

Burning zeal for change

In torching SUVs or construction sites, do extremists help or hurt the effort to protect the environment?

Kevin Donegan

Oct 13, 2003

SAN RAFAEL, Calif. — Rows of gleaming chrome grills give way to vivid promotional images of kayakers, cyclists, rock climbers and skiers. As the sun sets over the headlands on a quiet Tuesday evening, this Hummer dealership in wealthy, outdoors-loving Marin County may represent one of the more unusual fronts in the war over the environment.

But unlike the recent firebombing of a Hummer dealership in the San Gabriel Valley, about the most memorable act of protest on this lot was the time some SUVs got egged.

Here at Team Hummer of Marin, salesman Albert Giragossia said he used to joke with prospective buyers that “the only thing they don’t come with is a .50 caliber.” And though customers don’t seem concerned about harassment from environmentalists, he said, nowadays the sales team is more likely to stress that these military-style vehicles are becoming “more civilian.”

Still, these gas-guzzling Hummers — a Forbes magazine test rates them at 10 miles per gallon in town, slightly higher for freeways — make a prime target for some radical environmental activists.

And not just SUVs are targeted. This year in California, damage to private property as a form of protest has grown more costly: Apart from the \$1 million in damage at the West Covina SUV dealership, homes and apartments under construction in San Diego were torched at a cost of more than \$50 million. In Northern California, animal rights activists have claimed responsibility for pipe bomb attacks that did minimal damage on a biotech firm and a cosmetics firm in the Bay Area. The FBI filed an arrest warrant last week for a suspect in relation to those two incidents.

Are such attacks, labeled domestic terrorism by the FBI, justifiable as a means of change? Or does their extremism alienate people from the very cause activists are trying to push?

Followers of the Earth Liberation Front, a movement dedicated to sabotaging companies perceived to be “exploiting the natural environment,” are thought by the FBI to be responsible for the recent destruction at the SUV dealerships as well as the San Diego arsons. An e-mail inquiry to the ELF press office was answered anonymously because of FBI interest in those attacks.

Part of the ELF philosophy, wrote the respondent, is to make it unprofitable to produce, develop or research products that could be harmful to people and the planet. In the case of the attacks on Hummers and SUVs, the goal is to increase insurance costs for both dealers and owners to make the vehicles “more of a liability to own than they are now at 12 miles to the gallon,” said the ELF member.

Is that approach effective? “The ELF has brought a lot more attention to the issue with a few actions than a decade of pamphleteering at shopping malls ever could,” the e-mailer replied.

Engendering favorable public opinion is not of particular concern to radical activists, said Rik Scarce, author of “Eco Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement” and a sociology professor at Skidmore College in New York. Their actions, as they see it, are for a greater good. From their point of view, “the destruction of a



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bunch of SUVs is a way of preventing those SUVs from ever being on the road,” he said. That in itself is worthwhile to activists.

Those actions, countered Amy Ridenour, president of the Center for Public Policy Research, a conservative Washington think tank, are both ethically wrong and tactically damaging. “It’s only a matter of time before somebody is killed,” Ridenour said. “If I were in the environmental movement, I would do everything I could to stop these guys. They’re turning off the public and reducing the credibility of a serious environmentalist,” she said.

Eric Antebi, national press secretary of the Sierra Club, said activists sometimes get discouraged with threats to the environment by real estate developers and energy and timber industries. But Antebi said peaceful protest and democratic organizing has helped protect much of California’s coastline, parks and open spaces. He strongly condemned the ELF’s actions.

“The activities of groups like the ELF undermine the efforts of hardworking Americans ... to protect their communities,” Antebi said.

Damaging property to make a political point takes its place in an activist’s play-book somewhere between violent personal conflict — which all but the most zealous of activists oppose — and nonviolent civil disobedience tactics such as rallies, marches and hanging banners. Defenders of destruction say that is part of an American tradition dating to the Boston Tea Party. They credit aggressive protest, like rioting, with

helping win many political reforms, from the 40-hour workweek to the Civil Rights Act.

But Ridenour pointed out that the civil rights movement mostly championed peaceful disobedience. Attacks on SUVs today, by contrast, are taken very personally by average citizens “to a degree that the environmentalists don’t understand.”

Some left-leaning activists, such as John Sellers, director of the Ruckus Society, which provides training in nonviolent civil disobedience, agree that in the United States, in particular, property destruction usually alienates more people from a cause than it attracts.

“I don’t think the American public understands it as a political act,” Sellers said, “because of the way that private property is seen as a sacred right.”

Although much militant activism originated in the United States — think of Earth First! activists “spiking” trees to destroy logging equipment or the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society ramming whaling ships — such destruction is generally more likely to be accepted as a political statement in Europe. This is in part because Europeans tend to hold a less sacrosanct view of property ownership than do Americans.

But it may also be because actions there are often staged openly and explained to the public, such as in 1995 when anti-nuclear protesters sabotaged a nuclear weapons plant in England, sealing its main water discharge pipe with 6 tons of cement.

That activists are seen as willing to risk jail time for their cause often garners greater support than anonymous attacks.

French farmer Jose Bove, a darling of the anti-globalization movement, for example, recently was freed from prison after enormous public pressure. Bove, who remains under surveillance at home, had been sentenced to 10 months for destroying two experimental fields of genetically modified rice and corn.

He became famous in 1999 when he and other members of a left-wing farm union used their tractors to destroy a McDonald’s restaurant that was under construction in Millau, France. They then reportedly drove to the town center to publicly explain why they had done it. The incident drew significant public support. At a trial, tens of thousands of supporters gathered outside the courthouse.

Bron Taylor, a professor of religion and environmental studies at the University of Florida, has studied the radical environmental movement for 15 years. “I don’t think you can really understand these kinds of movements if you don’t understand that people in these movements have a deep spiritual connection to the natural world,” he said.

“They think there’s a war against nature and they are going to fight a war against nature’s destroyers,” Taylor added.

Among environmentalists, especially since the beginning of the Bush administration, “there’s an incredible amount of frustration that things are not getting any better,” agreed sociology professor Scarce.

The number of radical activists is not necessarily high, Scarce said. “No one knows if the number of activists is increasing or not,” he said in an e-mail. “That’s part of



Reuters

AFIRE: An unfinished house burns in September in San Diego: destruction of housing units being built there cost in the millions.

the ‘no membership card’ side of the movements. In a sense, head counts don’t matter. It’s action that counts to those involved.”

According to the FBI, California has reported the highest number of attacks on property in recent years, followed by Oregon, New York and Washington. Further, the frequency of these actions and the amount of damage they cause is escalating. Before this summer’s California attacks, the ELF claimed responsibility for \$100 million in damages over six years.

The mainstream media are partly to blame for the rise because they don’t cover enough conventional political protests, said Jason Salzman, author of “Making the News: A Guide for Activists and Nonprofits,” a book of tips for garnering media coverage of issues or events.

Salzman, a former Greenpeace senior manager who said he is committed to nonviolent protest, points to the anti-globalization demonstrations in Seattle at the 1999 World Trade Organization’s annual meeting, which resulted in sometimes violent confrontations between protesters and police. Anarchist groups such as the so-called Black Bloc broke windows at Nike and Starbucks stores, among others.

“Traditional forms of democratic expression don’t get the kind of media coverage that aggressive tactics do,” Salzman said. “If it hadn’t been for the violence, I wonder how much of the message would have gotten out.”

Though the protests may not have ended global capitalism, they appear to have increased the clout of both poor countries and nongovernmental organizations in international trade negotiations. This year’s WTO meeting in Cancun, Mexico, for example, ended last month without agreement largely because developing countries resisted demands made by the United States and Europe.

Salzman laments what he sees as a tendency among activists to fall back on destruction as the only option. “Creative protests can go very far in getting the message out in a nonviolent way,” he said.

Such violence has many people on edge. An animal rights group calling itself Revolutionary Cells — Animal Liberation Brigade recently claimed responsibility for exploding two pipe bombs outside Chiron, a biotechnology company in Emeryville, Calif.

The blasts, which followed incidents of intimidation at the homes of key company managers, caused no injuries but many employees have grown nervous, said John Gallagher, a company spokesman.

The activist group also claimed responsibility for an ammonium nitrate bomb last month outside another Bay Area company, Skaklee, which makes cosmetics and household products. Both companies were apparently targeted because of their ties to Huntingdon Life Sciences, a British company that tests medicines on animals.

Such high-profile incidents, some activists maintain, historically have served to draw public attention to issues of injustice. “How much concession would there have been in the civil rights movement unless there had been the occasional riot?” asked Taylor, the Florida professor.

Critics paint a different picture.

“The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. is revered because he saw that civil disobedience can effect change,” said Ridenour of the Center for Public Policy Research.

“People are impressed by self-sacrifice, they’re not impressed by firebombs.”

Whether destructive tactics are effective remains an open question.

Here at Team Hummer of Marin, they sell about a Hummer a day. Across the country, sales of large SUVs through the first seven months of 2003 are down 5% from last year, more than twice the overall decline throughout the auto industry, according to CNW Marketing Research.

So are those sales going to energy-efficient hybrids instead? Maybe. Or maybe to the highest-priced SUVs, including the Lincoln Navigator and the Hummer H2. Sales in that category from January to July increased 55% over last year to 81,236 vehicles.

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Special to The Times

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Associated Press

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Carrying a torch for a principle

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The Los Angeles Times, Oct 13, 2003, page 40.

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