

# Far from terrorism, ELF engages in selfless acts to protect future

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On Nov. 8, 1986, members of the Sea Shepherds, a radical environmental group, targeted three ships anchored in the Reykjavik harbor in Iceland that were still used for whaling in clear violation of International Whaling Commission regulations. Before boarding the ships the Sea Shepherds took an oath not to injure a living being in any way (Sea Shepherds also take an oath not to use weapons or explosives). A night watchman was discovered sleeping on one of the ships; this ship was left afloat. Valves on the other two ships were opened and soon the ships rested ruined on the harbor floor, at a cost later estimated at \$2.8 million. The Sea Shepherds then left the country; if caught they would have been prosecuted severely by Icelandic law. Why would people risk imprisonment to save whales at no economic gain to themselves?

A growing number of individuals are risking their lives in order to defend non-humans and ecosystems by destroying physical property that threatens these life forms. These groups include the Sea Shepherds, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), and the Animal Liberation Front. More fruitful public debate would be gained through a better understanding of these groups. A sharp line of distinction must be drawn between the actions of these groups and "violent terrorist" groups that use guns and bombs to promote their agendas. As a professor of religious studies I am committed to the idea that judgment should follow understanding; judgment that precedes understanding is called prejudice. I am interested in neither condoning nor condemning the actions of these groups, but

am concerned that an important distinction has been lost in recent public debate.

All of the groups mentioned above are committed to nonviolence; many individuals associated with these groups undergo strict training in the discipline of non-violence. However, ELF, the group that has supposedly claimed responsibility for the destruction of property in our area, has been labeled as a "violent terrorist" group by some of our local leaders. From an impassioned position of moral outrage, it has even been suggested that they have used guns. This is a dangerous accusation that may lead to unjust prosecution. ELF members may have been known to throw a pie in the face of individuals they believe responsible for actions destructive to the environment, but the distinction between a pie and a gun should not be lost. To be sure, some radical environmentalists have maintained that respect for life takes precedence over respect for property which is used to take lives, and have asked: If a person were coming after you or a helpless being with a weapon, would it be acceptable to destroy the weapon, even if this involved the destruction of property? However one answers, it must be conceded that the destruction of property is not the same as the destruction of life.

What, then, motivates such radical environmentalists? The answers surely must be complex and varied, but a general position can be identified from their publications. Some take very seriously what contemporary scientists are telling us: that all life forms are radically inter-

related. This means that by protecting a forest one is in effect protecting oneself. Others believe that healthy old-growth forests must be maintained. Harvard University biologist E. O. Wilson argues publicly and persistently that healthy old-growth forests are essential to a healthy human future. Polls indicate that most Americans, including the people of Indiana, want commercial logging on our public lands to stop. Yet it continues. The world's leading scientists have announced repeatedly that we are heading rapidly toward environmental collapse. This adds up to such great frustration for some individuals that they are driven to actions declared illegal.

Years ago, tree spiking was an effective means to preserve a forest. A forest was spiked (relatively harmless to the tree) and an obvious sign stating this was posted. Removing the spikes cut too far into the profits of a commercial logging operation, so the forest remained standing. The intention was clearly to protect the forest, not to injure loggers. Today, however, logging companies are willing to risk the lives of their workers by cutting a forest even after it has been spiked. For this reason, recent articles in radical environmental publications, such as *Earth First! Journal*, have called for a national halt to tree-spiking. It simply is no longer effective in today's economic climate.

An act such as theft results in economic gain for the individual who performs the act. But what is the economic gain here? Individuals engaged in such acts, whether misguided or not, are following a commitment to a vision of human responsibility that transcends individual self-interest. They often act out of a deep sense of connectedness to all life. They are not terrorists as the word is commonly defined, but see themselves as protectors of life with a vision beyond economics.

# A green crusade erupts in flames

## Elusive 'Earth Liberation Front' claims responsibility for \$30 million in damage, but law may be closing in

By Tom Kenworthy  
USA TODAY

For years, federal law enforcement authorities have been frustrated in their efforts to solve an escalating series of environmental crimes attributed to a shadowy group known as the Earth Liberation Front.

Finally, they may have caught a break. Late last week, a 17-year-old Long Island high school student, the son of a police officer, pleaded guilty to arson in a closed court proceeding, according to *Newsday* and ABC. The plea, which the New York FBI office would not confirm, comes just weeks after the ELF claimed credit for torching luxury homes in Mount Sinai, N.Y., and promised, "If you build it, we will burn it." Other youths were reported to be in plea negotiations with authorities.

The guilty plea marks the first recorded conviction of a self-proclaimed member of the group that since 1996 has claimed responsibility for more than \$30 million in "ecotage" — actions supposedly taken to protect the environment. Those include the destruction of timber company offices, federal facilities and animal- and plant-research labs.

Whether the progress in solving a string of arsons and other actions on Long Island will lead to advances elsewhere is an open question, says a top FBI investigator, who calls ELF the country's "most active domestic terrorism group."

"Any break is helpful," says Dave Szady, the special agent in charge of the FBI's office in Portland, Ore.

Like the Weathermen, the violent spinoff of Students for a Democratic Society in the Vietnam War era, ELF members "are excellent fugitives," says Gary Perlstein, a criminal justice professor at Portland State University. He estimates ELF membership at 100-300.

The ELF burst into the national consciousness when it took responsibility for a night of arson Oct. 19, 1998, at the Vail ski resort in Colorado. The attack, which did \$12 million in damage, was carried out in protest of an expansion into pristine forest regarded as prime habitat for the Canada lynx.

Now, the ELF appears to be making good on a promise to escalate its attacks "against capitalism and industry." And it appears to have spawned at least one copycat.

In Arizona, 10 homes built or under construction near open-space preserves in the Phoenix area have been set afire in the past two years, five since early December. A group calling itself the "Coalition to Save the Preserves" is responsible, a man claiming to be a member told a newspaper last month. The group has no "direct connection" to the ELF, but the two groups are "kindred spirits," he told the *Phoenix New Times*.

Last year, the FBI gave responsibility for its probe into the Long Island arsons to the same joint terrorist task force that investigated the World Trade Center bombing. In Portland, the FBI and local police have formed a special unit to investigate the ELF, which has been particularly active in the Pacific Northwest.

"The threat is increasing, the activity is increasing," Szady says.

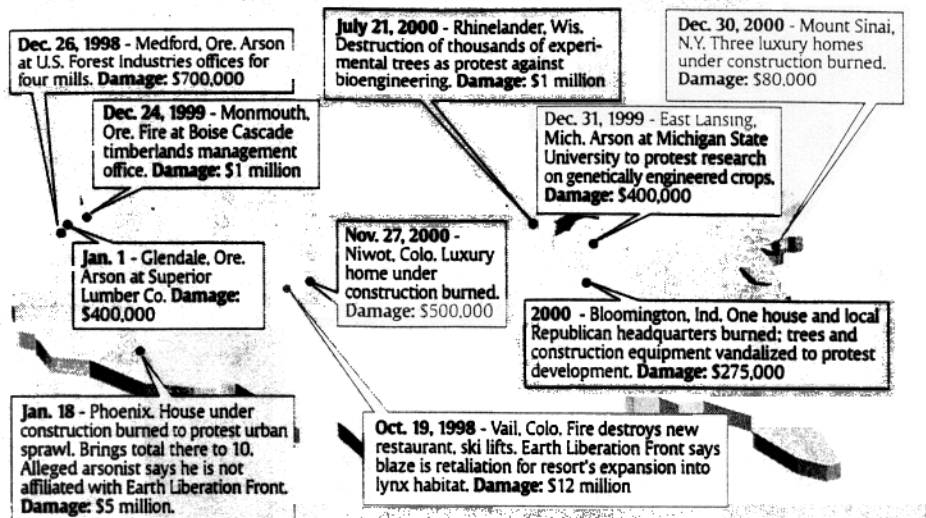
Until last week, law enforcement had had markedly little success in penetrating the secretive group. Arson is a notoriously difficult crime to solve, and the ELF has proven adept at leaving little evidence behind.

Formed in Great Britain in the early 1990s by dissident members of the radical environmental group Earth First!, the Earth Liberation Front began operating in the USA about 1996. A year later, ELF formed an alliance with its cousin in militant activism, the Animal Liberation Front. Since then, the two groups have claimed joint responsibility for actions such as the release of 100 wild horses from a government corral in Wyoming in 1998.

ELF members claim to have vandalized or burned facilities operated by federal resource management agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management; fur farmers; logging offices; animal-research facilities; genetic engineering labs; and

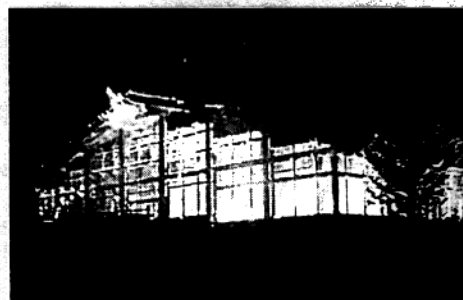
## Eco-terrorists strike

Earth Liberation Front and a copycat have taken credit for numerous destructive acts across the USA:

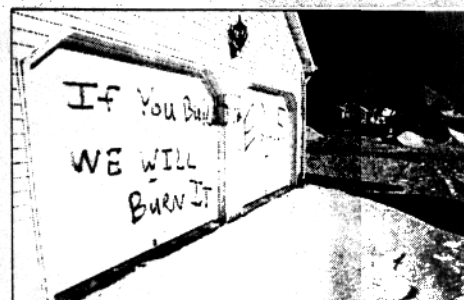


Source: Earth Liberation Front, police agencies

By Marcy E. Mullins, USA TODAY



Vail, Colo.: Flames consume the Two Elks Restaurant during a night of arson at the resort in October '98.



Mount Sinai, N.Y.: A warning remains after three new luxury homes on Long Island were torched.

luxury homes in natural areas being overtaken by sprawl.

The goal? "Economic sabotage and property destruction" aimed at "those who profit from the destruction and exploitation of the natural environment," according to ELF's Web site.

The method? "Any direct action to halt the destruction of the environment" that adheres to guidelines that advise "all necessary precautions against harming any animal, human and non-human."

The motivation? "The war of greed ravages the earth and species die out every day," says one of several communiques, which the group occasionally posts online. "ELF works to speed up the collapse of industry, to scare the rich and to undermine the foundations of the state."

"These folks believe there's a war on nature and that they are warriors for the Earth," says Bron Taylor, who directs the environmental studies program at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh and has researched radical environmentalism for more than a decade.

Taylor and others see a continuity between the ELF and the most radical elements of Earth First! in the 1980s — protesters who embraced "monkey-wrenching" tactics such as driving spikes into trees slated to be logged. The spikes can shatter saw blades.

The ELF isn't even an organization in the conventional sense, but rather a collection of individuals or small units that join the movement through direct action and operate along a classic "leaderless resistance" model.

"It's very hard for outsiders to infiltrate them," Perl-



Glendale, Ore.: Superior Lumber's Steve Swanson surveys damage.

stein says. "Even if somebody is caught, they only know one or two others."

But law enforcement officers believe there is more coordination than that, Szady says.

The ELF has no real public face. Claims of responsibility for ELF attacks on property are funneled through a small office in Portland, where sympathizers Craig Rosebraugh and Leslie James Pickering operate one of the world's most unusual press operations.

An animal rights activist and operator of a vegetarian bakery, Rosebraugh says he was first contacted anonymously by the Animal Liberation Front in 1997. He and Pickering assert they have no direct contact with members of the ELF and are not members themselves. But authorities have raided Rosebraugh's office and apartment, confiscated his computer equipment and hauled him several times before a grand jury investigating the group. He has never been charged.

ELF's victims say the group's tactics have backfired. "It really served to unite the community quite a bit," Paul Witt, who served as a spokesman for Vail Resorts, says of the costly 1998 arson in Colorado. "Both within the company, and within the community, there was a feeling of being violated."

Mainstream environmental groups reject the ELF's tactics, and some militant conservationists suspect a plot by the movement's enemies.

"I wonder if there is a group called ELF," says Tim Hermach, founder of the Oregon-based Native Forest Council, "or is it some kind of industry political group to discredit environmentalism?"