

The Smog Monsters vs. The ELF

Burning for a Better World

Rod Coronado

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When Jeffrey “Free” Luers and Craig “Critter” Marshall torched three SUVs at Romania Chevrolet in Eugene, Oregon, in June 2000, they set in motion a new era of monkeywrenching. While Luers awaited trial, 36 more SUVs burned at the same dealership. Luers’ 22-year prison sentence is a reflection of a society that values corporate free enterprise, consumerism and property above the environment.

The communique following the second Romania fire announced: “Gas-guzzling SUVs are at the forefront of this imperialistic culture’s caravan toward self-destruction. We can no longer allow the rich to parade around in their armored existence, leaving a wasteland behind in their tire tracks. We must strike out against what destroys us before we all choke on smog.”

As many urban drivers replace passenger cars with SUVs, carbon dioxide levels in the air have increased threefold. The Surface Transportation Policy Project (STPP) in August reported that two million tons, or 57 percent of all air pollutants in Los Angeles, California, come from tailpipe emissions. Whether an oil tanker spill in Karachi or the proposed oil exploration in the caribou breeding grounds of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, America’s consumption of 25 percent of the world’s oil is killing the environment and people alike.

While SUVs have become a legitimate anti-pollution target, does torching them make a difference?

Since the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) began attacking SUVs, General Motors has alerted its dealers to beware of the eco-sabotuers. Kroll, Inc., a “global threat management” company, has been advising SUV dealers in security strategies and has recommended that they establish contact with FBI terrorist specialists to share information. All American Pontiac-Buick-GMC in Houston, Texas, hired 24-hour security and installed a \$100,000 video surveillance system in response to an incident on September 3, when eco-vandals damaged two-thirds of the SUV inventory. The president of the dealership commented, “It’s definitely going to impact our bottom line.” Unwilling to accept any responsibility for the nation’s growing levels of auto-emission pollution, automakers and dealers are instead practicing a siege mentality by offering up to \$100,000 rewards for ELF members.

After the August ELF arson at Clippinger Chevrolet-Hummer in California, the dealership’s insurance company raised its premiums by 25 percent. The National Automobile Dealers Association reported that additional insurance costs for SUV dealers will likely raise the price of SUVs for consumers. If insurance companies consider private SUV ownership a greater risk, higher premiums may also be on the way for the individual. One communique from the ELF stated its determination to “take the profit motive out of killing” the environment. If the ELF’s intent is to make owning a SUV more cost prohibitive, it is on the right path.

Some argue that targeting SUVs galvanizes the opposition and creates an image of auto dealers as innocent victims, making it difficult for the public to accept the ELF’s message. In several communiqués, however, the ELF has reminded us that the land

and citizens of oil-producing countries are the victims of US automakers who profit from an environmentally and socially irresponsible car-culture lifestyle.

While the environmental crisis caused by the oil and auto industries apparently is not a story for the corporate media, attacking SUVs is. The ELF's SUV actions have generated international media attention toward automobile pollution in the US.

Most articles following the California SUV actions mentioned the words painted on the SUVs, including slogans such as "Fat Lazy Americans;" "American Wastefulness;" "I (heart) Pollution;" "Gross Polluter" and "SUV=Pollution." These slogans make it clear that the acts were not pointless vandalism, but a legitimate response to an increasingly worse environmental problem. Citing the STPP report, which revealed that southern California faces a public health crisis linked to air pollution, the Reuters news agency reported that SUVs are "vilified as gas-guzzlers and polluters."

After recent SUV attacks, a firefighter claimed that burning SUVs creates more pollution than the vehicles' exhaust. An ELF spokesperson responded that without the ELF drawing attention to SUVs, the media rarely reports on the environmental consequences of the auto and oil industry. Feigning concern for the environment while criticizing the ELF, the auto industry and media say nothing about the pollution caused by pumping, drilling, exploring, transporting and burning billions of barrels of oil every year so that we can drive our cars.

Liberal environmentalists argue that the media that accompanies arson and vandalism portrays the anti-SUV position as extreme. Yet, those opposing the US auto industry can hardly compete with the multi-million-dollar advertising budgets of corporations that convey SUVs cruising the wilderness as a First World status symbol. Since the ELF began its SUV attacks, every major news network has requested interviews from ELF spokespeople, giving environmentalists a chance to convey an anti-car culture, pro-environmental message to millions of people, for free.

Industry front groups like the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise are arguing that the ELF's recent attacks warrant harsher repression against the environmental movement. They even go so far as to compare the ELF to Al Qaeda, while the Sierra Club's president, Carl Pope, says of the ELF, "They're not environmentalists, they're arsonists."

Environmentalists fearful of supporting the ELF should respond to such accusations with a "neither condone nor condemn" position and instead take full advantage of the attention to talk about the issues at hand.

The ELF is usually most effective when its actions directly cut into the profit margin or disrupt the research projects targeted. It's unlikely that the ELF will be changing its tactics anytime soon. However, it is likely that the ELF is being more pragmatic in recognizing the limits of its SUV campaign. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, a self-identified ELF member who claimed responsibility for burning SUVs said, "Even if this does turn people off, it still gets them talking and debating the issues. This is all we really want." He also hoped that opponents of auto pollution would join in the struggle themselves.

Like urban sprawl, auto pollution is an environmental crisis faced by a growing number of US communities. First World lifestyles are becoming less environmentally responsible. Coupled with the Bush administration's environmental rollbacks, sweetheart deals for industry and Environmental Protection Agency exemptions, auto and oil pollution will not only result in growing rates of respiratory illness and degradation of air quality, but also hopefully, acts of resistance against them. The ELF offers one example of how we can empower ourselves to strike back.

With a 22-year sentence for SUV arson as precedence, is burning SUVs worth the risk of such repression? As radical environmentalists, we can instead ask ourselves whether preserving anything we fight for is worth the growing repression our movement faces. Such a question would best be answered by those who are literally dying to provide our oil—whether an Ogoni tribeswoman in Nigeria or a sea bird smothered in oil. The real question remains whether we, as First World Americans, are willing to accept the consequences of our consumer ways.

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