

Reporting on 'eco-terrorism', sabotage and vandalism

A RESOURCE KIT FOR JOURNALISTS

This guide should be read in conjunction with *Countering claims of 'eco-terrorism': a compilation of key source documents* available at www.edo.org.au

Defend the Defenders resources

The Environment Defenders Office (EDO) Victoria developed the *Defend the Defenders* resources to assist activists who are harassed because of their campaign activities.

Defend the Defenders resources may assist you and your group in understanding, preventing or responding to harassment.

They include:

- How to face legal threats
- Dealing with threats
- 10-point plan for handling claims of 'eco-terrorism'.
- Hassle free non-violent action
- Reporting on 'eco-terrorism', sabotage and vandalism
- Responding to claims of 'eco-terrorism': a compilation of source documents

They are available at the Victorian EDO website via www.edo.org.au

In recent years a number of claims of 'eco-terrorism' have been made against environmentalists. In many cases they are unsubstantiated. This resource kit looks at some case studies and how the media has got it wrong.

HOW THE MEDIA REPORT claims of 'eco-terrorism' can have a major impact on innocent people and profoundly affect debate on important matters of public policy.

Treat claims of 'eco-terrorism' with great care. There has been a number of cases where journalists have accepted inaccurate and outlandish claims by police, politicians and industry officials.

Imagine you get a tip off that there is a 'bomb' on a railway line next to a logging company log dump. A big banner hanging just metres away calls for the protection of an area of rainforest over the name of the environment group Earth First!. It is obvious that it is the work of 'radical environmentalists', isn't it?

What if word comes through that the equipment of a logging contractor, parked in an area of forest where there have been environmental protests, has been damaged? The contractor and others are blaming environmentalists. It is obvious that the only possible motivation for the machinery damage is environmental protest, isn't it?

What if you get a tip from police intelligence sources, citing ‘forensic’ evidence, that a massive explosion at a chemical plant was caused by ‘eco-terrorists’ – probably Earth First!. Since it is an apparently credible source you don’t need to check further, do you?

In each of these three cases journalists, police and industry got it badly wrong.

In the first example – the Black River ‘bomb’ case – damaging media coverage probably altered the outcome of an election.

In many cases of damage to logging machinery, false accusations against environmentalists have been used by industry leaders and media commentators to justify violence against environmentalists.

After the media hysteria over the Coode Island explosion one person publicly identified with the campaign to relocate the plant experienced a series of harassing phone calls over the following month. Brake lines were cut on the car of another activist with the potential for a serious accident.

Railway bomb

Environment group linked

Story: Nigel Tapp
Picture: Grant Watts



The black river ‘bomb’

On the morning of Thursday 11 March 1993 a cheap explosive mix of fertiliser and diesel, along with a length of wire, was found underneath the railway track abutting the Black River bridge in North-west Tasmania. The bridge adjoined a yard where logs were loaded for the woodchip mills.

While the materials were made to look like a bomb, it could not have exploded without a detonator. On the bridge was a banner, which stated “Save the Tarkine: Earth First”.

Over preceding months, Tasmanian environment groups had been campaigning for the protection of forests from logging, including the Tarkine, Australia’s largest area of rainforest wilderness.

The ‘bomb’ was found two days before the 1993 Federal election, with polling revealing

that the Tasmanian Greens could win their first Senate seat and with it the balance of power.

The peak Tasmanian timber industry group, the Forest Industry Association of Tasmania (FIAT) Executive Director Mark Addis stated on ABC TV News “*that action is entirely consistent with what the Earth First people have indicated they are prepared to do*”.¹

Late that afternoon the Premier, Mr Groom, issued a media statement stating “*it is most regrettable that some more extreme elements of the conservation movement may be willing to use the threat of violence to pursue their cause*”.²

The next day the North West Tasmanian newspaper, *The Advocate*, page one headline was “Railway bomb: environment group linked” and claimed “*international eco-terrorist group Earth First! has been linked with the potentially dangerous device on the TasRail line*”. The *Hobart Mercury* ran with the headline “Explosives under rail line in green protest”, although the following day it conceded it had no evidence that the ‘bomb’ was associated with a ‘green protest’.

The Greens missed out on the last Senate seat by less than one per cent of the vote. The seat went to right-wing Labor Party candidate and former Secretary of the Timber Workers Union, Shane Murphy, at the time a strong supporter of the timber industry.

In September 1993 Tasmania Police released a briefing note clearing environmentalists of involvement. “*Although a banner located at the scene implicated the Earth First movement no evidence has been forthcoming to support this view*”. Police gave a more qualified exoneration to supporters of the timber industry. “*Innuendo in the Smithton community espoused the view that the incident was the work of the pro-logging community, the aim of which was to discredit the conservation movement’s program during the summer months. Available direct evidence does not support this argument*”.³

A Victoria Police Counter Terrorist Intelligence Section memo obtained years later through Freedom of Information stated “*the device is considered [by Tasmania Police] to be an elaborate hoax and they have not ruled out the possibility that it may have been placed there by loggers in an attempt to discredit the Green movement*”.⁴

“...of twelve incidents of damage to machinery in forest areas in East Gippsland there had been six prosecutions and convictions, none of which were related to environmental issues”

Evidence provided to the Victorian Administrative Appeals Tribunal in November 1997

Damage to logging machinery

Since 1993 there have been many claims by timber industry leaders and supporters seeking to blame environmentalists for damage to logging equipment, “tree spiking” and other incidents.

Early in 1995, Superintendent Haldane from the Victorian town of Bairnsdale, acting on information that he had received, warned Criminal Investigations Branch (CIB) officers of the need to keep an open mind when investigating incidents of damage to machinery in forest areas.

In his memo, obtained through a Freedom of Information request, Haldane wrote:

“information has been received that with the fluctuating politics of the woodchipping debate, instances of damage to logging equipment might become more prevalent. This relates in particular to damage being done by pro-logging interests in an attempt to discredit the anti-woodchipping and conservation movements. Any member attending an incident of this type should notify the relevant CIB and ensure that all investigation options are explored – DO NOT assume that any act of damage to logging equipment or logging infrastructure is done by conservationists or members of anti-logging groups”.

Several days earlier Inspector Haldane had noted in a memo: *“In recent months members of the Forest Protection Society have attempted to align themselves with police personnel in the logging versus anti-logging debate. Members are advised that the Forest Protection Society is an industry funded pro-logging group with a vested and one-sided*

interest in the continuance of native forest timber harvesting. Members having dealings with the FPS should do so in this knowledge and be careful not to compromise the impartial position of the force”.

In a statement to the Victorian Administrative Appeals Tribunal in November 1997 in a Freedom of Information appeal, the late Detective Sergeant John Weel from Bairnsdale CIB conceded that of twelve incidents of damage to machinery in forest areas in East Gippsland there had been six prosecutions and convictions, none of which were related to environmental issues.

Weel indicated under cross-examination that the motivations ranged from rivalry between contractors, within families and general vandalism.

In southern NSW, there have been over the years of the forests debate many claims that damage to logging equipment was attributable to environmentalists. In a remarkable statement in 1995 on ABC Radio National’s Background Briefing program the former NSW State Secretary of the Forestry Division of the Construction, Forestry, Mining, Energy Employees Union, Gavin Hillier, explained in a discussion with now Greens MP Ian Cohen, how union supporters had damaged logging contractors’ equipment and this had probably been blamed on environmentalists.

Hillier said: *“We know how to sugar trucks and use mercuric...I’m talking about these scabby contractors and using mercuric acid and all those sort of things. We actually probably learnt it ...because we had trucks running over us in picket lines, and we used to follow them home, mate, and find out where they live. And when they’re...like most truckies, because they’re big and boisterous and want to make love with their wife before they go to Melbourne, that was the time we slipped in and you broke windscreens too, because windscreen and tyres you don’t get insurance for, but everything else you get insurance for. Every tyre is worth \$2,000 to them. We’ve had to hit ’em and hit ’em hard, and yes you [environmentalists] probably got the blame for it, too, along the track.*

*“I’m telling you now, I’m telling you now they knew who it was because we’d say to those contractors you behave your fuckin’ self or the same thing will happen”.*⁵

1991

Herald-Sun

CAULFIELD CUP SWEEP CHART: P81

Thursday, October 17, 1991 NEWS - PICTORIAL City: Five Mins. 18 (Page 34) 60c

SABOTAGE



Pipes tampered with, say police

By GREG THOMAS and JULIA SMITH

POLICE REVEALED that the Coode Island chemical plant fire was caused by sabotage, not by a lightning strike as claimed by the plant's owner.

A forensic team, including police and fire investigators, found that the pipes were cut by a high-pressure oxy-acetylene torch. The team also found evidence of tampering with the pipes, including the removal of a section of pipe and the installation of a new section.

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Cycle drama

By GREG THOMAS

A dramatic cycle race was held at the Coode Island chemical plant on Tuesday. The race was won by a local cyclist, who was celebrated by the plant workers.

The race was held to raise money for a local charity. The winner of the race was a local cyclist, who was celebrated by the plant workers.

1992

THURSDAY 11 JUNE 1992 THE AGE

Coode fire was an accident, police find

The 1991 Coode Island chemical plant explosion

On 21 August 1991 a fire erupted at the Coode Island chemical plant in inner city Melbourne. Over a two-day period the fire destroyed or damaged 33 storage tanks, caused more than \$20 million in damage and spewed toxic smoke across Melbourne.

For several years the plant had been a focal point of concerns by a local residents group and environmental groups in the aftermath of a series of chemical plant fires in Melbourne's western suburbs.

In the aftermath of the fire, pressure to relocate the tank farm away from residential areas intensified with political leaders supporting a series of investigations and inquiries into the causes and effects of the fires.

At first the owner of the plant, Terminals Limited, then owned by the major trading company, Burns Philp, sought to blame a lightning strike as the source of the fire. This was later dismissed when a video tape from a security camera revealed there had been no lightning strike at the plant.

Shortly after the fire ABC TV's investigative program, Four Corners, commenced working on a program about safety standards in the chemical industry.

At a media conference on 16 October 1991, Victoria Police claimed they had 'conclusive' forensic evidence that the fire had been caused by sabotage.

The stainless steel pipes where the fire had started, they claimed, had been cut by oxy-acetylene equipment. They even speculated that the fire had probably been undertaken by environmentalists with the intention of starting a small fire to illustrate their concerns about the safety of the plant.

The police media conference was held just days before public hearings on the fire and a little over one week before the Four Corners program that was quite critical of safety standards in the national chemical industry.

Police announced that they were appointing a twenty person taskforce to investigate the sabotage leading to the fires. The *Herald Sun* reported detectives with the taskforce "will check the radical environmentalists, and groups of individuals with perceived grievances against the storage plant".⁷

Despite this statement, police interviewed nobody from the local environment group or even those identified publicly with Earth First!. Nor did the police interview anyone prior to the media conference at which they announced their suspicions.

In an editorial, the *Herald Sun* railed against Earth First!. *The Age* also took the bait with a headline “Hunt for Coode Island saboteur”.⁸

After the police allegations, Colleen Hartland, spokesperson for the local group, HAZMAG, received a series of abusive phone calls for the following month. Cam Walker, from the Melbourne Earth First! group – which rejected the vandalism advocated by one faction of Earth First! in the US – had his house broken into and the brake lines on his car cut.

In June 1992, over six months after the damaging accusations of sabotage against environmentalists, police and the Department of Labor and Industry announced that the fire had been caused by a lack of maintenance and was not an act of sabotage.⁹

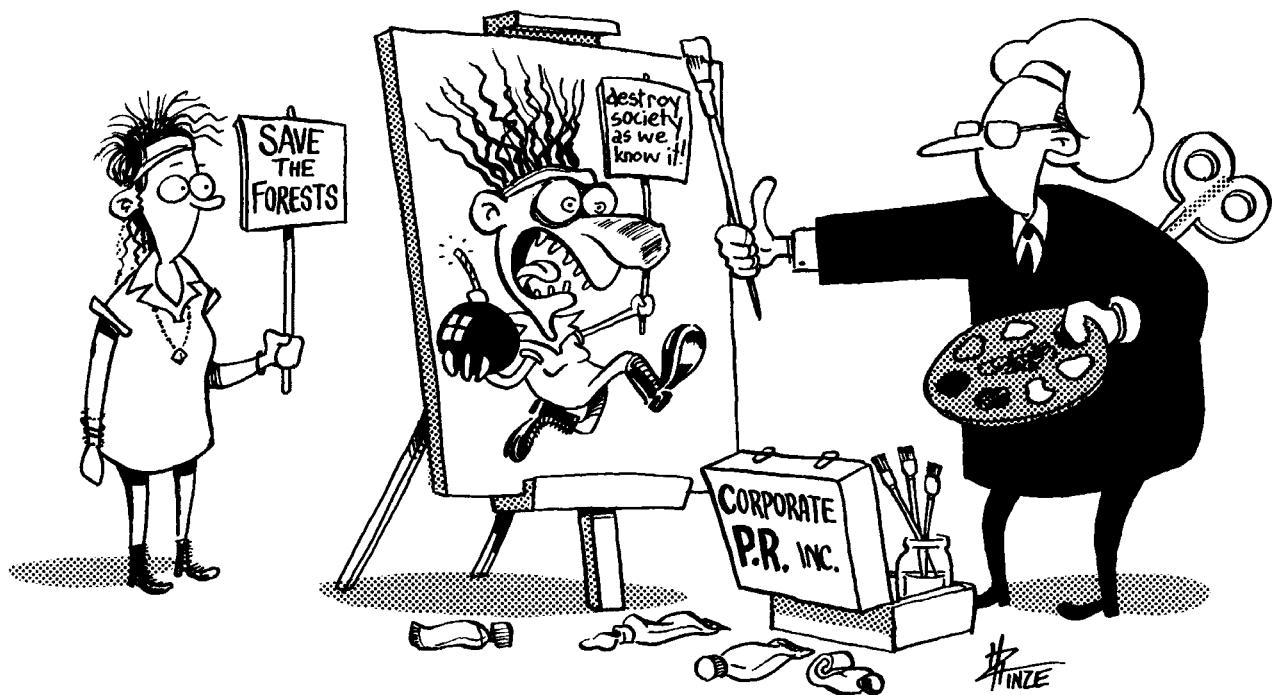
Exhaustive forensic tests on metal pipes and other equipment seized from the site had shown that there was no criminal involvement. The Department of Labour and Industry believed that the markings on the pipes at the centre of the blaze were more likely to have been caused by general wear and tear and the age of the pipes than foul play.¹⁰

For HAZMAG and other environmentalists the delayed vindication was cold comfort. Colleen Hartland, after experiencing harassing phone calls said “*We never received an apology from the police, we had no calls of outrage from the tabloid media. They went silent at an outrageous injustice against environmentalists.*”

Claims of ‘eco-terrorism’ used to justify violence

In March 1995, the Executive Director of the NSW Forest Products Association, Col Dorber, after viewing footage of a violent attack on environmentalists told ABC TV News “*If we have to have a fight, if we have to physically confront those people who have opposed us for so long, then so be it...I also say to people in the industry, if you are going to do that, use your common sense and make sure it’s not being filmed when you do it.*”⁶

The following day there was public uproar. One of the largest FPA members, Boral Timber, withdrew its membership, Dorber’s comments were condemned in Parliament and eventually Dorber withdrew his comments.



Hints and tips for journalists

- If you receive an anonymous tip, a media statement by industry, police or politicians claiming an incident is the work of 'eco-terrorists' or 'saboteurs', be alert to the possibility it may be a disinformation stunt.
- The word 'eco-terrorist' was coined by US anti-environmental groups and PR companies.
- The word 'eco-terrorism' implies proof of an environmental motivation usually before the conclusion of an investigation, gathering and testing of evidence.
- Describing the incident with the 'eco-terrorist' tag falsely may result in your audience taking it as 'fact' and using it to justify harassment and violence against environmentalists.
- If there is no conclusive proof (as distinct from circumstantial 'evidence' like a banner, leaflet or anonymous letter or message) it is best to avoid using the word 'eco-terrorism'.
- Police and industry insiders handling extortion threats or sabotage claims warn that publicising an incident can generate 'copy cat' incidents at a ratio of about thirty to the original one.
- Do not settle for the obvious storyline – damage to machinery, environmentalists, comment from accusing politicians, contractors or police.
- Although someone may claim an environmental motivation is obvious, test the available information against other scenarios. Has there been other vandalism in the area? Have there been prosecutions and convictions in for similar incidents?
- The possibility of 'incidents' being undertaken to discredit environmentalists should be taken seriously.

Despite the controversy, Miranda Devine of the *Telegraph Mirror* defended Dorber's statements and argued that sometimes violence against environmentalists was appropriate. Devine justified violence on the grounds of claims of 'tree spiking' in Tasmania – which she attributed to environmentalists, even though no one has ever been charged or prosecuted.

"It may not be palatable to say so publicly but violence can sometimes be good...it's a pity that Dorber felt he had to apologise and even more that Boral Timber deserted his cause...there comes a point in any disagreement when diplomacy ceases to be of any use. That is when violence has its place", she wrote.

How a PR firm would target a journalist and Greenpeace

In 1991 Greenpeace International was campaigning against the use of chlorine in the pulp and paper industries due to its toxic pollution problems. This campaign caused the huge US chlorine producer, Clorox, to hire the PR division of Ketchum Communications to develop a crisis management plan.

The draft plan was based on the assumption that Greenpeace would target the household use of chlorine. Ketchum drafted numerous 'worst case' hypothetical scenarios in its 59 page plan.

In one scenario, described by Ketchum as a 'worst case event', *"a prominent columnist targets the environmental hazards of liquid chlorine bleach in an article, which is syndicated across the country. The columnist calls for consumers to boycott Clorox products, since 'Clorox is guilty of widespread contamination of the environment'. Local chapters of Greenpeace take up the cause by spearheading anti-Clorox picketing campaigns outside supermarkets in 10 major cities across the country. The picketing campaign is receiving widespread media coverage in those cities, resulting in a dramatic drop in sales of Clorox products. In response to these concerns, congress schedules hearings on the environmental safety of liquid chlorine bleach products"*.



It is worth noting that there is no suggestion that the picketing by Greenpeace was violent or that the journalist was advocating violence.

In Ketchum's assessment, *"the event is every company's worst nightmare ... The company must be prepared to take aggressive swift action to protect its market franchise"*.

Part of the suggested action plan was *"conduct research to determine is and how a slander lawsuit against the columnist and/or Greenpeace could be effective"*.

Another part of Ketchum's suggested action plan was *"Industry association advertising campaign: 'Stop Environmental Terrorism' calling on Greenpeace and the columnist to be more responsible and less irrational in their approach"*.

In Ketchum's view, the justification for targeting Greenpeace and the hypothetical journalist as terrorists was simply that they expressed concerns about the environmental impact of a product and called for a boycott.

In the eyes of Ketchum, peaceful advocacy of sincerely held views by an environmental group merited an expensive advertising campaign accusing them of being environmental terrorists.

Footnotes

- 1 Mark Addis, ABC TV News, 11 March 1993.
- 2 Mr Groom, Media Statement, 11 March 1993.

- 3 Tasmania Police, "Explosive Incident – Black River", 11 March 1993.
- 4 Victoria Police, Counter Terrorist Intelligence Section, "Intelligence Investigator Report: Earth First Bomb Tasmania", 12 July 1993.
- 5 Matt Peacock, ABC Radio National, Background Briefing, 19 March 1995.
- 6 Col Dorber, ABC-TV News, 14 February 1995.
- 7 Craig Dixon and John Silvester, "Coode raid bunglers", *Herald Sun*, 18 October 1991, page 1.
- 8 Bruce Tobin, "Hunt for Coode Island saboteur", *The Age*, 17 October 1991, pages 1 and 2.
- 9 Bruce Tobin, "Coode fire was an accident police find", *The Age*, 11 June 1992.
- 10 Bruce Tobin, "Coode fire was an accident, police find", *The Age*, 11 June 1992.

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