

Politics, economy and environmental crime

Reece Walters highlights the dominant interest of trade and profit over environmental safety.

Issues relating to protection of the planet continue to capture media headlines and provoke public and political debate. The United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has referred to global warming as a 'weapon of mass destruction' (IPCC, 2007). However, global warming is not the only earth-threatening issue – there is also an increasing amount of environmental crime.

For many, the destruction of natural habitats and the pollution of oceans, waterways and the atmosphere is a global catastrophe; for others (including certain states and corporations) it is a necessary bi-product of commercial profit and capital accumulation. The challenge for environmental protection and regulation is that it often competes or is superseded by trade law – whereby economic prosperity and quality of human life is viewed as a paramount political and social objective.

The term 'environmental crime' is relatively new to the UK government lexicon but does not capture or harness the actions of the powerful towards acts of global environmental harm. The language is localised and encapsulated within governmental discourses of anti-social behaviour. For example, the Home Office (2007) refers to environmental crime as including:

- Fly-tipping – dumping household or commercial rubbish in private or communal areas;
- Littering – deliberately dropping litter on the streets;
- Graffiti – spray-painting or otherwise of private property or communal areas like the sides of bus-shelters and houses;
- Vandalism – damaging private property or communal facilities like telephone boxes or playground equipment.

How does the Home Office tackle environmental crime? By 'giving local authorities more power – to take action against fly-tippers and vandals and restricting sale of spray paint...' (Home Office, 2007). The actions of corporations and govern-

ments that pollute and exploit the environment while violating international agreements do not feature on the Home Office's environmental crime radar. That said the government has published findings that define corporate environmental crime as 'any environmental crime that has been committed by a corporate body' (House of Commons, 2005, 8). The corporate environmental crimes do not include transnational issues such as deforestation, illegal dumping of waste, illegal trading in ozone depleting substances and endangered species, the destruction or vandalism of sites of national heritage; the contamination of food and the theft of indigenous genetic resources (acts covered by international law). But they do include issues such as domestic water, sewerage, landfill and wildlife that are dealt with in British civil courts and not criminal ones.

There are more than 10 separate Acts of Parliament addressing a range of strict liability 'environmental offences' in Britain. From the Forestry Act 1967 to the Finance Act 2000 unlawful acts include industrial pollution, tree felling, disposal of waste, water contamination, misuse of pesticides, storage of hazardous substances and protection of wildlife. Let's look at one area that the government has often claimed success with, namely 'wildlife crime'.

It is known that for many years UK governments have been accused of permitting or ignoring the international billion pound industry of trade in and purchase of protected animals and animal bi-products. Yet from April 2004 to March 2005, English Nature reported a 'substantial increase in wildlife crime'. During this period a total of 235 cases were reported of 'damaging Sites of Special Scientific Interest'. Out of all of the offences, only seven were prosecuted; two received formal cautions; 201 received warning letters, and 25 were proven but no action taken.

Governments and corporations accumulate substantial wealth by exploiting the environment or by turning a blind eye to its degradation. Consider the following examples which provide brief snapshots of corporate and government complicity in acts of environmental degradation and social harm.

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- An estimated 24,000 'die prematurely every year' because of air pollution and many thousands are hospitalised (Thornton and Beckwith, 2004: 291). Yet, the control of air pollutants caused by corporations is under-resourced, based on a model of self-regulation and punishable by fines up to a maximum of a minuscule £20,000.
- Britain is the world's third largest importer of illegally logged timber. Up to 3.2 million cubic meters of timber sold in the UK and used for household furniture or garden woodchip is stolen from the Amazon rainforest and other protected habitats, and comprises a £700 million per year British industry (EIA, 2007).
- Imported fish is worth £4-9 billion to Britain per annum. By conservative estimates more than 12,000 tons originates from illegal fishing in the offshore waters of poor countries. An activity that decimates the industry and food supply of debt stricken countries in western Africa, while destroying marine biology. Yet unregistered pirate vessels enter British ports unchecked and the stolen fish are sold at London markets without question (Environmental Justice Foundation, 2007).
- The British nuclear industry (regulated, and in some instances operated by, government) has illegally disposed of thousands of barrels of radioactive waste in the Channel Islands, and reportedly 'lost' 30kgs of plutonium from Sellafield nuclear power station – an issue that awaits hearing in the European Commission in the European Court of Justice (Walters, 2007).
- The UK government has recently announced it will grow commercially genetically modified crops in 2009, even though ecological harm and uncertainties have been widely documented. Again, the decision to press ahead with GM crops is a commercial one and not an environmental one (Walters, 2008 forthcoming).
- One third of the biggest businesses in the UK pay little or no tax, including some of the largest polluting industries such as automotive, transport, construction and manufacturing (Houlder, 2007).

It is clear that policing and prosecution energies are not directed towards transnational corporations that breach international environmental law. When the UK government uses the language of environmental crime or crimes against the environment, such terms are referring to domestic acts of graffiti, littering, fly tipping and vandalism. While these acts have anti-social aspects; they are minuscule when compared to damage caused by large companies and governments that exploit our natural world for maximum profit. Viewed through the lens of political economy the picture is clear; the imperatives of trade and fiscal

prosperity dominate environmental protection and sustainability.

Reece Walters is Professor of Criminology at the Open University.

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