**Ecoterrorism**

**Alternative titles:** ecological terrorism; environmental terrorism

**ecoterrorism,** also called ecological terrorism or environmental terrorism,  destruction, or the threat of destruction, of the environment by states, groups, or individuals in order to intimidate or to coerce governments or civilians. The term also has been applied to a variety of crimes committed against companies or government agencies and intended to prevent or to interfere with activities allegedly harmful to the environment.

Ecoterrorism has been practiced by groups engaged in “anti-system” violence (i.e., violence against existing political structures). This kind of [terrorism](http://www.britannica.com/topic/terrorism), also known as [bioterrorism](http://www.britannica.com/topic/bioterrorism), includes, for example, threats to contaminate water supplies or to destroy or disable energy utilities, as well as practices such as the deployment of anthrax or other biological agents.

Another form of ecoterrorism, often described as environmental warfare, consists of the deliberate and illegal destruction, exploitation, or modification of the environment as a strategy of war or in times of armed conflict (including civil conflict within states). Modification of the environment that occurs during armed conflict and is likely to have widespread, long-lasting, or severe effects is proscribed by the Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1976. Nevertheless, such destruction has occurred with some regularity. In the 1960s and ’70s the U.S. military used the defoliant [Agent Orange](http://www.britannica.com/science/Agent-Orange) to destroy forest cover in Vietnam, and in 1991 Iraqi military forces retreating during the [Persian Gulf War](http://www.britannica.com/event/Persian-Gulf-War) set fire to Kuwaiti oil wells, causing significant environmental damage. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, adopted in 1998, defines such modification or destruction as a [war crime](http://www.britannica.com/topic/war-crime).

Finally, the sometimes violent activities of some groups of environmental activists have been described as ecoterrorism. They include criminal trespass on the property of logging companies and other firms and obstruction of their operations, sometimes through the [sabotage](http://www.britannica.com/topic/sabotage-subversive-tactic) of company equipment or the environmentally harmless modification of natural resources in order to make them inaccessible or unsuitable for commercial use. Examples of this practice, known as “monkeywrenching,” are the plugging of factory waste outlets and driving spikes into trees so that they cannot be logged and milled. Other activities described as ecoterrorist include protest actions by [animal rights](http://www.britannica.com/topic/animal-rights) groups, which have included the destruction of property in stores that sell products made of fur and the bombing of laboratories that perform experiments on animals.

[Lorraine Elliott](http://www.britannica.com/bps/user-profile/5769)

In the United States, criminal penalties for felonies committed in the course of animal rights protests were dramatically increased with the passage in 1992 of the Animal Enterprise Protection Act (AEPA). The act defined a new legal category of “animal enterprise terrorism” as the intentional “physical disruption” of an animal enterprise (e.g., a factory farm, a slaughterhouse, an animal experimentation laboratory, or a rodeo) that causes economic damage (including loss of property or profits) or serious bodily injury or death. In 2005 the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA) expanded the definition of animal enterprise [terrorism](http://www.britannica.com/topic/terrorism) to include “interfering with” the operations of an animal enterprise, extended protection to third-party enterprises having a relationship to or transactions with an animal enterprise, expanded the definition of animal enterprise to include any business that sells animals or animal products, and increased the penalties imposed by the AEPA. Critics of both measures argued that they were excessively broad and vague, that they imposed disproportionately harsh penalties, and that they would have a chilling effect on all forms of animal rights protest. In 2006 the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Federal-Bureau-of-Investigation) (FBI) announced that it considered ecoterrorism by animal rights activists to be the greatest domestic security threat facing the United States. In 2009 an American animal rights activist, Daniel Andreas San Diego, became the first “domestic terrorist” to be placed on the FBI’s Most Wanted Terrorists list.