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Overview of *Environmental Crime and its Victims* Conference in Delft, Netherlands

Melissa Jarrell  
Department of Social Sciences  
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

September 17-18: *Environmental Crime and its Victims* Conference in Delft, Netherlands

A great big THANK YOU to the conference organizers: Toine Spapens, Rob White, and Marieke Kluin as well as our hosts: Delft University of Technology and the Police Academy of the Netherlands! To read about the conference, view photos, and review conference abstracts, go to: <http://www.environmentalcrimeseminar.com/home.html>

This international conference brought together approximately eighty academics and practitioners in order to exchange views, ideas, and research findings related to environmental crime and environmental victimization. Keynote speakers presented on topics related to criminology, sociology, law enforcement, community wellbeing, environmental activism, and victimology. Panel sessions focused on topics such as illegal logging, crimes against animals, environmental crime enforcement, environmental harm, types of environmental crime, and the illegal waste trade.

The conference was an absolute success on many fronts: uniting scholars and practitioners from across the globe with a concentrated focus on environmental crime and most importantly, the victims of environmental crime. While many of us will see each other again in November at the American Society of Criminology annual meeting in Chicago and other national and international criminology conferences, many of us remarked that small conferences with a unified theme are particularly important. In this intimate environment, we were able to share ideas, goals for future research and collaboration, and engage in problem-solving dialogue.

## **Keynote Presentation Highlights**

On Monday, three keynote speakers presented to the conference participants. Rob White (University of Tasmania) opened the conference with a presentation entitled “Eco-justice and the importance of problem-solving approaches to environmental crime and victimisation”. Rob highlighted the core principles of social and eco-justice with a particular focus on innovative approaches to responding to environmental crime and victimisation and problem-solving methods that draw from a restorative justice approach. For example, Rob suggested specialized environmental courts that provide alternative sentencing strategies and a voice for all victims of environmental crime, humans and animals alike. Matthew Hall (Sheffield University) provided an overview of the limited literature on environmental crime victims, underscoring the need for research on environmental victimization. Matthew’s presentation, grounded in a critical victimological approach, made it clear that more research pertaining to environmental victimology is sorely needed to bring attention to victims of environmental crime. Mary Clifford, St. Cloud State University, drew attention to the ways in which we all play a role “in making the hidden aspects of exploitation visible and the connection each of us has to creating a broader conceptualization of social justice and social responsibility to ourselves, our global community, and the natural environment”. Mary made the important point that in order to change institutions, we must change society.

On Tuesday, four keynote speakers presented to the conference participants. Ron Kramer (Western Michigan University) discussed the state-corporate perspective on climate change; highlighting the social context of climate change, political failures, and need for a social harms approach. Ron, a dedicated scholar and activist, emphasized the need for political engagement, as we are all victims of climate change, including future generations. Toine Spapens (Tilburg University/Dutch Police Academy) presented on the “Invisible victims: the problem of investigating environmental crime”. Toine provided a pictorial presentation highlighting the difficulties in investigating environmental crime, the difficulties in proving environmental crime and the challenges with coordinating cross-border investigations. Despite these challenges, the Dutch Police Academy can be commended for incorporating environmental crime education and training into their academy curriculum. Melissa Jarrell (Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi) provided an overview of environmental victimization in Corpus Christi, Texas; illustrating the plight of just one of many environmental justice communities across the globe. Melissa discussed the various ways in which social scientists can advocate for victims in their communities through teaching, research, and activism. Antony Pemberton (Tilburg University) rounded out the keynote presentations with a focus on victimology, characteristics of victims, and the role of victims in the criminal justice system.

## **Discussion**

Many themes were evident in the keynote presentations and panel presentations: the wide range of crimes and harms that constitute “green crimes”, that victimization is widespread, problems are rooted in the political economy, government has failed to

protect people and animals and are often part of the problem, the issue of power and who has it and who doesn't, and that solutions aren't a one size fits all kind of thing. These issues are inter-connected. For example, Ron focused on climate change, an issue that affects everyone: humans, animals, eco-systems. I spoke about refineries in Corpus Christi, Texas. These refineries pollute the environment and affect the health and well-being of people that live directly in their shadow but these major industrial sources of pollution also contribute to global warming. Whether we are talking about pollution, illegal logging, crimes against animals, or others form of green crime/harm, these problems are local, national, and global in scope. As I listened to each keynote speaker and panelist, I could not help but feel a sense of excitement but at the same time, a feeling of powerlessness would creep in. Certainly, we can draw attention to green crimes through our research. However, many of these problems seem insurmountable unless we can convince our governments and legal systems to take these crimes and harms more seriously. To gain more traction at the political level, we must continue to convince the public that green crimes are a serious social problem.

We know that it is possible to change public conceptions about certain issues but not without extensive time and effort. For example, smoking cigarettes used to be considered very socially acceptable. Teachers smoked in classrooms, doctors and nurses smoked in hospitals. Political and public attitudes toward smoking have changed significantly since the 1960s, when the Surgeon General reported on the health hazards associated with smoking cigarettes. Numerous studies have shown that cigarette smoking causes various forms of cancer. Laws have been passed all across the nation that ban cigarette smoking in public venues. Anti-smoking campaigns have appeared in the mainstream mass media. But public attitudes toward smoking did not change overnight. In fact, we knew that cigarette smoking was harmful to health as early as the 1920s. Even when it was extremely apparent that cigarette smoking caused numerous health problems, attitudes and behaviors toward smoking did not change immediately. We needed more proof and more studies to confirm that cigarette smoking was causing illness and disease.

Illustrating the laborious effort needed to prove cause and effect, Devra Davis, author of *When Smoke Ran Like Water: Tales of Environmental Deception and the Battle Against Pollution* (2002: xi-xii) tells a story about a study involving the air inside airplanes:

In the early 1980s, I reached a disturbing conclusion. I was working at the National Academy of Sciences on what turned out to be a four-year-long study of air inside airplanes. The investigation didn't need to be four years, or even one. But Senator Daniel K. Inoyune had given the Federal Aviation Administration half a million dollars to fund a committee at the academy to find out why he kept getting sick after his regular eight-hour trips from Honolulu to Washington. . . I found out an easy way to answer the senator's question. From a friend at the Environmental Protection Agency, I borrowed a clunky piece of equipment called a piezobalance, which could measure the weight of airborne particles smaller than a

human hair, such as those produced by cigarette smoke. I set off on a flight to Paris. . .By the end of the flight, I had the answer. The levels of particles in the smoking and nonsmoking sections were identical. The senator kept getting sick because for all his lungs cared, he might as well have been sitting with heavy smokers. When I got back to Washington I eagerly told my boss at the academy the good news. ‘We don’t need to do a study for the senator!’ He looked at me nervously and asked, ‘What are you talking about?’ I suggested we could save time and money if we went out and studied a couple more planes and prepared a short report. After I explained what I had done, he sighed and shook his head. ‘You can’t do anything with those numbers. No committee reviewed what you were going to do. Nobody approved this project.’ Half a million dollars and four years later, the official academy study confirmed what I had found in a single flight.

The purpose of Davis’s story is to illustrate the importance of extensive research in our society. It is not enough to have a few studies linking environmental contaminants to human health problems. We need hundreds of valid and reliable studies to show that environmental pollution and toxins *cause* illness and disease. And even then, studies aren’t enough. The information must be made available to the public in an understandable format. Most people do not read academic journals. Consequently, in order to change public perceptions as to what constitutes crime; information must be presented to the public in a “friendlier” format, such as right here, on the green criminology website. Changing perceptions of what constitutes crime, simplifying environmental crime research for public consumption, and challenging corporate “greenwash” are not easy tasks. Nevertheless, they are necessary for the sake of our environment and health.

Davis, D. 2002. *When smoke ran like water: tales of environmental deception and the battle against pollution*. New York, New York: Basic Books.

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### **Additional Content:**

GreenCriminology.org is hosting the Book of Abstracts and presentations from this year’s *Environmental Crime and its Victims* Conference- including the presentations mentioned in this article. If you would like to view these presentations in their original form for further reference please visit our [Conferences Papers and Presentations database](#).

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