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Eco-fundamentalism

Like any movement which inspires belief in its values, environmentalism also fosters a proportion of fundamentalists. One who attracted some media attention in the UK this week was a lady called Joan Pick, who has taken energy saving about as far as its possible to go in a modern society, and then a bit further. Hailed as an "eco-heroine", the 67 year old has avoided all use of energy she considers unnecessary for the last 36 years.

Her car has stayed in the garage since 1972. Since then she has only been in a motorised vehicle twice: to be taken to hospital in an ambulance and to go to her mother's funeral in a hearse. Instead she jogs about 12 miles a day from her flat in Croydon. But when she's at home, she uses no heating, and her electricity bill (reported at 7 pounds a month) is for a single (low energy) light bulb and a kettle to make tea and provide hot water for washing and laundry. Plus a second hand radio; television was turned off permanently in 1975.

If this isn't extreme enough, she eats only raw seeds, grains and fruit: she has had no hot food for more than half her lifetime. Of course, there is a bit of cheating: her flat is kept warmer than otherwise by the heating of her neighbours in the block, and she spends part of each day in the (heated and lighted) local library reading the papers. Nevertheless, her personal energy use has been reduced just about as far as is humanly possible.

But although she takes this much further than most, Miss Pick is by no means unique in her zealotry. The Sunday Times ran an article about "carborexia" or energy anorexia, which is said to be an appropriate description for 7% of the American population. These dark greens indulge in practices the average person would regard as eccentric, for example urinating in the garden (urea is an excellent fertilizer), reusing freezer bags for years on end or going without conventional heating.

Such behaviour can become obsessive. One person is quoted as saying "Being green has taken over my life. I feel constantly guilty about the state of the world, and I inflict that guilt on my boyfriend, too.... I really infuriated his parents recently when I went round there and turned off all the switches on their Sky box, TV and DVD. It took them an hour and a half to re-programme everything, but I couldn't sleep knowing they'd left them on standby."

And here's another: "I'm so worried about the ozone layer that I've turned my fridge off. Now I line up my milk, cheese, yoghurt and vegetables on my balcony. Even though there's every chance the seagulls will eat them." This sort of all-pervading worry and guilt is something which some people are prone to. At one time, it may have led them to dedicate their lives to God in an monastery or convent, or even as a hermit.

Most of us may find such behaviour strange, and it is likely to limit socialising to those of like mind, but it does no harm. However, among the obsessives, there will be occasional individuals for whom controlling their own lifestyle and preaching to others is not enough. There will be some who want to go further, with what is blandly described as "direct action".

According to reports, police are concerned about the possibility of eco-terrorism, carried out by extremists from umbrella groups such as Earth First! or the Earth Liberation Front (which has already carried out attacks in the USA). There are always a few fanatics who are attracted to a cause which they believe justifies violence. The Red Brigades and Red Army Faction - European urban terrorists of the '70s - believed in the overthrow of the political system. The Animal Liberation Front similarly saw all species as having the same rights and indulged in sporadic violence to make their point. In the UK, the most concerted campaign was against Huntingdon Life Sciences by a group calling itself Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty. When banned from directly attacking HLS, they had no compunction in intimidating suppliers (including taxi drivers) or shareholders in client companies.

Direct action by climate change campaigners has so far taken the route of civil disobedience, using tried and tested Greenpeace tactics. But the longer fossil fuel emissions are a high profile issue and the more strident the rhetoric, the greater the chance that a small hard core of activists will take things further.

Since one of the apparent goals of Earth First! is an 80% reduction in the population of humans to "save the planet", there is concern that large-scale attacks with significant loss of life are possible. This seems unlikely, but smaller-scale violence would be almost as ugly a proposition. Concern for the environment is perfectly understandable. Extreme lifestyles are eccentric but harmless, but violent extremism is wrong, whatever the cause.