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Burning Rage

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When they first emerged in the mid-1990s, the environmental extremists calling themselves the "Earth Liberation Front" announced they were "the burning rage of a dying planet."

Ever since, the ELF, along with its sister group, the Animal Liberation Front, has been burning everything from SUV dealerships to research labs to housing developments.

In the last decade, these so-called "eco-terrorists" have been responsible for more than \$100 million in damages. And their tactics are beginning to escalate.

Some splinter groups have set off homemade bombs and threatened to kill people. As **correspondent Ed Bradley** first reported last November, things have gotten so bad, the FBI now considers them the country's biggest domestic terrorist threat.

The biggest act of eco-terrorism in U.S. history was a fire, deliberately set on the night of August 1, 2003, that destroyed a nearly-completed \$23 million apartment complex just outside San Diego. The fire was set to protest urban sprawl.

"It was the biggest fire I have ever responded to as a firefighter," remembers Jeff Carle, a division chief for the San Diego Fire Department. "That fire was not stoppable. At the stage that the fire was in when we arrived, there were problems in the adjacent occupied apartment complexes. Pine trees were starting to catch fire. Items on patios were starting to light up and catch fire. And we had to direct our activity towards saving life before we could do anything about the property."

Hundreds were roused from their beds and evacuated. Luckily, nobody – including firefighters – was injured. By the time the fire burned itself out the next morning, all that remained was a 12-foot-long banner that read: "If you build it, we will burn it." Also on the banner was the acronym: E-L-F.

When Carle saw the banner, he says he knew he had a problem.

A problem, because he knew what ELF stood for: the Earth Liberation Front, the most radical fringe of the environmental movement. It's the same group that set nine simultaneous fires across the Vail Mountain ski resort in 1998 to protest its expansion, causing \$12 million in damage.

And it is the same group that has left SUV dealerships across America looking like scenes from Iraq's Sunni triangle, their way of protesting the gas-guzzling habits of American car buyers.

The ELF is a spin-off of another group called the ALF, or Animal Liberation Front, whose masked members have been known to videotape themselves breaking into research labs, where they destroy years of painstaking work and free captive animals. In recent years, they've capped off their visits by burning down the buildings. Still, they insist they are non-violent.

"For every arson that I've carried out, there's probably three or four that were not carried out for that fear of injuring somebody," says Rod Coronado, a former ALF leader, who is widely-credited with introducing arson to the cause.

He spent four years in prison for setting six fires, including one at Michigan State University.

Why burn down a building?

"It's simply because after years of rescuing animals from laboratories, it was heartbreaking to see those buildings and those cages refilled within the following days. And for that reason, arson has become a necessary tool," says Coronado.

Coronado says the ALF and ELF operate in small autonomous "cells." He says he usually worked with five or less

people.

Asked how after choosing a target, a mission is carried out, Coronado says, "Those are the types of things that take nights and nights and weeks and weeks of reconnaissance to make sure that you know in the one hour that you're going to take action, that there will be absolutely no risk to any living being. The fact that nobody was ever injured in any of the actions that I've been accused of is not a coincidence."

Coronado says these days, he's simply an unofficial spokesperson for the ALF and ELF. And in that role, he travels across the country giving lectures on the groups' philosophies and tactics.

Many in law enforcement believe Coronado is still active in the movement as an organizer and recruiter. He recently found a GPS tracking device under his Jeep, which he believes was planted by the FBI. And, he just happened to have a speaking engagement in San Diego the day after the fire.

Coronado says he knew nothing about the condo complex fire, yet he has traveled around the country and encourage people to do this sort of thing.

"Encouragement through explanation and demonstration of my own actions," says Coronado. "I've showed them how I set fires. I showed them how the ELF and the ALF, what their mode of operation is."

"I'm asking for people courageous enough to take those risks for what they believe in," said Coronado.

60 Minutes was surprised when one of those people, a man claiming to be an active ALF cell leader, **came out of the shadows** to grant what he called "the group's first on camera interview in 20 years," as long as we didn't see his face or record his voice.

He told us that his cell has conducted operations from coast to coast, and every one of them was what he considered to be non-violent because nobody was injured. He said under the mask he is a normal, otherwise law-abiding citizen, and that his friends and family have no idea about his activities. He said he thinks it's "abysmal" that the FBI considers them America's top domestic terrorist threat, because unlike neo-Nazi groups, the ALF has never hurt anyone.

"Having the FBI chase you around is not a good thing," says John Lewis, a Deputy Assistant Director for Counterterrorism at the FBI. Lewis is the man charged with stamping out eco-terrorism in the United States.

Lewis says the bureau is aware of over 1,000 attacks and says these groups are considered such a threat is because they have caused over \$100 million worth of damage nationwide. He says there are more than 150 investigations of eco-terrorist crimes underway.

He admits they're not in the same league as al Qaeda but he says they're ratcheting up their actions and turning up the rhetoric.

"There have been multiple statements made regarding assassination and/or killing of individuals involved in, for instance, biomedical research and that kind of thing," says Lewis.

Case in point is Dr. Jerry Vlasak, a practicing trauma surgeon in Los Angeles, who also acts as a spokesperson for several extreme animal rights groups. Vlasak has told audiences that it's time to consider assassinating people who do research on animals.

Vlasak has been quoted as saying 'I think for five lives, ten lives, 15 human lives, we could save a million, two million, ten million nonhuman lives.'

"I think people who torture innocent beings should be stopped. And if they won't stop when you ask them nicely, they won't stop when you demonstrate to them what they're doing is wrong, then they should be stopped using whatever means necessary," Vlasak replied.

Vlasak says he is not going to do that, pointing out he is a physician. "My role in the movement is not to go out and do that, but to explain to the mainstream media and to the public in general why these people are doing what they're doing."

Asked if Vlasak wants someone to go out there and kill, Vlasak says, "I want people who care about animals to do what's necessary to stop their exploitation, to stop their suffering."

Vlasak says someone who believes that the life of an animal is not akin to the life of a human being is "species-ist."

Species-ists, he says, are akin to racists or sexists. Animals, he says, should be accorded the same rights as human beings, despite their place on the food chain.

"Just like at one time black humans were considered property. Well, dogs, cats and all other animals in our society are still considered property," Vlasak says.

Asked who he thinks is fair game, Vlasak says, "Well, I think anybody that tortures animals for a living or for a profit and who won't stop when they're asked to and won't stop."

Does that include researchers who are testing and performing tests using animals?"

"Animal researchers, slaughterhouse workers, the head of the corporation that slaughters hundreds of millions of chickens every single year for the taste of their flesh," says Vlasak.

Well, people like chicken.

"People liked owning slaves too, okay. That doesn't make it right," Vlasak said.

Vlasak says it's very straightforward in his mind.

"We don't live in a country where it's okay to kill people if we don't necessarily. Like what they're doing. If we have someone who actively embraces this then what's next?" says John Lewis.

What's next, he says, is the emergence of a "lone wolf" like Eric Rudolph or Ted Kaczynski, something that has already happened.

A mysterious bomber was caught on surveillance camera in 2003 planting two sophisticated explosive devices late at night outside a company that makes vaccines in northern California, a company targeted by animal rights activists. One bomb was set to go off an hour after the first - after firemen and police arrived - but it was spotted by a night watchman. A few weeks later a third bomb went off outside another company, this one strapped with nails.

"Anyone from 50 feet of that particular bomb probably would have been killed or seriously injured," says the FBI's David Strange, who is in charge of the investigation.

Strange thinks the second explosive was designed to hurt or kill the first responders that show up to the scene. He says it was the first time he heard of eco-terrorists using bombs.

Strange says the FBI has identified the suspected bomber as Daniel Andreas San Diego, a 27-year-old animal rights activist from San Rafael, California, who is now a fugitive after he slipped an FBI surveillance team.

But he left behind a message, posted on a Web site sympathetic to the Animal Liberation Front. Part of it reads, "We will now be doubling the size of every device we make."

"I'll ask you. Why does someone build an improvised explosive device with shrapnel, nails and such, if they're not intending to cause someone grievous harm if not worse?" says Lewis.

There is a definite split in the movement when it comes to violence.

After torching a forest research station in Irvine, Pennsylvania, one ELF cell threatened to "pick up the gun."

"I think it's sort off disingenuous to say 'Well, we can burn down buildings. But we can't use explosives. Or we can use explosives. But we can't do anything that might harm a person.' I think what we have to do is look at the big picture. We have to look at what works," says Dr. Jerry Vlasak.

Since our report first aired last fall, the FBI announced the arrests of 11 people, saying they were part of a criminal group that called themselves "The Family." They're accused of committing over a dozen arsons and other acts of sabotage nationwide, including those fires on top of Vail Mountain.

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