruction of the forest. Further than this, there are well-documented links between

dispossession and displacement and addiction (to drugs, or alcohol, or gambling). The relationship between drug addiction and crime is well established in the criminological literature!

- Broadening our concept to include the urban environment, criminology has also documented the link between urban decay and crime. Psychologists point to the links between environment, happiness and behaviour – and recognise that decreased interaction with nature (such as in urban areas with few parks or trees) increases unhappiness and correlates with various mental health problems. Criminologists in turn relate psychological factors to crime.
- Diet – and food is part of our environment – is related to crime and anti-social behaviour, for example, those with poor diets are more likely to engage in violent behaviour. (Of course, the production of food is implicated in much environmental damage itself.)
- Pollution – particularly lead poisoning, but other forms of poisoning as well – correlates with crime hot-spots. Whether there is direct cause-and-effect here may be the matter of some debate. Whilst pollution can and does alter brain chemistry and hence behaviour, this explanation for the correlation is only partial (and is dismissed as too reductionist and positivistic by critics). More likely pollution is one factor amongst many – polluting industries are often sited near residential populations that already face multiple deprivation.

This is not necessarily the limit to green criminology any more than studying the aetiology of crime is the limit of criminology in general (a green perspective can also be applied to studying the agencies of criminal justice as, for example, in some of the work by Michael Lynch and Paul Stretesky). But it is enough for current purposes. It is probably fair to say that those working in the field of green criminology do so because they have some interest in the environment, whether for its own sake or for its role in sustaining human society, but also because they have an interest in criminology (which is a social science of human conflict). Green criminology should therefore be interested in all the ways that human interaction with nature may contribute to crime – not just those examples where environmental harm is seen as crime, but also where environmental harm may be a *cause of crime*.

Carrabine, E., P. Cox, M. Lee, K. Plummer, and N. South. 2004. *Criminology: A Sociological Introduction*. London: Routledge.



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