It all began in protest against Glen Canyon Dam

Foes, supporters predict severity, frequency of acts to increase

Mitch Tobin

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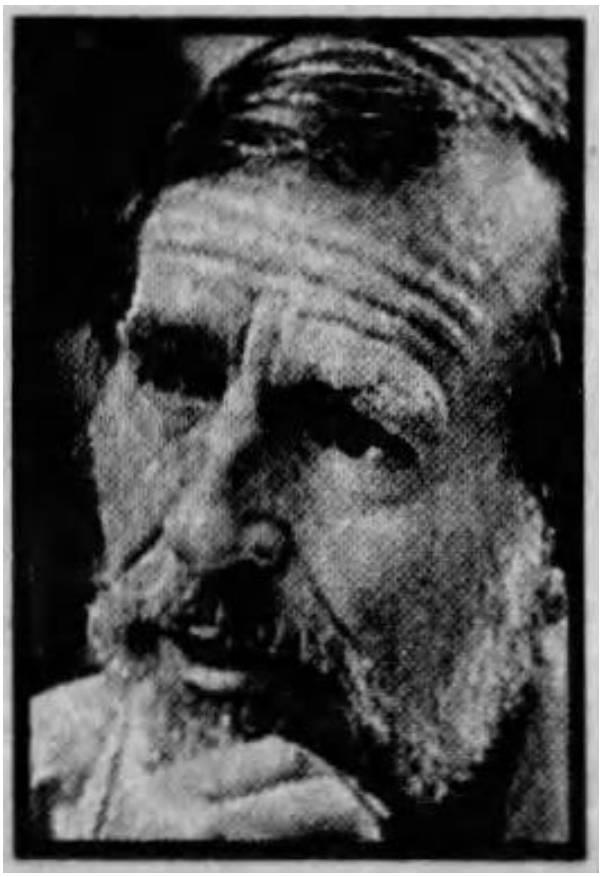
Fiery attacks on four Tucson trophy homes last week bear chilling similarities to a growing number of crimes committed in the name of nature.

Following the arrest Thursday of a 49-year-old Phoenix professional in eight luxury home arsons there, it's still unclear if a radical activist, mischievous copycat or pyromaniac hiding behind the banner of "save the preserves" started the Pima Canyon fires here.

Even so, sabotage in the name of the environment is rising across the nation. The crimes are motivated by a mistrust of conventional politics and outrage at development seen as a blasphemous imprint on the Earth, according to the vandals and those who study them.



Ed Abbey *fantasized destruction of the dam.*

Some experts say the profile of Mark Warren Sands, the man authorities believe masterminded the Phoenix arsons, matches that of other saboteurs.

Others find more differences than affinities comparing Sands and groups like the Earth Liberation Front, which burned a $12 million Vail, Colo., ski lodge in 1998 and six Long Island homes in December.

No one knows yet how the Tucson arsons fit in.

The early days

To understand the rage of radicals who are burning pricey homes in suburban America as political protest, it helps to start 400 miles north of here, at Arizona's Glen Canyon Dam.

In 1956, the federal government began plugging the Colorado River with 3 million cubic feet of concrete to help Tucson, Phoenix, Las Vegas and Los Angeles blossom in the desert.

Twenty-five years later, atop a dam they despised as a product of political horse trading, the founders of Earth First! staged their first protest, decrying decades of development in the West that put humans' needs ahead of wild nature's.

On the 1981 spring equinox, egged on by Tucson author Ed Abbey, activists unfurled a 300-foot black plastic banner down the dam's ivory face, making it look as if they'd cracked their concrete demon.

Glen Canyon Dam, whose destruction Abbey fantasized about in his writings, had created a 186-mile-long reservoir and flooded one of the South west's most gorgeous canyons. "A curious ensemble of wonderful features," one-armed John Wesley Powell wrote on his 1869 journey through the canyon, when Los Angeles had about 15,000 residents.

The 710-foot dam emerged out of concessions by the Sierra Club in the 1950s. The United States' foremost mainstream conservation group had sacrificed Glen Canyon in exchange for the government scrapping plans for a dam that would submerge part of Dinosaur National Monument in northwest Colorado.

Sierra Club leader David Brower carried regrets to his grave. And for people like former Tucsonan Dave Foreman, a disenchanted D.C. lobbyist for the Wilderness Society, it symbolized the perils of compromise and the shortcomings of working within the system.

Heroes and villains

To their backers, modern saboteurs are moral crusaders trying to save the planet from an onslaught of greedy developers and multinational corporations that corrupt governments.

To mainstream environmentalists, their gripes are legitimate, but their tactics are offensive and counterproductive.

To most of the nation, they're common criminals violating the nation's core beliefs.

"There's no difference between them and Timothy McVeigh," said Alan Gottlieb, president of the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise, a Bellevue, Wash., group that monitors eco-terrorists. "If you pick and choose which laws are valid and which you can break, the whole system comes crashing down and that's what these people want."

Environmentalism's fringe doubts technology; opposes global capitalism and flatly rejects the prevailing worldview that humans stand atop the natural world.

Bron Taylor, an expert on radical environmentalism at the University of Wisconsin, said many in the movement are "cynical about the ability of liberal democratic societies to respond in a timely matter to stop the insults we're perpetrating on nature."

While negotiation and incremental change are the essence of modern American politics, Taylor said, that's unacceptable for those who consider nature sacred and most development sacrilege.

"If at every turn you compromise and give up half," he said, "pretty soon the half of what's left is not large enough to protect the full complement of living systems and species."

Profiling extremists

Although saboteurs' elusive and often nomadic nature makes them hard to profile, social scientists say they tend to be young, intelligent, well-educated and from middle- or upper-class backgrounds.

Gary Perlstein, a criminal justice professor at Portland State University who has studied such people for 15 years, said reforms spawned by the mass movements of the 1960s haven't progressed fast or far enough for many eco-terrorists.

"We promised them there would be changes in the world, and they took us at our word," he said.

Some observers argue the media's attention to eco-terrorism has grown faster than the actual practice in recent years. And groups like the Earth Liberation Front, which took credit for the Colorado ski lodge arson, deny their work is "terrorism."

But a 10-month investigation by the Portland Oregonian in 1999 concluded crime in the name of animals and nature has grown more common and violent. The newspaper found at least 100 major acts of environmental sabotage had occurred by then in the West, causing $42.8 million in damage.

While some acts labeled as eco-terrorism look more like pranks, others tread toward the deadly force associated with Beirut and Oklahoma City.

Bombs have exploded in a U.S. Department of Agriculture office in Portland, in logging trucks in California, on the roof of a U.S. Forest Service office in New Mexico and inside meat and feed businesses in Utah, the Oregonian found.

Mainstream vs. fringe

In something of a paradox, the rise of eco-terrorism in the past three decades has dovetailed with mainstream environmentalism's' political ascendancy and the elevation of green values to a secular spiritualism for many Americans.

In the early 1970s, when the construction site vandalism of Tucson's "Eco-Raiders" began, Earth Day and the Endangered Species Act were in their infan cy. The aggressive electioneering of the Sierra Club and litigation of Tucson's Center for Biological Diversity hadn't begun. Now, surveys show majority support for tightening environmental regulations even further, said Earl de Berge, pollster for Behavior Research Center in Phoenix.

"People are searching for answers for how to preserve the lifestyle, open space and natural environment that's been so much a part of Arizona's history. There's a deep fear we're losing it," he said.

But while the environmental movement has gained adherents, and the budgets and political capital of its pressure groups have swelled, critics charge this "greening" of America is only skin-deep.

Americans may recycle religiously, they say, but over-consumption still runs rampant in the globe's most polluting nation. People may revere wildlife and make more pilgrimages to national parks, but they do so in gas-guzzling SUVs.

Fans, enemies and neutral observers of eco-terrorism all predict its severity and frequency will rise.

Barry Clausen, a former private investigator who infiltrated Earth First! in 1990 and wrote a book about it, said Tucsonans should expect more local sabotage with the Earth First! Journal returning to town this spring after stints in Missoula, Mont, and Eugene, Ore.

"You've got a lot of fruitcakes who follow the Journal," said Clausen, who goes to meetings of radical environmentalists and copies license plate numbers for his database.

The Earth First! Journal, which started in Tucson in 1984, refused to comment on Clausen's claim, but Tucson Earth First! member John Stephens called it "ridiculous." The Journal's staff is "just a bunch of journalists and they're so busy they can hardly even have a social life," he said.

Portland State University's Perlstein thinks with time, the campaign could turn deadly.

So far, "They're lousy terrorists, but excellent fugitives," he said. "I definitely think we'll see more and it will escalate."

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