

Not a Green Bone in Their White Bodies

How Ecofascists Are Fueling Racism and Deadly Violence

By [Stan Cox](#)

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It's not often that conservative lobbyists beat the drum for increased environmental oversight and regulation. But that's what happened this month when the far-right Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), through its legal arm, filed a brief in federal court [demanding](#) that the Department of Homeland Security conduct an extensive environmental impact study examining, of all things, immigration policy.

In a press release, the group laid out its reasoning:

"Clearly, DHS desperately wants to avoid the impossible task of explaining, in detail, why adding millions of illegal aliens to our population does not harm the environment, or why the harm it does cause is somehow 'worth it.'"

Ostensibly green rationales for ever harsher immigration policies are hardly a new phenomenon. U.S. and European anti-immigrant movements have long used the real need for environmental protection as an excuse for demanding ever harsher treatment of immigrants. Now, with drought, flooding, storms, and other manifestations of climate disruption swelling the ranks of people seeking refuge outside their home countries, far-rightists are dialing up their evocations of nature to push ever greater cruelty toward immigrants.

The pervasive theme in such circles is that, in an already overpopulated America, more millions of dark-skinned immigrants, having supposedly wreaked ecological destruction in their own countries in the Global South, are now crossing our borders in ever larger numbers. They will, so the thinking goes, despoil this country's environment, too — and the only way to stop them is by using ever more violent means. The extremists peddling such propaganda are coming to be known these days as "ecofascists." Above all else, they insist, the United States must maintain white control over "our" country — you know, the lands that our ancestors stole from Native peoples who actually knew how to live in harmony with

nature.

In the process, such white supremacists are, without the slightest sense of irony, increasingly adopting the language of environmentalism to push both grotesque anti-immigrant bigotry and a broader, genuinely unnerving far-right agenda.

A Crueler Shade of Green

In the past few years, ecofascism has broken into the mainstream news cycle several times, most notably in connection with a grim set of mass shootings.

Nineteen-year-old Payton Gendron, who pled guilty to [murdering](#) 10 Blacks in a Buffalo grocery store last year, explicitly called himself an ecofascist. In the manifesto he left behind, he [wrote](#),

“For too long we have allowed the left to co-opt the environmentalist movement to serve their own needs. The left has controlled all discussion regarding environmental preservation whilst simultaneously presiding over the continued destruction of the natural environment itself through mass immigration and uncontrolled urbanization.”

Urbanization, you see, because you know what kind of people live in cities. (Wink, wink.)

Patrick Crusius, who [killed](#) 23 people in an El Paso Walmart in 2019, left behind a manifesto raising false alarms about a “Hispanic invasion.” He [wrote](#):

“The environment is getting worse by the year. Most of y’all are just too stubborn to change your lifestyle. So the next logical step is to decrease the number of people in America using resources. If we can get rid of enough people, then our way of life can become more sustainable.”

Both men drew inspiration from Brenton Tarrant, the white supremacist who, earlier in 2019, had murdered 51 people at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Tarrant wrote a manifesto in which he [declared](#),

“The invaders are the ones over-populating the world... Kill the invaders, kill the overpopulation and by doing so save the environment.”

Florid rhetoric notwithstanding, those mass killers did not actually have ecological sustainability at the top of their minds. They just put a green veneer on their hatred of immigrants, an increasingly familiar tactic of the racist right. Philip Santoro, in [a rant](#) for the white nationalist publication *American Renaissance* in 2017, slathered on an early and especially rancid coat of green:

“The Left’s ‘green politics,’ combined with support for mass immigration and opposition to nuclear power, would mean a future of overcrowding, poverty, and the displacement of whites. When the Left tackles climate change, it wants to ‘save the planet’ — but apparently for someone else’s babies. The population explosion in the global south combined with climate change and liberal attitudes towards migration are the single greatest external threat to Western civilization.”

At the Global Network on Extremism and Technology, Frederike Wegener [reported](#) that, on social media, violent extremists increasingly “disguise racist and nativist ideas behind

environmental concerns to lure in young people and environmental activists,” utilizing slogans like “Love Nature, Kill Non-Whites” and “Save Bees, Plant Trees, Shoot Refugees.” Creating an overwhelming sense of imminent ecological catastrophe, he wrote, can induce nonviolent, climate-conscious citizens to make common cause with violent nativists.

Deploying bees and trees as a cover for such right-wing policies has a long history in America. The growth of the anti-immigration movement over the past half-century in particular is widely credited to a Michigan ophthalmologist named John Tanton, who, as Paloma Quiroga [wrote](#) for Wellesley College’s Environmental Synthesis and Communications blog in 2021, “viewed overpopulation and immigration as a threat to the environment and to the future of white America — views that are explicitly ecofascist. In his efforts to thwart immigration, he ended up creating a vast loose-knit network of anti-immigration groups and lobbyists, now dubbed the [Tanton network](#).” Since the 1980s, that network has managed to sabotage all attempts to develop humane federal immigration policies.

Today, the most powerful group in the network is the Federation for American Immigration Reform, the outfit pressuring the Department of Homeland Security on the supposed environmental impact of immigrants. On its website, FAIR [dwells](#) on the evils of population growth — and by that it means only the growth of “certain” populations:

“Currently, there are 326 million people residing in the U.S., so immigration alone will be responsible for an additional 78 million people over the course of just 40 years... Growth of the population at those levels are certain to impact both the quality of life for average Americans and the sustainability of the environment. The threat of overpopulation is not to our economic health, but also to the present and future quality of life and environmental sustainability... The progress the nation has made toward increased conservation and fuel and energy efficiency will continue to be eroded...”

Connecting anti-immigrant and racist ideas via population growth to environmental degradation is nothing new. The racism of the conservation movement’s founding fathers, including John Muir and John James Audubon, have been widely [discussed](#) in recent years. In the late 1990s, Tanton, at the time still a member of the Sierra Club, [pushed](#) for that venerable environmental organization to adopt an explicitly nativist position. That proposal was voted down, but only by a very narrow margin. In 2004, anti-immigrant members again tried to seize control of the organization — and once again they failed. In recent years, in fact, the Sierra Club has forcefully [renounced](#) its former toleration of nativist sentiment within its membership and has come to actively support immigrant rights.

Ecofascist arguments serve not only as an excuse for abusing immigrants, but are also being deployed by a [broader, more violent range](#) of far-right groups and movements on both sides of the Atlantic. Environmental and anti-industrial calls to action have been a staple of the leading U.S. neo-Nazi [site](#) *Daily Stormer*, along with several far-right groups, including [The Base](#), the neo-Nazi [Atomwaffen Division](#) (rebooted as the National Socialist Order), and the [Pine Tree Gang](#). Far-right political parties in France, Austria, and Germany have similarly [espoused](#) the merging of “ecological civilization” and “ecocentric nativism.”

Equal-Opportunity Collapse?

The ecofascists’ use of green rhetoric is, of course, wholly disingenuous. But frightening as well is the way similar impulses have crept into the edges of the actual environmental

movement, most of which is still identified not just with the leftward reaches of American politics, but with nonviolence. Still, in a country [filled to the brim](#) with weaponry and displaying a growing urge for violence (of which ecofascism is such a painful example), even those genuinely encouraging the greening of the planet have, sadly enough, not proven completely immune to the urge to deploy such tactics.

Last October, I experienced this personally. I gave an online talk about the role that rationing could play in curbing ecological destruction. The audience, including members of several West Coast environmental groups, seemed quite receptive. So, I was shocked when, as the hour ended, the moderator wrapped by veering into distinctly weird territory. Resolving the ecological crisis, he suddenly suggested, might require us to consider the “value” of “authoritarianism,” or more specifically, of “green fascism, or maybe green ‘equitable’ fascism.” As the session had already spilled into overtime, there was no opportunity for me to consider, much less discuss, how such ideas might have infiltrated a green movement that had long been peaceable indeed.

Radical movements to achieve a green, equitable society have been around at least since the rise of groups like Earth First! in the 1980s. In more recent times, however, movements like the Earth Liberation Front [advocated](#) damaging or destroying industrial infrastructure as an essential step toward a more ecologically sound society. For the past decade, the [Deep Green Resistance](#) movement has gone even further, insisting that the goal of such sabotage should be the complete collapse of industrial society. Only a return to pre-industrial civilization, it maintains, will give the planet room to heal, while creating opportunities for us to develop autonomous, egalitarian societies that exploit neither our fellow humans, nor nature.

In the 2011 [book](#) *Deep Green Resistance*, movement authors Lierre Keith, Aric McBay, and Derrick Jensen similarly [argued](#) that civilization’s industrial foundation needed to be completely pulverized, sooner rather than later. Convinced that “the vast majority of the population will do nothing unless they are led, cajoled, or forced,” they urged that “those of us who care about the future of the planet have to dismantle the industrial energy infrastructure as rapidly as possible.” Precipitous de-industrialization is necessary, they wrote, because so little time remains to prevent an ecological collapse complete enough to render the world unlivable for humanity. Therefore, “rapid collapse is ultimately good for humans — even if there is a die-off — because at least some people survive.” This is jarring stuff, to say the least, and it has rightly been subjected to [withering criticism](#),

So far, the deep green resistance people have stuck to proselytizing and organizing, rather than any kind of real-world sabotage. On the political right, however, incidents of eco-infrastructure sabotage are indeed on the increase. Over the past year, for instance, there have been a rash of attacks on [power grids](#) nationwide by right-wing extremists, not environmentalists. A man and a woman [arrested](#) in February for planning to take down four power substations in the Baltimore area proved, not surprisingly, to espouse neo-Nazi views. And successful attacks on two North Carolina substations last December were also [linked](#) to neo-Nazism and white supremacy. In late 2022, the Department of Homeland Security [warned](#) that there had been a significant rise in online discussions among far-right elements focused on assaulting the power grid to trigger cascading blackouts across the country. That, they believed, could lead to a governmental collapse and so create openings for a fascist takeover. (In a country already featuring the Trumpublican Party, this should be unnerving, even if not exactly surprising.)

Hunter Walker, a reporter for *Talking Points Memo*, recently [obtained a copy](#) of an online magazine that advocated attacks on power substations and provided coaching to would-be saboteurs, while announcing, as if they were greens, “It is our belief that the techno-industrial system presents an absolute and urgent existential threat to all life on earth.”

Walker managed to track down one of the authors who told him that their aim was indeed to motivate not the far right but “militant groups of educated anarchists.” As the author acknowledged, however, the far right is “far better armed” and better prepared for shooting out transformers “than the Left or post-Left.” That being the case, the manual’s author added, if the question was whether “I would accept assistance or ‘alliance’ with any far-right group, I would hesitate to say no. I would much rather turn the lights out and then fight them in the quiet dark afterwards.”

This raises a question: Might radical individuals or even groups at opposite ends of the political spectrum ever converge on the same violent direct-action tactics?

Brian Tokar is on the faculty and board of the Institute for Social Ecology in Plainfield, Vermont, which [offers](#) courses on ecofascism. I asked him how much overlap he and his colleagues had noticed between violent, racist, ecofascist movements and nonviolent, anti-racist, radical environmental movements. Tokar responded, “I don’t think there’s a lot of overlap, but there’s certainly enough that it’s deeply disturbing.”

“This goes back,” he said, “to the... eighties when [Dave Foreman](#) and [Edward Abbey](#) [of the Earth First! movement] were saying a lot of disturbing things, including a lot of anti-immigrant stuff — especially Abbey, who was all about protecting the borders against people who, he said, would spread pollution. It was just blatantly racist... but there were also a lot of people who vocally challenged it from the beginning.”

“Fast forward to more recent times,” Tokar continued, “and my colleagues have documented stories of people who started out in leftist ecological circles and drifted over into an overtly ecological neo-fascist or neo-Nazi anti-immigrant kind of politics.” In fact, the ecofascists’ strategy, he added, “seems to be that if they can skim off a few people, especially people who have a following, they can shift the discussion in their direction.”

A Future in Danger

I feel confident in predicting that the ecofascists won’t manage to seize power by taking down the national electric grid. Still, by fueling human-rights abuses, racial hatred, and deadly violence, their toxic propaganda has made the United States a more perilous place to live if you weren’t born white and within its borders. By hijacking the message of ecological renewal and using it to persecute the powerless, they could, at a minimum, make it far more difficult for this country to act boldly in the future when it comes to the climate crisis and environmental justice. That’s why the message of such ecofascists has to be verbally shredded wherever and whenever they try to spread it.

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Stan Cox, a [TomDispatch](#) regular, is the author of [The Path to a Livable Future: A New](#)

[Politics to Fight Climate Change, Racism, and the Next Pandemic, The Green New Deal and Beyond: Ending the Climate Emergency While We Still Can](#), and the current [In Real Time](#) climate series at City Lights Books. Find him on Twitter at [@CoxStan](#).

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