Four fires broke out in San Diego on 19 September 2003. Banners were found at each site claiming that the Earth Liberation Front was responsible.

IN THE NAME OF NATURE

What drives environmental activists to fire-bomb laboratories?
Emma Marris investigates a radical fringe of the US green movement.

One day in June 1998, three young environmental activists of a radical bent drove from Eugene, Oregon, to Olympia, Washington. Their route took them through some of the loveliest country in the Pacific Northwest: up Interstate 5, through the Willamette Valley, between dark green forested mountains and misty hillside vineyards. Their van shared the road with logging trucks carrying immense trees hung with lichens and mosses.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the three were on their way to take part in fire-bombing two research facilities. Things, however, didn't go according to plan. They picked up one friend and lost another to a shoplifting bust. They lost contact with their second vehicle. But something compelled them to set fire to their target anyway.

On the night of 21 June, they drove down quiet Blomberg Road in Olympia, past a dairy and a few houses. They stashed 5-gallon buckets of fuel around a wooden one-storey building, then lit them with barbecue lighter sticks. A national wildlife research facility, run by the

federal government's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, was utterly destroyed. It served as lab and office space for government scientists who study animals that eat trees and invent ways to keep them from doing so. At the time of the arson, the lab was working on chemical repellents for beavers and a long-term study of what induces bears to dine on Douglas fir bark.

The attack wouldn't be the last, or the largest, on a scientific facility. Seven years later, in December 2005, the US government indicted 11 men and women on charges of conspiracy and arson for 17 fire-bombings whose results included \$12 million in damage at a ski resort in Colorado as well as the destruction of the Olympia lab. The 11 had come together loosely under the banner of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and the Animal Liberation Front (ALF). Their trial, for those not dead, fled or pled out, will be held in Eugene.

For a certain segment of the radical environmental movement, science is seen as both useful and oppressive. Activists sometimes use scientific findings to support their arguments

but often view science, and especially technology, with deep distrust. To them, science is a string of proclamations issued by men in white coats and does not respect their deeply felt connection to individual places, animals and trees. Researchers, particularly environmental scientists, should be aware of such thoughts — not least because to some of these activists, science is a legitimate target in a war in which the very future of Earth is at stake.

Terror list

Although it is impossible to know how large such pockets of radicalism are, the FBI considers them a serious threat. Spokesman Bill Carter says, "From January 1990 to June 2004, animal and environmental rights extremists have claimed credit for more than 1,200 criminal incidents, resulting in millions of dollars in damage and monetary loss." The bureau has officially labelled both groups terrorists — a word freighted with emotion, rhetoric and law-enforcement response.

Dale Nolte, who ran the Olympia facility at the time of the arson, remembers an ELF

F. GRAVES/REUTERS

communiqué claiming credit. “They said they had targeted us because of work we had done with beaver traps and cougars,” says Nolte, now mammals programme manager at the National Wildlife Research Center headquarters in Fort Collins, Colorado. “I don’t know where they got their information, because we had never worked with cougars and we were working with repellents, not traps.”

Nolte has never understood the arsonists’ motives. He lost a personal library in the fire, as well as several crates’ worth of original data and observations about the mountain beaver going back decades. “Our goal was to establish a better understanding of the relationships between the animals and forest, and to enhance the establishment of trees,” he says. “I have a strong sense of protecting the environment.”

To the activists, a lab that served the interests of lumber companies was fair game. Many of them came from the anti-logging community in Eugene.

Among the outsiders

Quiet, pretty and populated with anti-establishment characters, Eugene is a magnet for the kind of activists who end up in the ELF. On a fine day at the downtown Eugene market, one might see the following clues that one has stumbled deep into the heart of a west-coast radical paradise: people bristling with clipboard petitions on a range of left and anarchist issues; others wearing fairy wings; kids in home-made nappies being toted behind bicycles; tie dye, drum circles and the sweet reek of marijuana.

The taxonomy of subcultures here is nearly impenetrable to an outsider. There are anarchists, feminists, Marxists, primitivists, old-school hippies, libertarians and socialists. The groups tend to spend their time debating with each other, more or less ignoring the mainstream.

In June, friends and sympathizers of the Eugene-based eco-prisoners held a benefit at a local bar. The night was mellow, the band good, the beer organic — just the sort of ideological cocoon that can make radical ideas seem pedestrian. Primitivist writer Derrick Jensen gave a lecture on the futility of working within any system to save Earth. For those in the room, his contention that humanity is in “the thrashing endgame of civilization” seemed obvious. A man in a cowboy hat and black overalls, smoking a cigarette on the back porch, said he was ready to give up civilization completely: “Everything, man, the whole gig.”

Jensen, a middle-aged man in a T-shirt reading “Better dead than domesticated”, proved a good rhetorician. Unlike many radical speakers, he was also very funny. But the logic of his arguments sometimes fell apart, and he displayed a strong anti-science streak. He referred to “the myths of science” and said it

doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see that industrial civilization is not sustainable. “In fact,” he continued, “it probably takes everybody but a rocket scientist.”

Jensen’s attitudes are not unusual among ELF-sympathizing eco-activists. These people are deeply sceptical of anything having to do with that entity variously known as ‘the dominant culture’, ‘the white supremacist capitalist imperialist patriarchy’, ‘the man’ or ‘the machine’. Science is part of ‘the machine’, based, in their view, on hard rationalism and cold technology.

Philosophers of science have produced reasonable arguments against science as the pure, objective, single road to truth. But something bad happens when you mix half-baked versions of these critiques with a soul-shaking environmental fervour. What you get is anti-intellectual spasms of violence. This approach is a long way from the earlier tradition of direct action in favour of the environment, pioneered by the group Earth First!

Many scientists were among the first members of that group, formed in 1980 in the US southwest. As Susan Zakin describes them in *Coyotes and Town Dogs*, her 1993 book on the movement, they were boozing, redneck ‘desert rats’ — men who had seen the mesas mined, the Colorado River dammed and the great American West becoming tamed. They stressed ecosystems over scenery, unlike many environmentalists of the time. They never resorted to arson: rather, they dismantled construction equipment, trashed billboards and spiked trees with nails to break chain-saws — but they generally told loggers where they had done this to avoid nasty accidents.

Later in the 1980s, a schism opened between the ecologists in the group and those who were more interested in “monkey-wrenching” — sabotage or other forms of troublemaking. The scientists began to drift off. “By the time we began sitting in redwood trees in northern California, the pagan vegan pacifists outnumbered the biologists ten to one,” says founding member Mike Roselle.

The non-scientists that were left, he says, spawned the ELF. They were radical and committed. “These folks are often the unsung heroes, the true foot soldiers of the movement,” he says. “The ones in jail were among our best, some of the most skilled and committed members of our movement. Their incarceration is a tragic loss for all of us.”

Earth First! co-founder Dave Foreman doesn’t quite agree. “We wanted to use the science of ecology to guide us,” he says. “The current group of people I don’t consider conservationists, but part of the international anarchist animal-rights movement. It becomes sort

of an inarticulate yowl against the establishment — revolution for the hell of it.”

The yowl often starts young. Chelsea Gerlach, one of the recent indictees, was a 16-year-old high-school student in Eugene when she was arrested at an Earth First! logging blockade in Idaho, according to her support website. At school, she ran an environmental club, and, according to Seattle’s alternative weekly, *The Stranger*, was quoted in the yearbook as saying, “Our generation was born to save the Earth. If

we wait until we’re out of school it might be too late.” She was 23 when, the FBI indictment alleges, she helped set fire to the Jefferson Poplar Farms in Clatskanie, Oregon, spray-painting “ELF” and “You cannot control what is wild”.

That was 21 May 2001. For maximum effect, the FBI says, on the same night three others — William Rodgers, Stanislas Meyerhoff and Briana Waters —

torched the University of Washington’s centre for urban horticulture, about 230 kilometres away in Seattle. They took time to remove some cages for pet snakes from the building, Merrill Hall, before setting it aflame.

The Merrill fire

The hall housed lab space for botanists and ecologists, and served as a meeting place for Seattle’s horticulturalists. Assistant professor Sarah Reichard, a specialist in rare plants, remembers the day well. “It was a beautiful morning,” she says, until she got the message that her lab was on fire. She rushed to the hall, which sits just down the hill from the main University of Washington campus and is surrounded by demonstration gardens, meadows, and a grove of native trees.

“There was Merrill Hall with flames leaping 30 or 40 feet into the air,” she remembers. The young academic lost everything, including a tissue culture lab where she was growing the highly endangered showy stickweed, a blue-white flowering plant in the forget-me-not family. Losses of specimens, along with irreplaceable books and slides, put her career back at least a year, she estimates.

It wasn’t just the blow to her road to tenure that worries her. That morning, standing by the blazing building, she feared that someone had been killed. “Academic units are not nine-to-five places,” she says. “In fact, it was very unusual that there was no one there at three in the morning. One graduate student told me that the only reason he wasn’t there was because I gave an extension on an assignment.” No one was hurt in the blaze, but the building was a total loss.

Reichard may have been the hardest hit but she wasn’t the target of the arson. “We could see Toby’s office was black — a big black hole,” she says. “Everyone realized immediately that it was not an accident.”

“The ones in jail were among our best, some of the most skilled and committed members of our movement.”

— Mike Roselle

“It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see that industrial civilization is not sustainable.”

— Derrick Jensen

LEFT: FBI/AP; CENTRE: LANE COUNTY ADULT CORRECTIONS/AP

Toby is Toby Bradshaw, a plant geneticist who at the time ran the Poplar Molecular Genetics Cooperative, a group working on finding genes in hybrid poplars that code for traits useful in a crop tree — fast-growing, disease-resistant and straight. The team used traditional breeding techniques, ultimately aiming to make productive tree farms more attractive than logging big trees from old-

growth forests. Somehow, however, the radical greens got the idea that Bradshaw was genetically engineering trees.

Bradshaw says he has never done so, although his colleagues have. He'd been a target before. Someone had tried to overturn his potted seedlings during the protest against the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999. And two weeks after the Merrill Hall fire, a communiqué was issued through Craig Rosebraugh, a former spokesman for the ELF who has not been indicted. It reads, in part, "Bradshaw, the driving force in G.E. tree research, continues to unleash mutant genes into the environment that is certain to cause irreversible harm to forest ecosystems. As long as universities continue to pursue this reckless 'science', they run the risk of suffering severe losses. Our message remains clear, we are determined to stop genetic engineering."

Bradshaw likes to joke that the fire actually helped his career. He got tenure and a new lab shortly afterwards, and has since moved on to unrelated work. But the attitudes behind the crime trouble him. "As social commentary,

Josephine Sunshine Overaker: fugitive.

Kevin Tubbs: pleaded guilty to arson and conspiracy.

William Rodgers: killed himself in jail.

FBI director Robert Mueller gave a press conference on the indictments in Washington DC. "Terrorism is terrorism, no matter the motive," he said. "The FBI becomes involved, as it did in this case, only when volatile talk crosses the line into violence and criminal activity." Terrorism, however, is not defined as a crime in the United States; the group was charged with arson and associated crimes.

these kinds of arsons are ineffective because they are so misguided," he says. "Science at its heart is a rational enterprise and, at its heart, this kind of terror tactics with fire-bombing is an irrational enterprise."

The crackdown

The FBI last interviewed Bradshaw at the time of the arson, and he was surprised last December when the arrests were announced. In fact, the FBI had spent years putting together information for the indictment; the most recent of the 17 arsons listed in the charges dated to October 2001, at a Bureau of Land Management wild-horse facility in Litchfield, California. The small group that had acted under the ELF banner seems to have more or less broken up after that, scattering to Virginia, Arizona, and around the Pacific Northwest. Reportedly, the FBI laid the groundwork for the charges by getting activist and heavy-metal guitarist Jake Ferguson to call his old pals for some nostalgic, and wire-tapped, conversations.

The bust was important enough to bring out the top law-enforcement brass. On 20 January,

Most of the indictees are now in jails in Oregon, with some under house arrest or out on bail. Lauren Regan, head of the Civil Liberties Defense Center in Eugene, calls the arrests the 'green scare', a play on the 'red scare' of the 1950s in which US citizens with communist ties were persecuted.

Regan says that many of the indictees don't deserve the sentences they are facing — life several times over for each. "A lot of these people were at the time very young," she points out. "You are easily swayed, you've got a lot of passion. You hold a radio while some genetically modified trees are burned down. Chances are that they were not thinking, in that pre-9/11 time, that they were looking at life in jail."

Repentance and escape

Many of those arrested have since pleaded guilty and are cooperating with the authorities. Gerlach made a public statement at the time of her plea, saying, "These acts were motivated by a deep sense of despair and anger at the deteriorating state of the global environment and the escalating inequities within society. But I realized years ago that this was not an effective or appropriate way to effect positive change."

Those outside jail have reacted harshly to those cooperating with the government. In Eugene, Jensen began his speech with a message: "What you are doing is wrong, and I plan on seeing you brought to justice. And fuck you." Ferguson, who never faced charges, is known in some activist circles as 'Jake the Snake'.

A few of the indictees are still at large. Their wanted posters reveal a bit about them. Justine Overaker's, for example, paints a portrait of her as a seeker; it mentions that she may seek work as a "firefighter, a midwife, a sheep tender or a masseuse" and that she can speak Spanish and has been known to use narcotics. She has a tattoo of a bird across her back.

Rodgers, also known as Avalon, was arrested at his bookstore in Prescott, Arizona. He suffocated himself to death with a plastic bag in his jail cell. He left a note that said, "Human cultures have been waging war against the Earth for millennia. I chose to fight on the side of bears, mountain lions, skunks, bats, saguaros, cliff rose and all things wild. I am just the most recent casualty in that war. But tonight I have made a jail break — I am returning home, to

The activists' enemy at work: a loader stacking logs in the Cascade Mountains near Eugene, Oregon.

W. MORGAN/CORBIS

Signature style: a message claiming responsibility for setting fire to an apartment complex being built in Sutter Creek, near Sacramento, California.

the Earth, to the place of my origins.”

At 41, Rodgers was the oldest of the indictees and by some reports the ringleader. His lover, Katie Rose Nelson, says, “Life mattered to him — and that meant all life”. She and Rodgers both felt the environmental cause was urgent — too urgent to spend time on research. “In our hearts we can all see what is happening around us,” she says.

With most indictees not talking, missing or dead, they can’t explain the motivations and justifications for their alleged crimes. But a rare glimpse of three of the activists, including Ferguson and Rodgers, can be seen in the 1999 documentary film *Pickaxe*, which chronicles an 11-month battle in the mid-1990s to keep an area in Oregon called Warner Creek from being logged. Here, they engage in legal protests, such as hunger strikes, and the kind of non-violent illegal protest that many condone, such as blockading the road into the area.

And they won. At least that one patch of forest is still there, old and moist and green. So why were these same people drawn to anonymous arson attacks late at night — and why target scientists?

“Science does not have a lock on truth,” says David Agranoff, an animal-rights and veganism activist in San Diego, California, who knows some of the defendants. He says he is sure they considered their actions carefully: “I would guess they had a pretty good reason.” Rosebraugh, the former ELF spokesman, notes

that each would have had their own motives. “For all the people involved,” he says, “you would probably give a different answer.”

The ‘pure ones’

Donna Haraway, who studies feminism and science at the University of California, Santa Cruz, met some of the radical-activist set in Eugene when she went to speak there in 2001. Because Haraway, author of *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, embraces technology as an agent for positive change, the group saw her as an enemy. Their protest included flyers that she found distinctly threatening. “At least one felt that the rape of nature justified the rape of anyone who supported it,” she says. “These people don’t go for complexity; they believe that they are the only pure ones who can defend nature.”

The ELF indictees are by no means the last

of the self-anointed environmental ‘pure ones’. Jeffrey Luers of Eugene is appealing a 22-year sentence for setting fire to sports utility vehicles as a protest. Activist Trey Arrow is fighting extradition from Canada to the United States, where he faces charges of having burned logging and mining trucks. In January, three people were arrested in the parking lot of a Kmart while buying supplies, allegedly to bomb a forest genetics lab in Placerville, California: they are charged with conspiracy, and two have pleaded guilty, although many activists blame an FBI agent provocateur for the plot. In Canada, a group of eco-saboteurs are currently on a fire-bombing tour of construction sites across Ontario. By its nature, the movement is decentralized, non-hierarchical and open. Anyone can be an environmental arsonist.

From jail, Luers publishes a magazine called *Heartcheck*, with an estimated circulation of 1,000. For the latest issue, he has penned an essay called ‘Time’s up’ in which he summarizes recent facts and figures on species extinction in various ecosystems, glacier melt rates in Alaska and carbon dioxide levels. He ends: “I could go on, but you get the point. Or do you? We are not running out of time, we are out of time! We have to act now just so it doesn’t get any worse. Smash it, break it, block it, lock down to it. I don’t care what you do or how you do it. Just stop it. Get out there and stop it.”

Emma Marris is a Washington correspondent for *Nature*.

“This was not an effective or appropriate way to effect positive change.”

— Chelsea Gerlach