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Title	Green Criminology
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Publication Date	2022-11-04
Link	https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/482775
Citation	van Uhm, D 2022, Green Criminology. in R Atkinson & T Ayres (eds), Shades of Deviance : A Primer on Crime, Deviance and Social Harm. Routledge, pp. 251-254. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003138198-65
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GREEN CRIMINOLOGY

Daan van Uhm

The changing ecological conditions in our globalizing world confront human societies with new challenges. Environmental topics, such as deforestation, pollution, climate change and species extinction, are all on the international agenda. Scientists speak of a new period that has arrived, the Anthropocene, an epoch that succeeds the Holocene. In contrast to the Holocene, the Anthropocene is characterized as a period in which the earth and atmosphere are greatly affected by human activities. The ‘manufactured risks’ created by industrialized society, as stated by sociologist Ulrich Beck, reveal themselves as ‘irreversible’ environmental consequences that threaten all life on earth.

However, the attention devoted by the discipline of criminology to these environmental violations, crimes and unethical practices is low: only a few environmentally related research publications are published in the discipline of criminology each year. Criminology is one of the scientific disciplines in which the relationship between humans and nature is largely ignored. Only from the 1990s onwards have criminologists started to focus on green crimes.

The emergence of *green criminology* occurred in the context of the increasing social and professional concern regarding the environment and cannot be dissociated from important trends in criminology over the past 25 years: increased attention to globalization, corporate crime, victims and unequal distribution of victimization

and human rights. Drawing on its roots from critical criminology, green criminology transcends the borders of mainstream criminology and its definition of crime. Like other delinquencies, the criminalization of environmental issues is shaped by inequalities and power dynamics. For example, interests of powerful political and economic elites play a role in minimalizing regulations and excluding environmentally harmful activities from criminalization in order to continue environmental destruction. The social, political and economic interests and conflicting private, state and environmental interests result in a complex field of power relations.

In the mid-twentieth century sociologists Thorsten Sellin and Edwin Sutherland criticized the legal approach of crime due to its social construction: whether an act is criminal or not is determined by social processes dependent on time, place and power relations within society. Since many of these environmental harmful behaviors are ‘lawful, but awful,’ green criminology draws attention to ‘harm’ as a way of critiquing traditional definitions of crime. They extend this principle of harm and argue that harm includes not only transgressions against humans, but also against the environment and non-human animals. By rejecting anthropocentrism in criminology, they approach humans as part of a complex ecosystem and no longer as central actors; the value of the natural environment is paramount in itself, rather than the value that they may (not) have to humans. From this perspective the dialectical relationship between humans and nature is central in the study of green criminology.

Primary categories of green crimes and harms include—but are not limited to—deforestation, mining, trade in wildlife, climate change, fisheries, animal harm and crimes of pollution, with various socioeconomic, political and ecological implications arising from these acts. Deforestation of primeval forests for timber, livestock or mining can result in the loss of trees and wild animals, soil, water and air pollution, or affect the livelihood, cultures and mobility of local (indigenous) communities. However, deforestation also results in greenhouse gas emissions that impact global warming and increase the sea levels, causing new phenomena such as El Niño in the Americas. The trade in endangered species puts not only their survival at risk, harms individual animals and damages the biodiversity of planet earth, it also increases the risk of zoonotic diseases, such as COVID-19. In other words, many environmental crimes

and harms are not land- or border-related; their complex effects affect the entire planet.

In these environmental crimes and harms, a diversity of legal and illegal actors is involved: crime groups, corporations and state actors all have a stake in the business. Contemporary developments in environmental crime networks signal the expansion of grey areas of business where the overlaps between conventional and non-conventional criminals are crucial in understanding and dealing with the increasing complexities of environmental crime. For example, legal-illegal interfaces are illustrated by illegally obtained natural resources that are converted and laundered into legal products. Consequently, consumers legitimately buy products, such as a gold wedding ring, a hardwood floor or endangered species on the international market and unknowingly become part of a trade with devastating environmental effects. In particular, nature-rich areas in the Global South are (legally and illegally) overexploited by the Global North, reflecting how environmental harm is unequally distributed and influenced by criminogenic asymmetries in the twenty-first century.

In the last 50 years, humans have consumed more natural resources than in all previous history. The world has lost half of its forests and the last hundred years, the level of species extinction has increased by as much as a thousand times—up to 150 species are lost each day. At least two billion people use contaminated drinking water and 99% of the global population breathe air containing high levels of pollutants. If climate change continues to rise for decades to come, this will result in intense drought, storms, heat waves, rising sea levels, melting glaciers and warming oceans, which will destroy human and non-human livelihoods and communities in the near future. This emphasizes the important role green criminology should play in understanding and explaining the understudied green crimes described above and enrich criminology—both empirically and theoretically.

Further reading

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Watch

The Revenant (2015) Directed by Alejandro G. Iñárritu [Film]. 20th Century Fox.