University of Glasgow
School of Education

SCCJR
The Scottish Centre for Crime & Justice Research

Green Criminology

INTRODUCTION

What is Green Criminology?
Green criminology is a sub-discipline of criminology, frequently associated with critical criminology. Green Criminology focuses on harms against the environment, their impact on human and non-human species, as well as climate and the environment itself.

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Theoretically, Green Criminology most often draws from radical criminological schools, such as feminism, Marxism, and social constructionism, but it also incorporates theoretical perspectives that go beyond criminology, including zemiology (social harm). Further, many scholars of Green Criminology recognise the importance of Southern Criminology as decolonial perspectives. See Theories-and-causes-of-crime-part-1.pdf for a brief discussion about Marxist and Feminist theories.

Theoretical tendencies

Green Criminology (GC) is an interdisciplinary perspective that incorporates various theoretical positions to explore and explain crimes and harms that impact the environment, human and non-human species. The aim of GC is to acknowledge those harms as committed by both powerful organisations (e.g. governments, transnational corporations, military), as well as by ordinary people. While environmental harms and crimes of ordinary people, such as littering or waste dumping, are included within the GC umbrella, the majority of the GC scholarship has focused on the "crimes of the powerful", particularly due to the fact that those acts (but also omissions, as will become clear below) cause widespread and long-term environmental damage. Below, we'll discuss some of the theoretical perspectives and tendencies that GC draws on. It is important to remember that GC is not one theory, but rather a series of perspectives that draw on different philosophical, sociological, legal, and scientific traditions.

Social Harm (Zemiology)

Social harm perspectives encourage us to consider different events in terms of social harm, rather than crime. In this way, both actions and inactions that cause harm to people, places, societies, and environments can be accounted for. Zemiology considers not just those harms that are the result of individual actions or omissions, but also those that are caused by social structures: this means the harms that are not caused by a specific person's actions, but they are the result of how society organises itself, such as inequality. In addition, zemiology considers criminalisation itself as socially harmful, as definitions of what is criminal or illegal are dictated by those with the power to influence and enforce the law, and disproportionately target those who are already marginalised within society. The social harm perspective therefore allows for the understanding of actions and inactions that cause long-term harms to groups, communities, environments etc. even when they are not traditionally considered as criminal or illegal.

The leading argument made by the proponents of the social harm approach, such as academics Paddy Hillyard and Steve Tombs, is that although illegal acts are sometimes harmful, many legal acts cause more harm than those that are illegal. The concept of crime focuses our attention on intentional acts by individuals, and distracts us from the bigger harms by institutions, corporations, or even states. Many environmental harms are not illegal, so the concept of social harm is used frequently in GC. For example, cutting down rainforests for agricultural purposes such as cattle ranching is not technically illegal. However, it has a detrimental impact on the environment, animals, local communities, but also the human population globally, due to its impact on climate. Consequently, GC has incorporated the social harm perspective to explain how legal actions and inactions contribute to harms, consequences of which are experienced by large groups of people and can become visible months or years after. However, it is important to remember that, unlike much GC, zemiology does not argue that legal harms should become illegal: for zemiology, criminalisation itself is harmful. In fact, for zemiologists the role of the state is to prevent harm, but punishing individual perpetrators does not do this, because it does not change the conditions that created the harm in the first place. For example, many environmental harms are caused by the prioritisation of profit and corporate interests over environmental concerns, and it is only by changing these conditions that we can prevent future harm.

Southern Criminology

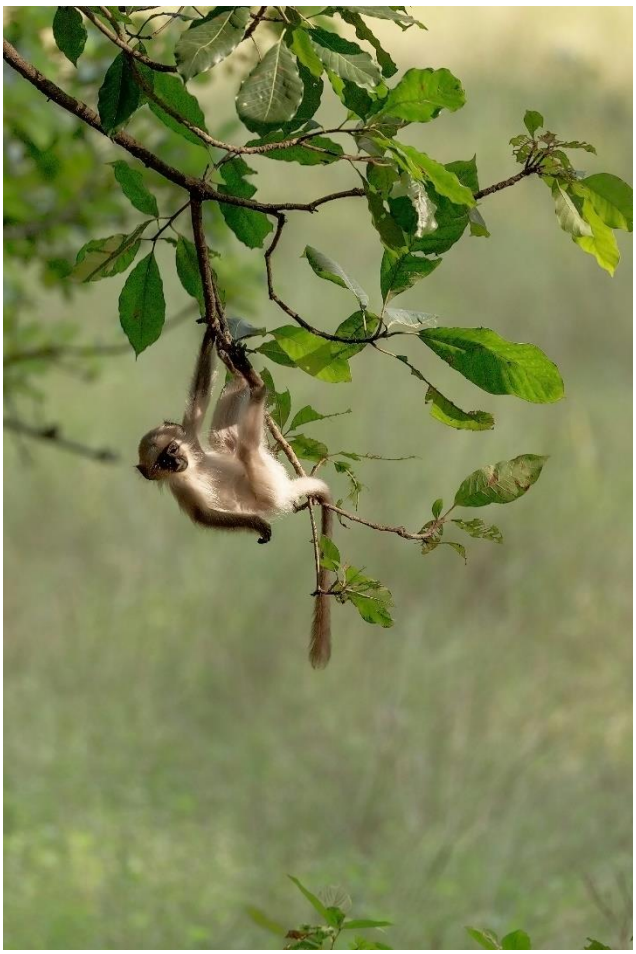
The Southern criminological perspective has become crucial for Green Criminology, with academics such as David Rodriguez Goyes advocating for a turn towards Southern Green Criminology, which combines the two perspectives. Southern Criminology is closely linked to other movements, including post-colonial and de-colonial criminologies. The aim of Southern Criminology is to address the power relations and hierarchies in the processes of knowledge production between the Global North and the South, and to acknowledge how criminology as a discipline has been dominated by Global North approaches and scholars. In fact, knowledge produced in the Global North is often treated as universal.

Matt Palmer via Unsplash

Consequently, Southern Criminology challenges the perceptions and processes of knowledge production, because knowledge is not universal and neutral. It also aims to put at the centre criminological voices from the Global South, highlighting the need for diversifying criminological scholarship and incorporating multiple perspectives. Green Southern Criminology, therefore, advocates for the acknowledgement of the role of the Global North in the damage to the environment of the Global South. For example, Green Southern Criminologists argue that Global North states and corporations exploit the people and environments of the Global South for their own profit, but the harms (and crimes) committed are largely ignored within the scholarship and by criminal justice systems. Hence, Green Southern Criminology scholars strive towards the inclusion of marginalised voices and experiences within the criminological scholarship, highlighting the role of the Global North in exploitation and damage of the natural environment of the Global South. (See Decolonisation Criminology Resource for more – link here).

Social harm and southern criminology are theoretical perspectives that intersect in green criminological enquiries, supporting its interdisciplinary character. To further explain contributions made by green criminology, academic Rob White identifies three theoretical tendencies that are encompassed within green criminology:

a) **Environmental justice** refers to a human-centred approach, exploring the questions of who has access to use environmental resources and to what extent, and what prevents all people from sharing equal access to the environment. Some of the "harms" included here are illegal fishing, contamination of drinking water, or toxic waste dumping, all of which have adverse consequences for people but do not affect everyone equally. Rather, indigenous people, ethnic minorities or poor communities tend to be affected to a higher degree.



Hans Veth via Unsplash

b) **Ecological justice** brings attention to the relationship between humans and the natural environment without centring humans. Consequently, any developments made by humans that use natural environments (e.g. housing, agriculture, consumption) should be assessed in terms of their damage or harm to other living species. This position is often referred to as "ecocentric" because it centres the environment over humans.

c) **Species justice** is a biocentric approach emphasising the importance of non-human rights. At its core is the assumption that humans are not the only species with rights, and they are not superior to other living beings. It's a complicated perspective that incorporates discussions about the ways in which rights are constructed but also involves consideration of the understanding of the value and worth of other non-human species.

Types of environmental crimes

The table below shows some examples of environmental crimes. It is important to keep in mind that regulation and control of these depend on a specific context, meaning that local authorities will have different approaches, legislations and regulations that aim to govern environmental crimes. This further demonstrates the social constructionist nature of crime, as illegality of those actions will differ between jurisdictions. Further, there remain some acts that would fall into some of the categories below, that are legal. For example, fossil fuels are known to significantly contribute to pollution by releasing greenhouse gases during burning, being one of the leading causes of climate change. However, burning of fossil fuels remains contested, as it is legal, and in some circumstances even encouraged as the main non-renewable energy source. Therefore, some governments and corporations will be

reluctant to outlaw or ban the use of fossil fuels, despite scientific evidence of the damage it causes to the environment.

Wildlife Crimes	Illegal Wildlife Trade
	Poaching
	Destruction of Habitats
Pollution Crimes	Illegal Dumping of Hazardous Waste
	Air Pollution
	Water Pollution
	Soil Contamination
Resource Extraction	Illegal Logging
	Illegal Mining
	Illegal Fishing
Waste Crimes	Illegal Waste Sites
	Misdescription of Waste
	Illegal Export of Waste

The above examples are of environmental crimes. However, green criminology is concerned not only with actions that are illegal, but also those actions that are completely legal as well as inactions that cause significant damage to the environment. The below case study will demonstrate the type of actions that green criminology would consider "green crimes/harms".

Case study

In 2011, Greenpeace accused Mattel, a company behind the production of Barbie dolls, of using products from Asia Pulp and Paper (APP), a company known for their contribution to destroying Indonesian rainforests, for their packaging. Following a prolonged and public campaign led by Greenpeace activists, Mattel released a global policy instructing its suppliers to avoid wood fibre from controversial sources, including companies that are known for their involvement in deforestation. They also committed to increased use of recycled paper and wood products certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (sourced from Greenpeace Southeast Asia, 2011).

In general, deforestation is a contested issue, as its legality depends on local jurisdictions and permissions. Some deforestation is legal, while other takes place illegally. However, issues surrounding deforestation go much further than the damage they cause to the environment and species that occupy the forests as their natural habitat. As reports suggest, deforestation is frequently a cause of conflict between local communities, land defenders, states and corporations, in some cases escalating to lethal violence against land defenders (see for example this report by Global Witness). In 2023, 196 people were murdered for defending the land (Global Witness, 2024). Consequently, deforestation, as well as corporate appropriation of indigenous land, combine elements of traditional criminology (e.g. when land defenders are killed or arrested) with green criminology and zemiology perspectives (e.g. damage to natural environment caused by deforestation).

Consider these questions to help you better understand green criminological perspective:

1. What are the consequences of deforestation, both legal and illegal?
2. Why is deforestation a contested issue from criminological perspective?
3. How is zemiology helpful in explaining phenomena such as deforestation? Why is it favoured by green criminologists over traditional criminological theories?
4. What other examples of "green crimes/harms" can you think of?
5. Can you think of other theoretical perspectives that could help you explain deforestation as a crime?

Green criminology encourages us to think about how crime and criminality are constructed through social norms, laws, and marginalisation of minority communities. It also provides a framework for redefining victimisation in a way that includes both human and non-human species, including animals and the environment. At the same time, green criminology allows us to incorporate various criminological and other perspectives to understand the wide macro-level spectrum of crimes and harms, the complexities of the criminal justice system, and the role of inequalities, power relations and structural processes. Consequently, green criminology is an important area of criminological research that can contribute to policy changes and advocacy and bring attention to damaging acts and omissions of powerful actors that impact on the well-being of people and the planet.

Further Reading

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