

Vandalism of radical environmental activists: Motivations and consequences

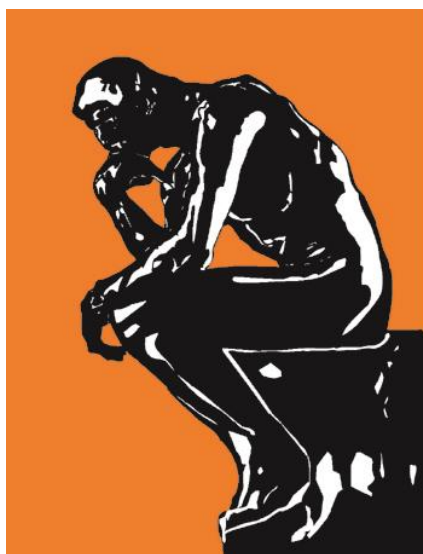
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“[...] only by uniting the power of the entire village could they chase Snake away.”

In “Virtue of Sacrifice”; *The Kingfisher Story Collection* (2022)

Environmental activism plays a vital role in raising awareness of environmental degradation and halting environmentally destructive activities, which is expected to contribute to safeguarding the Earth’s system against climate and biodiversity loss crises (Hungerman & Moorthy, 2023; Naaraayanan et al., 2021; Scheidel et al., 2020; Wolbring & Gill, 2023). Although the passion and commitment of environmental activists should be acknowledged, several groups of environmental activists are embracing the radical environmentalist movement. They support using illegal actions to achieve their primary goal of environmental protection (Carson et al., 2012). The actions perpetrated by radical environmentalist groups

are not impulsive but rather part of a deliberately planned and organized following a long-term strategy.

Several reasons drive them to conduct such actions. First, radical environmentalist groups want to provoke substantial interest from both the general public and the media, thereby stimulating greater awareness of the environmental issues they champion. Therefore, they frequently target priceless artworks in museums or disrupt public activities and events to draw the focus of a large audience.

For example, in 2022, members of the Just Stop Oil group routinely carried out vandalism on priceless artworks by world-renowned painters, such as Horatio McCulloch, John Constable, Leonardo da Vinci, Vincent Van Gogh, Joseph Mallord William Turner, and many other artists, in museums and galleries across England (Alao, 2022). The Last Generation organization resorted to gluing themselves to the roads, causing blockages during rush-hour traffic on more than 30 traffic routes in Berlin on April 25, 2023, leading to severe traffic congestion on many major roads in the city and some neighboring areas. It was reported that up to 500 police officers were deployed on the city's streets to prevent and disperse these illegal traffic blockades (Armstrong, 2023; Grieshaber, 2023).

Activities of these groups also intend to pressure the governments and businesses to change due to environmental urgency. Recent scientific evidence also confirms the urgent situation in which several tipping points have been crossed. The most recent status update of the planetary boundary suggests that six out of nine safely operating spaces have been transgressed, including two core boundaries – climate change and biosphere integrity (Biino, 2023; Fretwell et al., 2023; Lenton et al., 2019; Purich & Doddridge, 2023; Richardson et al., 2023). The statement delivered by a member of Last Generation during the assault on *Monet's Haystacks* painting captures well this motivation of radical environmentalist groups:

“I'm afraid because science tells us that we won't be able to feed our families in 2050. [...] Does it take mashed potatoes on a painting to make you listen? This painting is not going to be worth anything if we have to fight over food. When will you finally start to listen? When will you finally start to listen and stop business as usual?”

Nevertheless, the effects of such actions seem to be counterproductive, intensify environmental tensions and conflicts, and diminish trust in environmental protection endeavors. While activists undertake radical actions against artworks to communicate messages regarding climate change or other environmental concerns, these actions infringe upon the law and undermine the cultural values they seek to preserve. The radical actions also could not improve public support toward environmental movements but sparked public indignation and encountered significant resistance (Davis, 2022; Gayle, 2022).

Although the activities of radical environmentalist groups are almost nonviolent and aim at causing property damage rather than injuring or killing humans (Carson et al., 2012), they

can easily escalate into violence and even result in fatality. The traffic blockage of activists can face many forms of confrontations from the traffic participants and social media influencers (Chung, 2023; Mann, 2023). Notably, a case of traffic obstruction in Berlin blocked the way of an ambulance dispatched to save a severely injured cyclist, leading to the victim's demise (Connolly, 2022). Such ineffective and disruptive actions often fail to attract attention as environmental activists desire and instead tend to generate hostility and criticism. Some researchers even view them as 'eco-terrorists' due to their actual and potential threats to social security (Barnum & Logan, 2023; Carson et al., 2012; Gruenewald et al., 2015).

The business sector contributes substantially to the anthropogenic impacts that fuel climate change and environmental degradation but also holds enormous socio-economic power. Therefore, addressing the current environmental crisis requires their active participation (Vuong, 2021). However, radical environmentalist organizations often consider business owners and large corporations as risks to the environment, especially those operating in environmentally sensitive sectors like oil or transportation. They have conducted many radical actions to sabotage, hinder activities, and even inflict violence toward these people and organizations (Binde, 2023; Healy, 2023; Limb, 2023; NTV, 2023; Speare-Cole, 2022), which can force the business sector into a direct confrontation, rather than cooperation.

Notably, environmental activist groups that conducted vandalism of artworks, like Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil, are funded by the Climate Emergency Fund, which was founded by Aileen Getty – the granddaughter of J. Paul Getty, the oil tycoon (Angeleti, 2022). These groups also target institutions with no ties to funders involved in the fossil fuel industry, casting doubt against the protest's true intentions.

What matters most is that environmental activists need to employ appropriate and effective strategies for raising public awareness and support. Actions deemed inappropriate, such as vandalism and blockages, can have negative repercussions and may decline public support for the environmental cause. Instead, activists should concentrate on educating the public about climate change and other environmental concerns, promoting an eco-surplus culture, and facilitating collaboration among governments, businesses, and citizens to formulate solutions (Nguyen & Jones, 2022; Vuong, 2021). This is essential for the environmental movement's success in tackling climate change and addressing various environmental challenges. It also serves as a prerequisite for mitigating the risks and counterproductive consequences that extremism and radicalism can pose to the global political agenda, especially at a time when the Earth needs human wisdom and solidarity more than ever.

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