

How Climate Change Is Becoming a Deadly Part of White Nationalism

Brian Kahn 8/07/19 1:17pm

This weekend's [mass shooting in El Paso, Texas](#), has re-opened the festering debates over gun control, immigration, and the president's penchant for racist hate speech. But the manifesto believed to have been authored by the suspected shooter also reveals another horrific idea edging its way toward the mainstream from the primordial sludge of racist message boards.

Patrick Crusius, the 21-year-old suspect police took into custody after the shooting, is believed to have uploaded a four-page white nationalist document to the message board 8chan (it's since been removed from the site, which itself has been [forced into retreat](#), and we won't be linking to it) outlining his motives for killing at least 22 people at Walmart on Saturday. Included among its racist, anti-immigrant rhetoric are ideas central to the mainstream environmental movement. "[O]ur lifestyle is destroying the environment of our country. The decimation of the environment is creating a massive burden for future generations. Corporations are heading the destruction of our environment by shamelessly overharvesting resources," it reads.

Where Crusius' views violently diverge is the solution to these real issues. The manifesto suggests Americans overconsumption will never stop, so the only option is "get rid of enough people" to make the American lifestyle "more sustainable." Horrific, disgusting, and absurd, this so-called ecofascist ideology uses legitimate environmental concerns to justify racist policies and, sometimes, mass murder.

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This isn't the first time right-wing or fascist figures have pulled from environmentalism to

further their cause. Some thinkers within Hitler's National Socialist party espoused the idea that "[o]nly through a re-integration of humanity into the whole of nature can our people be made stronger," though the relationship of the Nazis and environment is a [bit more complicated](#) than that. Racists throughout U.S. history have often misappropriated population control tied to resource protection, an idea popularized in the 18th century by Thomas Malthus. His idea that food production couldn't keep up with exponential population growth has been debunked since, well... here we are with 7 billion humans on Earth and enough food for everyone (if it were [distributed equitably](#), that is). Much of the discourse around overpopulation [centers on developing countries and stereotypes](#) rather than the reality that rich countries—and their [richest citizens](#) in particular—are the biggest resource consumers on Earth.

The El Paso shooter manifesto itself echoes that of the gunman who killed 51 in Christchurch, New Zealand, earlier this year. Brenton Tarrant, the accused shooter in that massacre, [identified as an ecofascist](#) and defined it as "ethnic autonomy for all peoples with a focus on preservation of nature and the natural order." The El Paso manifesto is in the same vein, going further in some ways by noting that the goal of the murders was to preserve Americans' unique position as one of the world's biggest per-capita carbon polluters on Earth.

While I hesitate to call it a trend, there are growing signs the right-wing populists are leaning into climate change and other environmental crises as a way to drum up support for their policies of exclusion and hate. [Fox News and the president](#) have had an undue influence on fueling anti-immigration hysteria, creating a dark kind of symbiotic feedback with the rising tide of hate in the U.S. While climate denial is still en vogue on Fox News and in the president's addled brain, it's fair to wonder if we

could see ecofascist ideas start to slowly creep into more open public discourse.

To get a handle on that as well as the origins of ideology, I spoke with Betsy Hartmann, a professor emeritus at Hampshire College (full disclosure: it's my alma mater). Hartmann has long studied the connections between white nationalism and environmentalism, something she's referred to as the "greening of hate." Our conversation is below, lightly edited for clarity.

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Brian Kahn, Earther: What is the real genesis of this ideology? Where did these ideas coming from?

Betsy Hartmann: The deeper concerns about racial purity have a long history, but they became married to population concerns with the eugenics movement in the beginning of the 20th century and the idea that you didn't want the unfit procreating. And then, of course, Hitler used eugenicist ideas for genocide against the Jews and also gypsies, the disabled, and other people deemed unfit. He, like many eugenicists in the U.S., drew a link between national purity and racial/ethnic purity and a romanticized pristine natural environment. This link remained and continues to remain an undercurrent of certain population control ideologies and practices.

In terms of the white nationalist movement's use of explicit population-environment arguments, we need to look at the John Tanton network's deployment of these ideas against non-white immigrants. *[Editor's note: Tanton was an ophthalmologist who the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) calls the "architect of the modern anti-immigrant movement," which includes grassroots groups and think tanks that hold sway in Washington, DC, today].*

This network helped set the ground for the rise of these kinds of hate-filled environmental arguments, what I and others have called the 'greening of hate.' Deploying racialized fears of overpopulation destroying the environment, members of the Tanton network even tried to take over the Sierra Club in the late 1990s and turn it into an anti-immigrant organization. Fortunately, they were defeated. What we are facing now is the greening of hate, stage two.

Old ideas, but with some new actors and manifestations. While ties exist between the Tanton network and the white nationalist movement, the lethal embrace of these ideas by violent, armed white nationalists is another order of magnitude.

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Earther: What's driving this renewed interest in this? What are the factors bringing this to "stage two," as you call it?

Hartmann: I would say the internet and right-wing media certainly plays a role in spreading them. But we can't ignore how Malthusian ideas about overpopulation and the environment are taught in high schools all over the United States. They are an important part of many environmental studies curricula. There's a deep racial undercurrent with poor people of color are presented as having too many children and destroying the environment. Unfortunately, Malthusianism has achieved the status of conventional wisdom in the U.S. It's not surprising that white nationalists are influenced by it and deploy it for their own hateful aims.

Now, there's also a powerful apocalyptic discourse that links climate change, environmental degradation, overpopulation, and scarcity. White nationalism is already steeped in violent apocalypticism—fears about the white race coming to an end feed the impetus to mount an Armageddon-style bloody-but-cleansing race war. The manifestos of the shooters in both New Zealand and El Paso in a sense represent a coming together of a green apocalypse and a brown fascist one. This toxic mix serves as a rationale for saving nature and the white race. The El Paso shooter's manifesto even mentions the unwillingness of Americans to change their environmentally damaging lifestyles as a reason to decrease the number of Americans through attacking immigrants.

Earther: Why does this strain of environmentalism seem to appeal to right-wing subculture in particular?

Hartmann: The environmental movement in the U.S. has, I would say, overindulged in apocalyptic thinking for a long time. There's that kind of apocalyptic bridge and then the nature-race-purity bridge. What's so horrifying and shocking to me is that these manifestos are openly Malthusian environmentalist arguments. I don't think we saw that quite as much before in the armed white nationalist movement.

Earther: Is it possible some of these extreme ideas in these manifestos will get laundered through think tanks and become part of mainstream political discourse?

Hartmann: Potentially, but the other thing I've been following in recent years is the growth of the climate-conflict, climate-refugee discourse. My concern has been that it's basically militarizing climate change and introducing a huge national security element into it, which is a real problem. Ironic too, since the military is one of the main culprits when it comes to carbon emissions.

Groundbreaking Report Gives Us a Glimpse of the US Military's Gigantic Carbon Footprint

There are a lot of superlatives that can be used to describe the U.S. military. It represents the...

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I don't want to deny that there may be climate conflicts or climate-related migration. But there is a deeply problematic, apocalyptic discourse about climate and conflict and climate refugees that is quite common in liberal policy circles and even documentaries. It draws on highly racialized depictions of poor people—especially in Africa—as more prone to violence in times of resource scarcity as if they're savages not capable of cooperation. And these narratives also simplify the migration process with the claim that climate change is going to cause scarcity, scarcity's going to cause conflict, and that's going to cause migration. Most climate migration researchers believe a lot of migration that is likely to occur will be within countries not across borders. But to the extent that it is across borders, why are negative images fomented of these poor people coming to get us? That's not on the far right, that's in some liberal foreign

policy and military scenarios around climate change.

Earther: That's interesting. There's often a push to win conservatives on climate change by highlighting the military's climate views. You're saying in some ways this could push us toward a dangerous state of militarizing the borders and militarizing climate change?

Hartmann: Right, we don't want to appeal to conservatives that way, it's not the way to go. It has unintended consequences. There are other ways to bridge party lines like carbon pricing policies and investments in renewable energy. Using this highly militarized and stereotyped Malthusian discourse about poor people of color is dangerous and counterproductive.

Is the World Really Overpopulated?

The notion that we're headed towards some kind of populational apocalypse—that there exists a line...

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Earther: Could we see this kind of language on closing the borders or deporting people or becoming a new flavor climate denial on the right and if so, what are some ways to counteract that?

Hartmann: Once we start using this threat language, it too easily can morph in the minds of some into 'those people are taking away our jobs, they are destroying our culture and our way of life, and they are destroying our environment on top of that.' So I think we have to be mindful of that.

This past fall, Matthew Phelan [wrote an article](#) in the New York Review of Books on ecofascism. He talks about how sustainability discourse is becoming popular in Europe among right-wing populists, especially in Italy with the Five Star Movement. Sustainability could become a mantra of these people, but their kind of sustainability excludes. It's sustainability for white people and for their particular nativist vision of the nation-state. So sustainability needs to be clearly delineated in terms of whose interests are being served. The same with climate policy. Green comes in many shades.

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We need to understand the differences between them.

We also need to acknowledge that migration may be a good response to climate change and people should be allowed to migrate. How can people migrate safely and equitably? These kinds of questions need to be addressed.