

## BRIEF COMMUNICATION OPEN



# When, where, and which climate activists have vandalized museums

Lily Kinyon<sup>1</sup>, Nives Dolšak<sup>2</sup> and Aseem Prakash<sup>3</sup>✉

Some climate groups have employed disruptive but non-violent tactics to draw public attention to the slow progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. In 2022, a new disruptive tactic emerged: vandalizing art and museums. In this Brief Communication, we describe the key findings which are based on an exhaustive search of media articles and social media postings. We find that almost all 38 reported incidents occurred during May–December 2022, with protests peaking around the COP 27 conference in Sharm El Sheikh, November 6–18. Once the COP conference was over, museum incidents dwindled to only three in December. Museum vandalism took place in eleven countries, nine of which are in Europe. Even within Europe, 60% of the incidents occurred in just three countries: Germany, Italy, and the U.K. We find sixteen groups were involved in these incidents, but three groups account for 58% of them: Ultima Generazione (Italy and Vatican), Just Stop Oil (the U.K.), and Letzte Generation (Germany). Importantly, these groups are part of the A22 network, which suggests the possibility of some informal coordination on the staging and timing of museum events. None of the legacy environmental groups (such as Greenpeace) are involved in museum protests, although historically some have staged dramatic events to garner media attention.

*npj Climate Action* (2023)2:27; <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44168-023-00054-5>

## INTRODUCTION

Environmental advocacy has existed for decades. Starting with the 1970 Earth Day protest<sup>1</sup> to the more recent Greta Thunberg's "Fridays for Future" strikes<sup>2</sup> and the Sunrise movement, activists have used protests, blockades, naming-and-shaming, boycotting, divesting, and litigation to bring attention to their cause<sup>3,4</sup>. In developing countries, Indigenous Nations have protested against pollution and mining<sup>5,6</sup>. In Indian Himalayas, the Chipko movement led women to hug trees to prevent their logging<sup>7</sup>. Broadly, a well-developed literature examines social movement repertoires<sup>8,9</sup>. Scholars note that the specific tactics advocacy groups adopt depend on a variety of factors<sup>10</sup> including the resources available to them, the political opportunity structure within which they can advocate specific causes<sup>11,12</sup>, the characteristics of the advocates, and the characteristics of the target<sup>13</sup>.

Activists target governments, corporations,<sup>14</sup> and even citizens regarding climate policies and behaviors<sup>15,16</sup>. Scholars note that media plays an important role in amplifying the social movement's message<sup>17</sup>. Climate advocates have skillfully deployed both legacy media and social media<sup>18</sup>. In part, the success of media coverage translating into public support depends on how the issue gets framed<sup>19</sup>. Thus, narrative control is critical for the success of climate advocacy.

In recent years, given the slow pace of emission reductions, some climate groups have resorted to non-violent but disruptive (NVD) action<sup>20</sup>. We view this as radical in terms of tactics, though not necessarily in terms of their goals. Moreover, we recognize that the level of radicalness of different tactics varies, in part by the response they provoke from targeted actors. The tactical objective of NVD action is to generate widespread media coverage. These activists have sometimes stopped trains or disrupted traffic on major highways. They have blocked oil terminals or demonstrated near oil pipeline projects as in the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline<sup>21</sup>. For some commentators, these actions are

disruptive and confrontational and not likely to generate either public sympathy or policy change. After all, a lack of public awareness is not hindering climate progress. They believe that sources of opposition to climate policy are complex, requiring careful political negotiations instead of confrontation.

Social movement scholars debate whether radical actions support or subvert movement goals<sup>22</sup>. After all, most social movements have mainstream and radical (both nonviolent and violent) factions. Might even nonviolent radical action provoke a countermovement or provide a pretext for governments to crack down on social movement activists? For example, in response to the picketing of oil and gas infrastructure, about 17 U.S. states have enacted "critical infrastructure" laws that criminalize protests against fossil fuel pipelines. Other scholars suggest that radical action might increase support for mainstream groups and therefore lead to policy action; this is sometimes called the "radical flank effect"<sup>23,24</sup>. The idea is that radical groups make mainstream groups look more reasonable and therefore persuade public officials to respond to their moderate demands. Thus, the radical flank potentially changes the political opportunity structure that mainstream groups can take advantage of.

## MUSEUM VANDALISM AS RADICAL ACTION

Recently, climate groups such as the Extinction Rebellion, Letzte Generation, and Ultima Generazione have employed NVD tactics to draw public attention to the slow progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. In 2022, they began vandalizing art and museums, although in most cases the art pieces were not damaged. These actions which were carefully choreographed over social media, are designed to shock citizens, mobilize them, and compel governments to enact aggressive climate policies. Arguably, these protests should not be dismissed as emotional responses by actors with little policy knowledge because sometimes radical activists professionally

<sup>1</sup>Center for Environmental Politics, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA. <sup>2</sup>School of Marine and Environmental Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA.

<sup>3</sup>Department of Political Science & Center for Environmental Politics, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA. ✉email: aseem@uw.edu

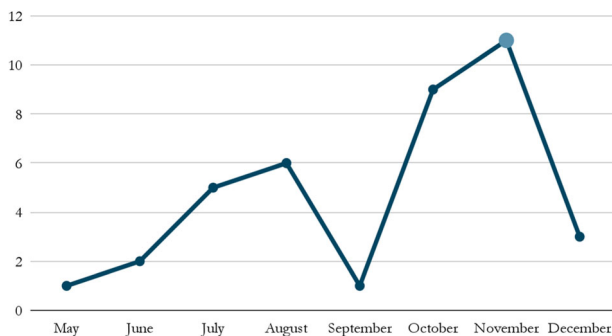
evaluate policy options by employing scientific knowledge<sup>25</sup>. Thus, the museum vandalism tactic could be viewed as part of a well-thought-out plan to mobilize public opinion against fossil fuels.

How many of such incidents took place? When, where, and who was responsible? To provide a comprehensive overview of the museum vandalism tactic, we describe the key findings which are based on an exhaustive search of media articles and social media postings. We have posted the dataset on the Harvard Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/SAYIJ5>). We find that in 2022, thirty-eight incidents took place. None took place in 2021 and only three so far in 2023. Below are our key findings.

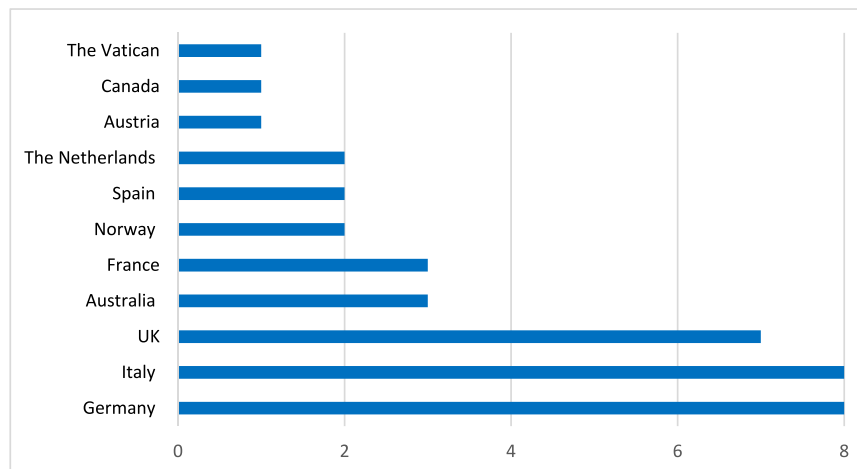
### WHEN DID THESE INCIDENTS TAKE PLACE?

Almost all reported incidents seemed to have occurred during May–December 2022. The first museum incident took place on May 29 when an activist threw cake on the Mona Lisa in the Louvre. There were two incidents in June, five in July, and six in August. After a lull in September with only one recorded incident, we find nine incidents in October. Protests peaked in November with eleven incidents, eight of which occurred during the COP 27 conference in Sharm El Sheik, November 6–18. This suggests that activist groups, probably in some sort of informal coordination, sought to employ museum tactics to amplify the COP’s climate message. Indeed, once the conference was over, museum incidents dwindled to only three in December (Fig. 1).

Museum vandalism has almost stopped in 2023, with only three incidents to date: the smearing of paint over Degas’ “Little Dancer” in Washington DC and the Monet Painting at Sweden’s National Museum as well as the pouring of diluted charcoal in the water of Rome’s Trevi Fountain.



**Fig. 1** Museum Vandalism Incidents in 2022.



**Fig. 2** Countries that Experienced Museum Vandalism.

### WHERE DID THESE INCIDENTS TAKE PLACE?

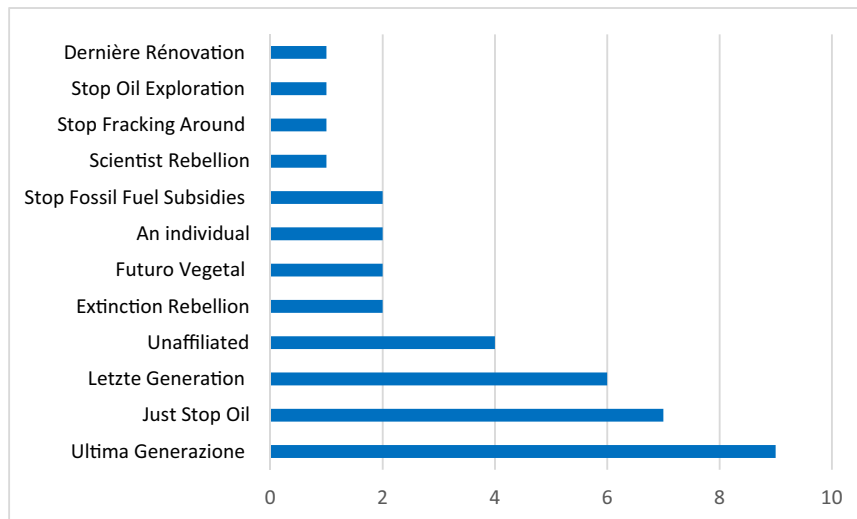
Museum vandalism is predominantly a European phenomenon. These events took place in eleven countries, nine of which are in Europe: Germany Italy, the U.K., France, Spain, the Netherlands, Norway, Austria, and the Vatican. Non-European countries, Australia and Canada, account for only 10% (four of the thirty-eight) incidents. Even within Europe, 60% (23) of the incidents occurred in just three countries: Germany, Italy, and the U.K. Interestingly, in 2022 we did not find any museum vandalism incidents in the U.S., although some climate groups have employed disruptive tactics.

Importantly, the absence of such events in the developing world which has well-established climate movements, raises important questions on how some tactics to raise public awareness might work in specific countries only. If museums are an important part of a country’s cultural life, museum vandalism will probably receive extensive media coverage. In other countries where cultural life is located at the community level and not part of a formally organized structure, museum vandalism will probably not appear in the tactical repertoires of climate groups (Fig. 2).

### WHICH GROUPS WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR SUCH INCIDENTS?

We find sixteen groups were involved in these incidents. Organized groups (as opposed to individuals) are responsible for 95% (thirty-six) of incidents and they targeted museums in their countries of origin. Even among these, three groups account for 58% of these incidents: Ultima Generazione (Italy and Vatican) is responsible for nine, Just Stop Oil (the U.K.) for seven, and Letzte Generation (Germany) for six incidents. While these groups targeted museums in the countries in which they are located, they may have some sort of coordination mechanisms as well. The reason is that these organizations are members of the A22 network (<https://ultima-generazione.com/a22network/>). The A22 website notes: “As the Last Generation, we will do whatever it takes to protect our generation and all future generations. As is our inalienable right. The old world is dying. We are in the last hour, the darkest hour. This world is being decimated before our eyes. We are in between moments. What we do now decides the fate of both this world and the next.”

The Climate Emergency Fund (<https://www.climateemergencyfund.org/a22>), which is the “lead funder” for the A22 group, notes: “In less than a year, most A22 groups had become the most prominent climate group in their home countries. Each group generated incredible amounts of press coverage and fundamentally changed the conversation around their chosen demand. In 2022, 23,000 press stories covered these 11 groups and their



**Fig. 3** Activist Groups Conducting Museum Vandalism.

demands!" Thus, future work should examine whether specific acts of museum vandalism are part of a coordinated plan, or whether A22 members individually choose specific locations and times of action.

In addition, three groups were involved in two museum incidents each, and the remaining ten engaged in one incident each. None of the legacy environmental groups (such as Greenpeace) are involved in museum protests, although historically they have staged dramatic events (such as boarding ships or unfurling banners from the top of prominent buildings) to garner media attention. This raises important questions such as whether legacy groups focus on specific types of NVD actions only, and why they are keeping away from the museum vandalism tactic (Fig. 3).

Did these groups outline a specific demand? Just Stop Oil, Letzte Generation, and Ultima Generazione target the fossil fuel sector and want quick emission reductions. They typically do not advocate for a specific policy instrument to achieve this objective. In contrast, Scientist Rebellion, which participated in one incident, had a specific demand: the German government reinstate a speed limit. Futuro Vegetal, which organized two incidents, demanded the revocation of Coca-Cola's COP27 sponsorship. It appears that the less visible groups tended to make focused demand for a specific policy instrument or objective, while the more visible groups had a more generic message on climate change and reducing fossil fuel use.

## DISCUSSION

Martinez-Alier<sup>5</sup> differentiates among three types of environmentalism based on their origins, discourses, and tactics. The first, 'the Cult of Wilderness' reflects the traditional conservation movement that seeks to protect pristine nature, without paying adequate attention to who might bear the costs of such conservation measures. Second, the 'gospel of eco-efficiency' advocates for ecological modernization coupled with economic and technological changes to move the modern industrial society towards sustainable development. The third type, 'environmentalism of the poor,' views environmental problems from the prism of the poor and underprivileged whose daily lives are impacted by environmental destruction. The climate movement incorporates all three elements but where might we place museum protests? Given that these protests took place in rich countries and museums are not the sites where the livelihood of the poor (even in these countries) is impacted, they probably do not reflect the "environmentalism of the poor." Moreover, given the demand for decoupling from fossil fuels, as opposed to sustainably

managing them, it also does not fit in the category of the "gospel of eco-efficiency" either. Arguably, and with some caveats, museum protests share some similarities with the conservation movement. Both seek to protect future generations by eliminating current economic activities. Conservationists sought to protect pristine nature by protecting it from logging and other economic interests. Moreover, like the conservationists, museum vandals do not pay adequate attention to distributional and justice issues<sup>26</sup> (della Porta, 2015), specifically, how eliminating fossil fuel could increase energy costs which hurt the poor or communities dependent on the production or use of fossil fuels. Yet, unlike the conservationists, the museum vandalism movement employs outsider tactics. Its leadership is anti-establishment, as opposed to a part of it. Thus, museum vandalism, and NVD action in general, call for additional theorizing about the different types of radical tactics employed by the climate movement.

This Brief Communication raises additional questions for the study of climate action. It is not clear whether museum vandalism is effective in spurring governments to adopt more aggressive climate mitigation policies, at least in the short term. On the face of it, drilling for oil and gas continues, Coca-Cola did not drop its COP 27 sponsorship, and the German government has not put speed limits on autobahns. Regarding the broader climate policy goals demanded by some groups, the effectiveness of a single tactic is difficult to evaluate because governments operate in a complex political environment. Moreover, with the Ukraine crisis, energy security issues may have temporarily slowed down the energy transition. What if the tactical effectiveness is evaluated in terms of the public support it generates? Many museum incidents were widely covered in both legacy and social media. Activists often made highly emotional statements. After gluing themselves to Vermeer painting in the Hague, Just Stop Oil activist said: "How do you feel when you see something beautiful and priceless apparently being destroyed before your eyes? Do you feel outraged? Good. Where is that feeling when you see the planet being destroyed?"<sup>27</sup>

Some opinion polls suggest public disapproval of these tactics<sup>28</sup>. German Chancellor Scholz said that "it's completely nutty to somehow stick yourself to a painting or on the street"<sup>29</sup>. Directors of prominent museums released a statement noting: "In recent weeks, there have been several attacks on works of art in international museum collections. The activists responsible for them severely underestimate the fragility of these irreplaceable objects, which must be preserved as part of our world cultural heritage"<sup>30</sup>.

Will climate advocacy become more radical (both in terms of tactics and goals) over time if policy progress remains sluggish? Or

will it shift towards more collaborative approaches to work with both governments and firms? The picture is unclear. In January 2023, Extinction Rebellion announced that it would temporarily pause disruptive protests. Other groups, such as Just Stop Oil and Ultima Generazione, however, are continuing with this tactic. Recent examples include the attempts at disrupting the Wimbledon and the British Open. Broadly, it seems two sorts of social movement repertoires will continue to flourish. Mainstream groups will focus on established tactics such as protests, lobbying, boycotts, divestment, and litigation. In contrast, smaller organizations with social media skills will probably selectively engage in museum protests and other forms of dramatic NVD action. It remains to be seen whether the good cop/bad cop strategy, the “radical flank effect”, will increase public support for the climate goals espoused by the mainstream climate movement and motivate additional governmental response to the climate crisis.

## METHODS

The data was collected via internet searches. No Human subjects were involved.

## Reporting summary

Further information on research design is available in the Nature Research Reporting Summary linked to this article.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

The datasets are posted on the Harvard Dataverse repository, <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/SAYJJS>.

Received: 31 May 2023; Accepted: 14 July 2023;

Published online: 01 September 2023

## REFERENCES

- Rome, A. *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-in Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation* (Macmillan, 2013).
- Fisher, D. R. The broader importance of # FridaysForFuture. *Nat. Clim. Chan.* **9**, 430–431 (2019).
- Van Der Heijden, H. Political opportunity structure and the institutionalisation of the environmental movement. *Environmental Politics* **6**, 25–50 (1997).
- Dietz, M., & Garrelts, H. *Routledge Handbook of the Climate Change Movement* (Routledge, 2014).
- Martinez-Alier, J. *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2003).
- Ali, S. *Mining, the Environment, and Indigenous Development Conflicts* (University of Arizona Press, 2009).
- Jain, S. Women and people’s ecological movement: A case study of women’s role in the Chipko movement in Uttar Pradesh. *Econ. Polit. Weekly* **19**, 1788–1794 (1984).
- Edelman, M. Social movements: changing paradigms and forms of politics. *Ann. Rev. Anthropol.* **30**, 285–317 (2001).
- Taylor, V. & Van Dyke, N. “Get up, stand up”: Tactical repertoires of social movements. *Blackwell Companion Social Move* **12**, 262–293 (2004).
- Prakash, A. & Gugerty M K. (Eds.). *Advocacy Organizations and Collective Action* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- Gamson, W. *The Strategy of Social Protest* (Wadsworth, 1990).
- Kitschelt, H. Political opportunity structures and political protest: Anti-nuclear movements in four democracies. *British J. Polit. Sci.* **16**, 57–85 (1986).
- Walker, E., Martin, A. & McCarthy, J. Confronting the state, the corporation, and the academy: The influence of institutional targets on social movement repertoires. *Am. J. Sociol.* **114**, 35–76 (2008).
- Baron, D. Private politics. *J. Econ. Manage. Strat.* **12**, 31–66 (2003).
- Wynes, S. *SOS: What You Can Do To Reduce Climate Change—Simple Actions that Make a Difference* (Random House, 2019).
- Dolsak, N. & Prakash, A. Different approaches to reducing aviation emissions: Reviewing the structure-agency debate in climate policy. *npj Clim. Act.* **1**, 2 (2002).
- Andrews, K. & Caren, N. Making the news: Movement organizations, media attention, and the public agenda. *Am. Socio. Rev.* **75**, 841–866 (2010).
- Van Laer, J. & Van Aelst, P. Internet and social movement action repertoires: Opportunities and limitations. *Inform. Commun. Soc.* **13**, 1146–1171 (2010).
- Benford, R. & Snow, D. Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Ann. Rev. Sociol.* **26**, 611–639 (2000).
- Wang, D. & Piazza, A. The use of disruptive tactics in protest as a trade-off. *Soc. Forces* **94**, 1675–1710 (2016).
- Steinman, E. Why was Standing Rock and the # NoDAPL campaign so historic? Factors affecting American Indian participation in social movement collaborations and coalitions. *Ethnic Racial Studies* **42**, 1070–1090 (2019).
- Shuman, E., Hasan-Aslih, S., van Zomeren, M., Saguy, T. & Halperin, E. Protest movements involving limited violence can sometimes be effective: Evidence from the 2020 BlackLivesMatter protests. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci.* **119**, e2118990119 (2022).
- Freeman, J. *The Politics of Women’s Liberation* (Addison-Wesley Longman Limited, 1975).
- Haines, H. Black radicalization and the funding of civil rights: 1957–1970. *Social Prob.* **32**, 31–43 (1984).
- Corry, O. & Reiner, D. Protests and policies: How radical social movement activists engage with climate policy dilemmas. *Sociology.* **55**, 197–217 (2021).
- della Porta, D. (ed). *Global Justice Movement* (Routledge, 2015).
- Henley, J. Just Stop Oil activist tries to glue own head to Girl with a Pearl Earring. *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/oct/27/girl-with-a-pearl-earring-vermeer-just-stop-oil-protest-mauritshuis-the-hague> (2022).
- Mann, M. Throwing soup at art shifted people’s views of climate protests—but maybe not in the right way, *Time*, November 15 (2022). <https://time.com/6233983/van-gogh-art-climate-protest-survey/>.
- Grieshaber, K. German chancellor calls some climate activists’ protests ‘nutty.’ *Associated Press*, <https://www.aol.com/news/german-chancellor-calls-climate-activists-153250211.html> (2023).
- USA Art News. ‘We have been deeply shaken’: 92 museum leaders release statement addressing climate actions that target works of art, <https://usaartnews.com/news/we-have-been-deeply-shaken-92-museum-leaders-release-statement-addressing-climate-actions-that-target-works-of-art> (2022).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No external funding was received for conducting this study.

## AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

These authors contributed equally to the paper: Lily Kinyon, Nives Dolsak, and Aseem Prakash. email: lilyk21@uw.edu; nives@uw.edu; aseem@uw.edu.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

**Supplementary information** The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44168-023-00054-5>.

**Correspondence** and requests for materials should be addressed to Aseem Prakash.

**Reprints and permission information** is available at <http://www.nature.com/reprints>

**Publisher’s note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

© The Author(s) 2023