

Article

# Role of state mechanisms in countering environmental terrorism and radicalism in society

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**Abstract:** Protecting the environment and the Earth's natural resources is one of the most important tasks for modern societies, economies, and countries. Changes in the environment have made climate protection a key task of state policy implemented at the local, national, and international. They also have caused such negative social manifestations as environmental radicalism and terrorism. The purpose of this paper was to analyze the capacity of state institutions to prevent environmental terrorism and radicalism, particularly in the Russian context, by identifying and prioritizing key challenges and countermeasures. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, involving both qualitative and quantitative analyses. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, a total of 35 articles and reviews were selected to provide a foundation for understanding eco-terrorism trends. Additionally, an expert survey was conducted with 44 qualified participants to rank problems and recommended actions. The Kendall concordance coefficient was used to assess the consistency of expert opinions. The authors conclude that low environmental awareness and insufficient cooperation between state institutions and environmental organizations are the most significant challenges in preventing eco-terrorism. To adequately and competently prevent environmental terrorism and radicalism in society, the prevention system must be based on clear and thoughtful actions by state institutions.

**Keywords:** environmental terrorism; eco-terrorism; environmental radicalism; environmental activism; ecotage; environmental protection; animal welfare

## 1. Introduction

Climate change and the growing awareness of the resulting threats, including in the economic and social spheres, have led societies, state governments, and international organizations to introduce elements of nature and environmental protection into their legal system and the conscious formation of environmental policy (Lipari et al., 2024).

Interest in nature degradation in the 20th century manifested itself in the growth of environmental awareness of societies in developed countries reflected in numerous scientific publications and the introduction of nature conservation issues into public discourse and implemented in the action programs of emerging organizations and environmental movements. The popularity of environment protection slogans is explained by the fact that public opinion recognized the deterioration of environmental living conditions as a consequence of social behavior, especially as a result of excessive economic exploitation of natural resources, compromising values important to social groups and institutions as values that determine the quality of life on Earth (Abbass et al., 2022).

The growth of environmental awareness in the 1960s affected both individual and social space. Environmental awareness and its accompanying conceptual tools have been expressed in the emerging system of knowledge, views, images, and ideas about the environment and human relations to the environment (Bondaroff, 2008). The catalyst for the development of the idea of environmentalism in the 1960s was the emergence of many countercultural organizations and social movements, which, in the face of radical criticism of industrial society responsible for the growing environmental crisis, with a sense of threat of environmental catastrophe and fear for the natural foundations of public life, adopted and developed pro-environmental ideas (Carson, 2013). The activities of environmental movements brought positive results in the form of popularization and dissemination of pro-environmental ideas and views, as well as their politicization by demonstrating protests against environmental destruction and exerting social pressure to adopt legal forms of environmental protection (Smith, 2008).

Organizations and movements that in their action programs preferred violent tools aimed against groups and people perceived as threatening the natural environment became an extreme manifestation of a radical environmental trend (Pośluszna, 2020). These groups often resort to acts of sabotage, arson, and vandalism aimed at entities they perceive as harmful to the environment, including industrial facilities, research institutions, and agricultural operations (Sovacool and Dunlap, 2022; Sapaev et al., 2024). However, the concept of pro-environmental attitudes at the behavioral level and active actions were understood by the leaders of radical environmental movements as legally permitted activities (picketing, demonstrations, counter-demonstrations), as well as some activities prohibited by law and even criminal actions, including acts of criminal terror (Carson et al., 2012).

Linking nature conservation with the activities of extremist environmental movements operating in the United States in the last century inevitably allows identifying a specific category of radical environmental thought, which in practice boils down to one of the varieties of modern terrorist threats, eco-terrorism (Buell, 2009).

Thus, eco-terrorism is a phenomenon that, when initiated and appropriately fueled by misinformation and deliberate media reports that arouse social emotions (Loadenthal, 2017), can potentially pose one of the most serious threats to security at the local, regional, and international levels. The danger is explained by the fact that the environmental agenda is relevant and causes genuine concern to many people. This circumstance is often used to destabilize the socio-political situation.

## **2. Literature review**

Even though there are many materials on eco-terrorism and environmental radicalism, mainly in the form of articles and studies published by American and British researchers, this topic has not yet received the attention it deserves in Russia, where the concept of environmental terrorism in most publications is regarded as illegal and intentional acts committed to harm the environment (Tikhonov and Bogoslovskii, 2016) or as acts of terrorism that have a destructive effect on the environment (Ryzhenkov, 2017; Zubarev, 2017) done to intimidate the population

and compel the state and various international organizations to commit (or refrain from committing) certain actions (Kurbatova and Ivanova, 2020).

In modern literature, researchers focus on the definition of environmental terrorism (eco-terrorism) as the use or threat of criminal violence, often of a symbolic nature, against people or property by environmentally oriented groups for ecological and political purposes or directed at other audiences (Spadaro, 2020).

According to researchers, eco-terrorism is used to prevent companies, institutions, organizations, and governments from destroying or changing the environment (Aleksanin et al., 2018). It includes acts of violence or destruction of various forms aimed to stop human changes in the environment or animal species (Tislenko, 2005).

We focused on understanding the term “environmental terrorism”. At present, environmental terrorism does not pose a great threat in Russia. However, we can expect an increase in the activity of radicals and environmental groups, since the mining and processing industries, polluting the environment, the meat and fur industry, and universities and research institutions using animals are vulnerable to attacks.

Researchers note that the negative effect of spreading the idea of environmental protection in the post-industrial society of the 20th century was the radicalization of biocentrism and pro-environmental activities carried out by extremist pro-environmental and animal rights movements (Yang and Jen, 2018). They believe that the reasons for this can be found, on the one hand, in the history of the formation of counter-cultural, radical social movements in the second half of the 20th century in the US (Smith, 2008). On the other hand, increased awareness of threats and the inability to solve the most important problems identified by environmental communities using nonviolence have created the need to transfer actions from the verbal to the behavioral level, from awareness and experience of the value of the ecological state to tools of civil disobedience and their practical behavioral implementation (Dubovik, 2018).

Preventing environmental radicalism and eco-terrorism is associated with the fact that members of radical environmental movements and animal liberation organizations are guided by the belief that their actions are necessary and fair (Schlembach, 2018). Their main goal is to achieve acceptance, eventually, of their worldview by the majority of society (Kuznetsova and Milyukov, 2023). They are divided into two camps, one of which believes that criminal actions do not help legitimize their views and do not contribute to increasing public support. The second camp consists of extremists who believe that anything other than a violent reaction against industrial agriculture, vivisection, and environmental destruction is a sign of species discrimination or crookedness (Telford, 2020).

The direct action methods of radical environmentalists can be viewed on a wide scale: from legal means, like acts of civil disobedience and open liberation, to acts of destruction of property, arson, and even violent attacks on people (Vanderheiden, 2005). The actions carried out by environmental activists are divided into four types (Loadenthal, 2013):

I. Minor crimes in which minor material damage is caused or there is no risk to human health at all.

II. Serious acts of destruction of property, including arson and bombings, without violence directed directly against people, but with the likelihood of causing indirect damage.

III. Intimidating behavior directed at people, including cases of physical violence without causing bodily harm.

IV. Physical attacks on people that cause or intend to cause bodily harm.

Eco-terrorism is also very often associated with acts of “ecotage” (a derivative of sabotage). Over the past few decades, ecotage has been used by various environmental groups, although it is not the exclusive prerogative of radical eco-terrorist groups (Sumner and Weidman, 2013). Groups that use more traditional methods of political activity perceive it as fulfilling a complementary role to other types of activities, rather than as an end in itself, and make every effort to ensure that the actions of ecotage do not pose a threat to human health (Alekseeva and Anisimov, 2017).

The literature analysis showed that eco-terrorism poses a huge threat to the modern state because environmental ideology gives radicals and extremists an excellent excuse to commit crimes. They believe that the world is on the verge of destruction, which means that immediate changes must be made, regardless of the cost of infrastructure or human lives, all in the name of the noble goal of protecting nature. In recent years, many studies have focused on understanding eco-terrorism and radical environmental movements, particularly in the context of developed European countries (Lederer et al., 2024). However, limited research has addressed this issue in the Russian context, where ecological activism is growing in response to industrial activities impacting the environment. This study distinguishes itself by exploring the effectiveness of state mechanisms in countering environmental terrorism and radicalism specifically within Russia, filling a notable gap in the literature.

The purpose of the paper is to analyze the capabilities of state institutions in preventing eco-terrorism and environmental radicalism in Russian society.

### **3. Methods**

Due to the features of preventing environmental terrorism and radicalism in society, a qualitative and quantitative approach to the study was chosen.

The data were collected between 20 November 2023, and 20 February 2024, by analyzing the scientific literature on the research issue, as well as performing an expert survey by email and processing and analyzing its results.

In the first stage of the study, the information sources necessary to realize the research goal were selected. The data for this study included articles and reviews published in journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. The information was searched using the keywords “eco-terrorism”, “radicalism”, “environmental activism”, and “environmental protection” in English and Russian in the title/abstract/keywords. To ensure transparency and rigor in the review process, the article selection followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. A total of 35 sources were analyzed. Based on the analysis of the source base, the existing problems in countering the spread of

environmental radicalism and eco-terrorism, as well as the necessary actions to prevent them, were identified.

In the second stage, an expert survey was conducted to determine the order of importance of existing problems in countering the spread of environmental radicalism and eco-terrorism and determining the necessary areas of action to prevent them in society. Emails offering to participate in the survey were sent to 49 experts. The criterion for selecting the expert pool was the presence of at least 3 articles on the research problem in peer-reviewed publications. 44 people agreed to take part in the survey. The experts received emails requesting them to rank the identified problems and recommended actions on an ordinal scale from 1 to 5, assigning points based on their perceived significance. Following this, the scores provided by the experts were used to calculate the rank of each issue and action. The survey data were then processed to determine weighted values, reflecting the relative significance of each problem and action from the experts' perspectives.

In the emails, the experts were also asked to provide their recommendations and reflections on the problem under study in a free form. All survey participants were warned about the survey's purpose and the plan to publish its results in a generalized form.

For a more objective analysis of the data obtained during the expert survey, the degree of consistency of expert opinions with mathematical processing of the results was measured using the Kendall concordance coefficient.

#### 4. Results

The analysis of the scientific literature and the expert survey allowed us to formulate the existing problems in countering the spread of environmental radicalism and eco-terrorism and present them in order of importance (**Table 1**).

**Table 1.** Problems in countering the spread of environmental radicalism and eco-terrorism\*.

<b>Problems</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Weight</b>
Low environmental awareness about existing environmental problems in society	1	0.37
Lack of close cooperation between state institutions and Russian environmental organizations	2	0.27
Insufficient information given by state institutions to the public about emerging environmental problems through the media, social networks, etc.	3	0.19
Lack of special legal regulation of environmental radicalism and terrorism	4	0.12
Manipulative nature of the activities of extremist and radical environmental organizations	5	0.05

\* Compiled based on the expert survey; the value of the concordance coefficient  $W = 0.73$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), which indicates a strong consistency of expert opinions.

Findings suggest that improving public knowledge and establishing partnerships with environmental groups are crucial first steps. Addressing gaps in legal regulations and minimizing manipulative influences from extremist groups could further strengthen societal resilience against radical environmental activities.

The analysis of the expert survey results allowed us to formulate the main activities of state institutions to prevent environmental terrorism and radicalism in society and present them in order of importance (**Table 2**).

**Table 2.** The main activities of state institutions to prevent environmental terrorism and radicalism in society\*.

Activities of state institutions	Rank	Weight
Increasing environmental awareness in society	1	0.39
Cooperation with Russian and international environmental organizations	2	0.28
Restriction of the existing legislation towards stricter liability for harm to the natural environment	3	0.22
New legislative restrictions in the regulation of environmental terrorism and radicalism	4	0.11

\* Compiled based on the expert survey; the value of the concordance coefficient  $W = 0.69$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), which indicates a strong consistency of expert opinions

Enhancing environmental awareness is ranked as the top priority, reflecting a consensus that well-informed citizens are less likely to be swayed by radical ideologies. Collaborative efforts with both national and international environmental organizations, along with stronger legal sanctions, are also key actions. This suggests that a combination of educational, cooperative, and regulatory measures can create a balanced approach to mitigating environmental radicalism and promoting long-term ecological security.

Overall, the results underscore a need for comprehensive state-led initiatives to mitigate environmental terrorism and radicalism effectively. It shows that boosting environmental awareness in society, fostering collaboration with environmental organizations, and implementing clear, stringent legal frameworks are pivotal to addressing these issues. Expert consensus suggests that a balanced approach, combining public engagement with firm legal measures, can substantially reduce the influence of radicalism. By prioritizing these strategies, state institutions can build a proactive, sustainable framework to enhance environmental security and resilience against eco-terrorist threats.

## 5. Discussion

Previous studies have shown that environmentally motivated violence is not a declining phenomenon (Połuszna, 2020). Researchers do not believe that the number of environmentally oriented acts of sabotage will decrease significantly soon (Yang and Jen, 2018). The opposite trend should be considered, especially since over the past 20 years, we have seen extremist environmental organizations constantly expanding the scope of their goals. In the last months of 2022 alone, members of the Just Stop Oil organization, which requires the UK government to stop the development and extraction of fossil fuels, staged more than ten environmental protection actions in museums and on European highways (O’Leary et al., 2023).

Although the literature analysis showed that the number of eco-terrorist actions is slowly but systematically decreasing worldwide, it is too early to predict a decline in eco-terrorism and environmental radicalism, although we can talk about a decrease in environmental activity associated with the use of violence. Radicals are

moving away from actions that cause major material damage and instead focus on performance (without endangering people's health and lives).

Any performance by modern radical environmental activists, whether it is blocking roads or gluing themselves to something, immediately gains millions of views on the Internet, and the media only spreads information about past actions. Radical environmental activists seek to draw the attention of the media and the public to the issue of environmental protection (Kuznetsova and Milyukov, 2023).

Modern youth radical environmental groups must be distinguished from the classic terrorists of the late 20th and early 21st century, such as ELF (Earth Liberation Front) and ALF (Animal Liberation Front), who committed more than 600 crimes in the US between 1996 and 2002, resulting in losses exceeding \$43 million. Between 2003 and 2008, losses totaled more than \$200 million, and most states passed eco-terrorism laws (Carson et al., 2012).

As a rule, the methods of modern environmental activists rarely go beyond criminally punishable hooliganism and the deliberate destruction of property. Thus, Extinction Rebellion, a group of climate activists, does not endanger people, while their events cause a wide public response, due to which the authorities and companies cannot ignore environmental problems.

In Russia, a striking example of environmental actions was the massive "garbage" protests of residents of the Moscow region in 2018, which reached their peak after the poisoning of 50 children with gas from the Yadrovo landfill in Volokolamsk. The rallies, which were attended not only by environmentalists but also by residents, led to the closure of most landfills in the region and the search for alternative ways to dispose of garbage. Despite the success of such actions, many environmentalists offer more peaceful ways to preserve the environment.

Stricter legal regulation, including high financial penalties imposed on those responsible for these incidents, also has a significant impact on reducing the number of eco-terrorist incidents, if the perpetrators are caught and their criminal acts are proven. However, in some countries, such as the US, these circumstances do not play such a big role, since the owners of property attacked by eco-terrorists can use firearms to protect their property. In the US, state laws may differ significantly from federal ones when bringing to justice those responsible for eco-terrorism. In the case of ecotage actions directed against oil pipelines, refineries, power plants, power lines and railways, chemical plants, and liquified natural gas (LNG) terminals, the law treats such cases as "ordinary" sabotage. However, many other incidents qualify as vandalism. Different states in the US have passed laws imposing severe penalties for those responsible for the destruction of genetically modified crops and livestock farms (Sumner and Weidman, 2013).

As noted by Alekseeva and Anisimov (2017), there are many differences in the organization of the activities of environmental terrorists, radical groups, and criminal communities. Environmental radicals are less organized, their small groups are poorly funded, and illegal actions in most cases are not part of a formal organization with a rigid hierarchy of power. Environmental radicals lack common goals, not to mention a clear specialization or a rational division of labor. Underground cells of environmental radicals usually work in groups of two to five people, and sometimes they implement their ideas alone. Groups of environmental radicals, as a rule, are

completely autonomous from each other, there is no connection between them. Criminal groups for the liberation of animals (the most widespread ideology of environmental radicals) are only a small part of a large social movement, many of whose members shy away from crime and are associated only with the goals of wildlife protection.

It is necessary to strengthen preventive work with the environmental radical movement to remove most of them from the crime sphere. To do this, one should listen to the goals of the activities that environmental radicals declare on social networks and in public speeches. The phenomenon of environmental radicalism is caused by indifference and disregard for their position. The widespread involvement of environmental radicals in public discussions in the media, as well as the expansion of their participation in parliamentary debates on ways and measures to protect the environment, considering the most reasonable part of their proposals (on the protection of animal rights, among others), can radically change the existing situation. Having felt involved in the environmental decision-making process, most of the environmental radicals will leave this movement. Therefore, there is no need to use exclusively punitive methods to control environmental radicals, unlike environmental terrorists.

Environmental terrorism is a global challenge to international security and the sustainable development of society. Terrorists widely use the achievements of modern science and technology. Their impact on man-made objects can endanger humanity's existence, since, implementing an extreme form of expression of social, ethnic, or religious fanaticism, a terrorist is not inclined to stop at nothing to achieve their goals.

## **6. Conclusions**

There is a need to form an appropriate system for preventing environmental terrorism and radicalism within the framework of the state mechanism for protecting the population from internal and external threats. To adequately and competently prevent environmental terrorism and radicalism in society, the prevention system must be based on clear and thoughtful actions by state institutions. Climate change has been the subject of in-depth research, which has resulted in corrective organizational and legislative measures taken at the national and international levels.

The requirements for measures to limit negative climate change and preserve environmental heritage are reflected in specific infrastructure projects. The participation of many countries in rational environmental protection policies helps to weaken the radical message of the ideology of extremist organizations and encourages them to take action to eliminate violence in favor of often spectacular actions that arouse media interest. It is also important that there is a strong international reaction (in a political, legal, and organizational sense) to any terrorist or criminal activity.

Progressive urbanization and the development of new technologies contribute to the emergence of new problems and open up space for new methods of activity of environmental organizations and movements. It is unlikely that, despite the significant involvement of state institutions in many countries and the activities of



international organizations in implementing the requirements of climate protection policy, they will agree to meet all demands of pro-ecological and animal protection extremist organizations and movements. It is also unlikely that these organizations will agree to mitigate or abandon the radical provisions of their programs.

Dynamic technological development and ongoing changes in the globalized world mean that the issue of the development of the activities of radical and extremist environmentalists remains an open and completely unpredictable issue, since there is no shortage of problems, both locally and globally, which can become an impulse to violent actions on the part of radical environmental movements.

The social exposure to systemic disinformation and manipulation, the purpose of which is a conscious and purposeful policy of exerting influence, is a particular threat, as in this confrontation, the power of arguments is often weaker than emotions.

By addressing the specific socio-political dynamics of environmental radicalism in Russia, this article adds significant value to global discussions on eco-terrorism and provides a foundation for targeted policy solutions that can be adapted by other nations facing similar challenges.

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