Ordinary Human Acts and Their Ecological Consequences: A Criminal Behaviour Perspective

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Abstract - Environmental degradation is conventionally attributed to large-scale industrial activities or deliberate violations of environmental law. However, emerging interdisciplinary research in green criminology challenges this limited understanding by exposing how legally permissible, socially accepted, and routine human behaviours can cumulatively contribute to ecocide, defined as severe, widespread, or long-term damage to the natural environment. Green criminology critically examines the human–nature relationship and challenges the legitimacy of environmental harm, even when such harm is lawful or socially sanctioned. It scrutinises not just criminal but also lawful actions that result in ecological damage, thereby broadening the scope of criminological inquiry to include socially accepted yet environmentally destructive behaviours. This paper adopts an interdisciplinary criminological lens to examine how routine human actions, such as excessive consumerism, overexploitation of resources, and unsustainable lifestyles, may be understood as ecocidal when considered in aggregate. These acts are often legal, normalised, and repeated without critical reflection on their environmental consequences. The study draws upon established theories of criminal behaviour, including strain theory, social learning theory, and opportunity theory, to analyse the socio-psychological and structural conditions that shape such conduct. Strain theory explains how social and environmental pressures drive individuals toward harmful actions; social learning theory reveals how such behaviours are normalised and transmitted through societal influence; and opportunity theory demonstrates how access to means and circumstances enables the commission of ecocidal acts. Thus, these theories show how structural inequalities, learned behaviours, and situational opportunities drive individuals and societies to engage in acts that, while not criminalised, pose significant risks to ecological integrity. By recognising these ordinary human acts as contributors to ecocide, the paper seeks to advance the discourse within green criminology and calls for a reassessment of how environmental harm is conceptualised, attributed, and addressed within legal frameworks.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As humanity stands at a defining juncture in the 21st century, it is no longer a matter of debate that human activities exert profound and far-reaching effects on the environment. The Earth is undergoing rapid environmental changes because of human actions. While the environment has always been fundamental to human survival as it provides essential resources and ecological services, the advent of rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and consumer-driven societies has placed unprecedented strain on natural systems. This anthropogenic stress is largely fuelled by the relentless pursuit of economic and personal gain, often with little consideration for the long-term repercussions of environmental degradation. The resulting consequences extend far beyond ecological decline, influencing economic stability, human health, global security, and the principles of intergenerational equity.[1]

The natural environment that has sustained life for centuries is now under severe strain, as evidenced by the growing impacts of climate change, habitat loss, resource depletion, and large-scale ecological disruption. Such contemporary environmental harms are not always the result of overtly illegal or large-scale industrial practices; rather, they often stem from ordinary, everyday human actions that have become normalised within modern societies. From a criminological perspective, particularly through the lens of green criminology, these seemingly benign acts acquire significance as they cumulatively contribute to ecological degradation and environmental injustice. By broadening the conception of 'crime' and 'harm' beyond statutory definitions, green criminology underscores how routine consumption patterns, waste generation, and resource exploitation can amount to forms of environmental harm that challenge both ethical and legal boundaries.

Emerging from the traditions of critical criminology, green criminology extends beyond legally defined crimes to include a wide spectrum of environmentally harmful activities, many of which stem from everyday human actions such as pollution, deforestation, overconsumption, and waste generation. Scholars have proposed distinctions within green crime, such as *primary* green crimes, which involve direct harm to the environment (e.g., deforestation, pollution), and

[1] Eileen Skinnider, "Victims of Environmental Crime – Mapping the Issues" (The International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy, March 2011); United Nations Environment Programme "Global Environment Outlook – GEO-6: Healthy Planet, Healthy People" (2019).

secondary green crimes, which refer to regulatory or enforcement failures that facilitate such harm.[2] Further, a number of criminologists have adopted a legal-procedural approach to their research on environmental issues, focusing on violations of existing environmental laws designed to protect the health, safety, and vitality of humans, animals, and ecosystems. Others, however, adopt a socio-legal approach that contemplates environmental harms which may not be statutorily proscribed but still inflict significant ecological damage. As Lynch and Stretesky note, the former *'corporate perspective'* reflects a narrow legal conception of crime based on violations defined by law, whereas the latter *'environmental justice perspective'* encompasses a broader understanding of harm, recognising that many acts or omissions not criminalised by law can nonetheless cause profound injury to the environment and living beings.[3] By acknowledging this wider continuum of harm, green criminology reveals how ordinary, normalised human behaviours and industrial practices can cumulatively lead to large-scale ecological degradation, demanding a rethinking of responsibility and justice in environmental contexts.

While state and corporate actors are often the focus of green criminological analysis, this paper shifts attention to what Robert Agnew calls *'ordinary acts'*, routine human behaviours like excessive meat consumption, reliance on fossil-fuel-powered vehicles, air-conditioning use, and overconsumption of energy and resources.[4] Importantly, these acts manifest differently across cultures, economies, and social classes. For instance, while energy-intensive lifestyles and high consumption patterns in affluent societies contribute disproportionately to global emissions, similar behaviours may be driven by survival needs or limited access to sustainable alternatives in developing regions. Likewise, cultural norms surrounding diet, mobility, and consumption shape how environmental harms are produced and experienced worldwide. From a criminological standpoint, particularly within green criminology, this global variability emphasises the need to interpret environmental harm not merely as the outcome of individual behaviour but as a reflection of broader structural inequalities, consumption patterns, and socio-economic dependencies that sustain ecologically damaging practices.

[2] Yingyi Situ and David Emmons, *Environmental Crime: The Criminal Justice System's Role in Protecting the Environment* (Sage Publications, 2000).
[3] M.J. Lynch and P. B. Stretesky, *Exploring Green Criminology: Toward a Green Criminological Revolution* (Routledge, 2014).
[4] Robert Agnew, "The ordinary acts that contribute to ecocide: A criminological analysis", in *Routledge International Handbook of Green Criminology* (Routledge, 2nd edn., 2020).

Despite their significance, ordinary acts receive limited attention in green criminology, which often prioritises visible and institutional forms of ecological harm. However, recent scholarship argues for expanding the criminological gaze to include the behaviours of individuals within consumer societies, recognising their role in environmental harm. This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on key criminological theories, such as strain theory, social learning theory, and opportunity theory, to examine the socio-psychological foundations of such behaviours. These theories help explain how environmental harm becomes normalised through social pressures, learned behaviours, and situational enablers. By foregrounding individual agency and responsibility, the paper seeks to broaden the discourse on environmental harm beyond institutional or corporate misconduct. It aims to examine how *'ordinary acts'* can constitute forms of environmental harm despite their legality and social acceptability; analyse how such acts vary across different socio-economic and cultural contexts; and evaluate how a green criminological perspective can help reconceptualise responsibility and accountability for these diffuse yet cumulatively significant harms. Through this inquiry, the paper seeks to expand the scope of green criminology to consider not only macro-level harms but also micro-level behaviours that collectively contribute to ecocide.

II. ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME AND GREEN CRIMINOLOGY

The exploitation of nature, which began as a fight for survival now evolved into hegemony among living things and continues apace, especially in developing countries. This is because human affairs are not exclusively arranged in accordance with morality as to what is 'ecologically wrong' due to the lack of a clear environmental policy. There is, nevertheless growing consensus that technology-driven overpopulation, ignorance, and greed are to blame for the severe resource exploitation and environmental degradation that endangers the integrity of the biosphere, the thin layer of earth, water, and air that supports all life.[5] The traditional definitions and classifications of crime, deviance, and harm in criminology are being challenged, with calls for alternative approaches to achieving justice and rights. This has led to the emergence of green criminology, reflecting a growing acknowledgement of the environmental damage being inflicted.

The emergence of *green criminology* marked a significant shift in the study of crime by extending criminological inquiry beyond conventional human-centred harms to include the

[5] Mark Allen Gray, "The International Crime of Ecocide" 26 *California Western International Law Journal*, 215, 230 (1996).

degradation of ecosystems and the suffering of non-human species. Traditional criminology's narrow focus on violations of criminal law overlooks a wide range of environmentally destructive yet legally sanctioned activities. Green criminology, on the other hand, emphasises the need to distinguish between 'crime' as defined by law and 'harm' as experienced by the environment, highlighting that acts contributing to pollution, deforestation, and resource depletion often escape legal accountability despite their devastating ecological impacts.

Building upon this foundation, green criminology seeks to expose and address the full spectrum of environmental harms, whether legally recognised or not.[6] It distinguishes between primary and secondary environmental crimes to better understand the continuum of ecological harm. *Primary environmental crimes* involve direct actions that cause destruction or degradation of natural resources, such as deforestation, illegal mining, overfishing, and poaching. *Secondary environmental crimes*, by contrast, arise as a consequence or by-product of environmental degradation and include activities such as the illegal disposal of toxic waste, illicit trade in scarce resources, and corruption in environmental regulation and enforcement.[7]

At its core, green criminology calls for a broader, harm-based approach to defining environmental crime, one that prioritises ecological integrity over narrow legal definitions. It challenges the legitimacy of laws that legitimise environmental degradation under the guise of economic development or public welfare.[8] For instance, industries operating within the bounds of legal environmental clearances may still release harmful pollutants, destroy biodiversity, or contribute to climate change. Similarly, large-scale deforestation or excessive carbon emissions, although legally permissible, have long-term, transboundary, and often irreversible ecological impacts.[9]

Proponents of green criminology, therefore, argue that ecological considerations should hold weight in determining the ethical and criminological status of harmful activities. Laws,

[6] Rob White and Dianne Heckenberg, *Green Criminology: An Introduction to the Study of Environmental Harm* 13 (Routledge, 2014).
[7] See Mary Rice, "Environmental Crime: A Threat to our Future", *Environmental Investigation Agency* 1 (2008)*;* A UNEP-INTERPOL Rapid Response Assessment, "The Rise of Environmental Crime – A Growing Threat to Natural Resources Peace, Development and Security" (2016); Polly Higgins, Damien Short and Nigel South, "Protecting the Planet: A Proposal for a Law of Ecocide" 59 *Crime, Law and Social Change* (2013).
[8] Albert Lin described 'harm' as a 'normative concept that reflects underlying social judgments about the good and the bad', and defined 'environmental harm' as 'a setback to human interests that community norms have deemed to be significant'. See Albert Lin, 'The Unifying Role of Harm in Environmental Law' 3 *Wisconsin Law Review* 898, 901 (2006).
[9] Stuart Bell and Donald McGillivray, *Environmental Law* (Oxford University Press, 7th edn., 2008); Gerry Bates, *Environmental Law in Australia* (LexisNexis Butterworths, 9th edn., 2016).

shaped by political and economic interests, may fail to capture the true extent of environmental damage.[10] Ordinary human actions, embedded in everyday consumption patterns, infrastructure development, or corporate practices, often reflect deeper structural issues where law, policy, and societal behaviour are misaligned with ecological sustainability. When such actions collectively contribute to environmental harm, they become part of a broader web of ecocidal processes that demand criminological attention.

In this view, environmental harms should be critically examined regardless of their legality. Acts that inflict significant and lasting ecological damage, whether individual, corporate, or state-driven, can and should be considered criminal from a criminological harm perspective. Green criminology thus not only exposes the inadequacies of existing legal frameworks but also advocates for a paradigm shift towards recognising environmental harm as a form of injustice that endangers both present and future generations.[11]

While green criminology has significantly broadened the scope of traditional criminological inquiry by addressing environmental harms that extend beyond legal definitions, it has also been subject to several critical debates. A central challenge lies in conceptualising and operationalising the concept of 'harm'. Since much of green criminology is concerned with acts that are legal yet environmentally destructive, it is difficult to establish what constitutes harm and how it should be measured and addressed within legal and policy frameworks.[12] This conceptual openness, although theoretically enriching, can lead to analytical ambiguity and make practical implementation and enforcement difficult.[13] Another key concern is whether green criminology should primarily adopt a normative approach, guided by moral and ethical principles, or focus more on legal enforcement and institutional mechanisms. Some scholars argue that its justice-oriented and activist nature may blur the boundaries of legal objectivity,[14] while others maintain that this value-based orientation is essential, as environmental harm is

[10] Samantha Bricknell, "Environmental Crime in Australia" (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2010).
[11] Yingyi Situ and David Emmons, *Environmental Crime: The Criminal Justice System's Role in Protecting the Environment* (Sage Publications, 2000).
[12] M. J. Lynch, "The Greening of Criminology: A Perspective for the 1990s" 2 *The Critical Criminologist* 11–12 (1990). Also see Rob White, *Transnational Environmental Crime: Toward an Eco-global Criminology* (Routledge, 2011).
[13] Nigel South "Green Criminology: Reflections, Connections, Horizons" 3 *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 5–20 (2014); Carole Gibbs, Meredith Gore, et.al., "Introducing Conservation Criminology: Towards Interdisciplinary Scholarship on Environmental Crimes and Risks" 50 *The British Journal of Criminology* 124–144 (2010).
[14] Robert Agnew, "Dire Forecast: A Theoretical Model of the Impact of Climate Change on Crime", 16 *Theoretical Criminology* 21, 33 (2013).

inherently political and requires a justice-driven legal response.[15] This discourse reflects an ongoing effort within the field to balance its ethical and justice-oriented commitments with the need for clarity, consistency, and practical applicability in law and enforcement.

III. CRIMINOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF ORDINARY ACTS

Understanding ordinary human acts from the criminological perspective involves analysing the dynamic interaction between individual actions and broader social structures. While individual behaviours play a role in environmental degradation, they are deeply influenced by societal norms, economic incentives, and institutional practices. Although these behaviours may not be classified as crimes, activities like driving cars and consuming meat significantly contribute to ecological degradation. Government policies and corporate strategies further worsen environmental damage by shaping consumption patterns and resource management.

Analysing criminological theories at the individual level, such as strain theory and social control theory, provides insights into the motivations and structural forces behind these environmentally harmful acts. While these theories primarily focus on explaining criminal behaviour, they can also shed light on conformity to ordinary harms like driving and meat consumption. Despite not directly addressing these behaviours, applying these theories creatively offers valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms and contextual factors influencing individuals' decisions. By considering these factors, we can better understand the complex interplay between societal norms, individual motivations, and environmental influences in shaping behaviours that cause harm to the environment. This understanding is crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate environmental harm and promote environmental sustainability.

i. Strain theory

Strain theory, developed by Robert K. Merton (1938) and extended by Agnew (1992, 2013), asserts that individuals resort to harmful behaviour due to societal pressures or frustrations. This strain or pressure may arise from their inability to achieve socially valued goals through legitimate means.[16] Such a situation can generate negative emotions and a compulsion for

[15] Avi Brisman and Nigel South, "Green Criminology and the Anthropocene" 19 *Theoretical Criminology* 198–215 (2015). Also see Rob White, *Environmental Harm: An Eco-Justice Perspective* (Policy Press, 2013).
[16] Sung Joon Jang and Robert Agnew, **"**Strain Theories and Crime" in James D. Wright (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences* 495-500 (Elsevier, 2015); Robert K. Merton, "Social structure and anomie" 3 American Sociological Review 672–682 (1938)

corrective action, which may lead to deviant or criminal behaviour. In the environmental context, while this theory may not directly account for actions like driving or meat consumption, it can be applied creatively to understand why people adopt consumption patterns that degrade the ecosystem. For instance, in consumer-driven economies, individuals may equate success and social belonging with material acquisition, leading to high energy consumption or unsustainable purchasing practices. Individuals experiencing relative deprivation may seek emotional relief through increased consumption, regardless of ecological impact. Similarly, societal emphasis on material prosperity and comfort can generate 'status frustration,' prompting individuals to adopt environmentally harmful lifestyles, driving luxury cars, using air conditioning excessively, or consuming resource-intensive diets, to project social status.

From an environmental criminology perspective, strain theory shows that ecological harm is not simply a product of ignorance but a social response to economic and cultural pressures. It frames ordinary harms as coping mechanisms, linking ecological damage to underlying social pressures and inequalities.[17] Various factors influence environmental strain, including media coverage and personal traits like short-term thinking and self-interest. Individuals with low environmental strain are more prone to engaging in acts that harm the environment because they perceive these actions as less problematic. Conversely, those with high environmental strain are more inclined to adopt environmentally responsible behaviours, but the motivation for such actions varies based on individuals' concern for the environment.[18] In essence, strain theory offers insights into how individual-level strains contribute to behaviours that harm the environment. By understanding the societal pressures and individual choice of coping strategies involved in these actions, we can better address the root causes of ecocide and promote more sustainable behaviours.

However, the application of strain theory to environmental behaviour is limited by its focus on individual adaptation rather than systemic structures. Moreover, the theory tends to underplay cultural diversity, as in many regions, environmentally harmful acts are driven not by relative deprivation but by survival needs or lack of sustainable alternatives. Thus, while

[17] Robert Agnew, "The ordinary acts that contribute to ecocide: A criminological analysis", in *Routledge International Handbook of Green Criminology* 53-57 (Routledge, 2nd edn. 2020). Also see Barry Smart, *Consumer Society: Critical Issues and Environmental Consequences* (Sage Publications, London, 2010).
[18] A Takacs-Santa, "Barriers to environmental concern" 14 *Human Ecology Review* 26–38 (2007).

strain theory helps explain the emotional and social motivations behind ordinary environmental harms, it requires adaptation to capture global inequalities and differing material realities.

ii. Social Control Theory

Social Control Theory suggests that individuals are less likely to engage in criminal activities when they have strong bonds to conventional social institutions such as family, education, and employment. It explains conformity to behaviours by emphasising the strength of individuals' bonds to society, including attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.[19] When these bonds are strong, people internalise societal norms and refrain from deviant acts. However, in the case of environmental harm, such 'conformity' may ironically perpetuate unsustainable practices.

Modern consumer societies promote norms that equate comfort, convenience, and economic growth with progress that normalise high-consumption lifestyles. Individuals may engage in environmentally harmful behaviours due to societal promotion of consumerism and materialism, which suggests that accumulating possessions and pursuing certain lifestyles are markers of success and happiness. Stake in conformity[20] and internalised beliefs further explain why individuals may prioritise consumption, convenience or social approval over ecological responsibility.[21] Consequently, individuals may engage in ordinary environmental harms not because they reject social control but because prevailing social controls *endorse* environmentally harmful conduct. For instance, corporate marketing and social institutions normalise air travel, fast fashion, or high meat consumption as desirable and respectable lifestyles.

The theory also highlights the regulatory dimension. Direct regulatory controls, such as environmental laws, are often weak or inconsistently enforced, while informal sanctions such as social disapproval are often minimal for such ordinary environmental harms. Such approval

[19] See Robert Agnew, "Social concern and crime: Moving beyond the assumption of simple self-interest" 52 *Criminology: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1-32 (2014); Robert Agnew and Timothy Brezina, *Juvenile Delinquency: Causes and Control* (Oxford, New York, 7th edn., 2023).

[20] Stake in conformity refers to the potential risks individuals face to their reputation or social relationships if they fail to conform to environmentally harmful behaviours. Engaging in these behaviours may be seen as a way to maintain social status or relationships, as well as to fulfil societal expectations regarding material possessions and lifestyles. See N.L. Deutsch and E. Theodorou, "Aspiring, consuming, becoming: Identity in a culture of consumption" 42 *Youth & Society* 229–254 (2016).

[21] *Ibid*; Robert Agnew, "The ordinary acts that contribute to ecocide: A criminological analysis", in *Routledge International Handbook of Green Criminology*, 57-58 (Routledge, 2nd edn., 2020).

leads to widespread acceptance of such behaviours to persist.[22] In fact, such behaviours are perceived as contributing positively to the economy and supporting societal norms of progress and development.[23]

While the application of Social Control Theory to environmental issues has not been extensively studied, it provides a valuable framework for understanding why individuals conform to behaviours that contribute to environmental destruction. It illuminates how individuals' attachment to dominant cultural values, rather than their rejection of them, can lead to ecological degradation. However, the theory assumes shared moral values and overlooks pluralistic and conflicting moral codes, particularly around environmental responsibility. In contexts where environmental ethics are not widely internalised, social control may function as a mechanism that sustains, rather than deters, ecological harm.

iii. Self-Control and Environment Awareness Theory

Self-control theory asserts that individuals with low self-control are more likely to engage in impulsive, short-sighted actions that have immediate rewards but with long-term costs. While this theory may not directly address conformity to specific environmental harms, it sheds light on the underlying psychological factors influencing such behaviours.[24] It explains why people persist in actions such as overconsumption, unnecessary car use, or excessive air conditioning, activities which provide instant comfort or gratification but produce cumulative environmental harm.

Low self-control is characterised by traits such as impulsivity, risk-taking, and insensitivity to consequences. Such traits make harmful actions more appealing as they offer instant gratification without immediate repercussions. These traits can also manifest in ecologically harmful consumption, where individuals prioritise convenience or pleasure over sustainability. Individuals with low self-control may be more likely to engage in behaviours such as excessive driving or meat consumption, which offer immediate satisfaction but contribute to environmental degradation over time.[25]

[22] C Funk and B Kennedy, "Everyday environmentalism," *Pew Research Center*, 2016, *available a*t: www. pewinternet.org/2016/10/04/everyday-environmentalism/ (last visited on October 13, 2025).
[23] A. Brisman, 2004. 'Double whammy: Collateral consequences of conviction and imprisonment for sustainable communities and the environment,' William & Mary Environmental Law & Policy Review, 28(2): 423–475.
[24] M. R. Gottfredson and T. Hirschi, 1990. A General Theory of Crime. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
[25] John Tribbia, "Stuck in the Slow Lane of Behavior Change? A Not-So-Superhuman Perspective on Getting Out of our Cars" in S. C. Moser and L. Dilling (eds.) *Creating a Climate for Change* 237–250 (Cambridge University Press. 2007).

On the other hand, individuals with high self-control are more likely to consider the broader implications of their actions and exhibit greater restraint in behaviours that contribute to environmental harm. While they may still engage in some ordinary harms, such as purchasing luxury items, they are more inclined to weigh the environmental consequences and may choose more sustainable alternatives when possible. Individuals with these traits are more likely to engage in environmentally responsible behaviours, actively working to reduce their ecological footprint and mitigate the effects of environmental damage. Further, environmental control, a dimension of self-control, also plays a crucial role in mitigating behaviours that harm the environment. Individuals high in environmental control demonstrate awareness of the environmental impact of their actions and a commitment to preserving natural resources for future generations.[26]

However, integrating this theory with the notion of *environmental control*, awareness, and valuation of ecological consequences adds nuance. This theory overemphasises individual responsibility, neglecting the structural and cultural factors that shape opportunities and incentives for harm. Many environmentally damaging behaviours are shaped less by personal impulse than by systemic design, such as urban infrastructure, market incentives, or lack of alternatives. Individuals with high self-control but low environmental awareness may still engage in such ordinary environmental harms. This shows how cognitive and cultural factors shape the moral evaluation of environmental actions in society.[27]

Nevertheless, self-control theory does provide a framework for understanding how individual-level regulation interacts with broader ecological consciousness. By considering the interplay between self-control and environmental control, we can better understand why individuals engage in harmful behaviours and develop strategies to promote more sustainable practices for the benefit of the planet.

iv. Social Learning/ Rational Choice Theory

Social Learning Theory and Rational Choice Theory both highlight decision-making processes shaped by learned norms and perceived costs and benefits.[28] Originally developed to

[26] Martin Patchen, "What shapes public reaction to climate change? Overview of research and policy implications" 10 *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 47–68 (2010).
[27] Avi Brisman and Nigel South "Green Criminology and the Anthropocene" 19 *Theoretical Criminology* 256–275 (2015).
[28] Ronald Akers, *Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance* (Routledge, New York, 1st edn., 2009); Ronald Clarke and Derek Cornish, "Modeling Offenders' Decisions: A Framework for Research and Policy" 6 *Crime and Justice* 147–185 (1985).

explain criminal conduct, these theories can also be applied to understanding how individuals adopt and rationalise behaviours that lead to environmental destruction. These theories explain how ordinary environmental harms are socially reproduced and justified through observation, imitation, and cultural reinforcement. Similar to how people learn criminal behaviour through observation and rationalisation, they internalise attitudes and beliefs that justify harmful actions toward the environment. Individuals learn environmentally harmful practices from family, peers, and media that endorse consumption and convenience. For example, frequent car use or energy-intensive lifestyles are often framed as symbols of independence or modernity. Differential reinforcement further sustains these behaviours as they provide immediate benefits such as comfort, time efficiency and social approval with minimal perceived risk of punishment or disapproval.[29]

Rational Choice Theory complements this by suggesting that individuals make decisions based on perceived utility. It emphasises the role of cost-benefit analysis in individuals' decision-making processes, whether in the context of engaging in criminal behaviour or actions contributing to environmental harm. Individuals assess the potential advantages and drawbacks of their actions and are inclined to proceed when the perceived benefits outweigh the perceived costs.[30] Yet, environmental criminologists have noted that this model assumes perfect information and rational calculation, which rarely applies to ecological behaviour.[31] In reality, decisions about ordinary environmental harms are bounded by habit, cultural conditioning, and misinformation, which Herbert Simon referred to as *"bounded rationality*."[32] People often underestimate environmental consequences or assume their individual actions are insignificant.

Further, broader cultural attitudes that prioritise materialism, economic growth, and exploitation of natural resources over environmental conservation also play a significant role.[33] These attitudes influence societal norms and values, perpetuating a mindset where environmental degradation is seen as an unavoidable consequence for societal advancement. Efforts to promote environmentally responsible attitudes and behaviours face challenges due to such deeply ingrained cultural norms and economic interests that prioritise short-term gains

[29] Tim Kurz, "The Psychology of Environmentally Sustainable Behavior: Fitting Together Pieces of the Puzzle" 2 *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 257–278 (2002).
[30] R. L. Akers, "Rational Choice, Deterrence, and Social Learning Theory in Criminology: The Path Not Taken" 81 *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 653–676 (1990).
[31] Mark Halsey, "*Against 'Green' Criminology"* 44 *The British Journal of Criminology* 833–853 (2004).
[32] Alfio Giarlotta and Angelo Petralia, "A. Simon's bounded rationality" 47 *Decisions in Economics and Finance* 327–346 (2024).
[33] R. L. Akers, 1998. Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.

over environmental preservation. Further, this cultural context complicates rational choice theory, as what appears rational in one context, such as heating homes in cold climates, using private transport due to safety concerns, may be ecologically damaging in another. Thus, while these theories elucidate how people justify and reproduce ordinary environmental harms, they must be expanded to account for collective rationalities and socio-economic disparities shaping environmental decision-making.

Thus, Social learning and Rational Choice theories provide a framework for understanding how individuals adopt and perpetuate behaviours leading to environmental destruction. Addressing these behaviours requires a comprehensive approach involving education, policy changes, community involvement, and cultural transformations. This multifaceted strategy aims to promote sustainable practices and mitigate the adverse impact of human activities on the environment. By tackling the underlying social influences and attitudes driving such behaviours, we can work towards creating a society that prioritises sustainability and environmental consciousness.

v. Opportunity Theory

Opportunity theories, particularly Routine Activity Theory and Environmental Criminology, emphasise the situational factors that enable or constrain harmful behaviour.[34] These frameworks can illuminate how physical, economic, and institutional structures shape engagement in ordinary harms. This theory can also offer insights into the environmental contexts that encourage engagement in behaviours contributing to ecological harm. These theories highlight how situational factors and environmental conditions play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' decisions. Environmental degradation is often facilitated by the availability of harmful options and the absence of accessible, sustainable alternatives. For instance, reliance on private vehicles may result not from individual preference but from urban designs that neglect public transport. Similarly, the affordability and marketing of high-meat diets, disposable goods, and energy-intensive appliances create environments of ecological opportunity.[35]

[34] Lawrence E. Cohen and Marcus Felson, "Social Change and Crime Rate Trends: A Routine Activity Approach" 44 *American Sociological Review* 588–608 (1979); Paul J. Brantingham and Patricia L. Brantingham, *Environmental Criminology* (Waveland Press, 1991).
[35] Barry Smart, *Consumer Society: Critical Issues and Environmental Consequences* (Sage Publications, London, 2010); P. N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (Routledge, New York, 2001); Worldwatch Institute, "State of the World 2010: Transforming Cultures: From Consumerism to Sustainability" (2010).

The opportunity to perpetrate environmental harm hinges significantly on societal conditions and structures that shape individuals' behaviours. In societies characterised by consumerism and economic abundance, a plethora of products and services contribute to environmental degradation. These items are often mass-produced and aggressively marketed, making them easily accessible and attractive to a broad audience. Individuals, especially those with greater financial means, may be more inclined to choose behaviours that harm the environment, despite potential concerns for ecological preservation.[36]

Furthermore, societal structures sometimes limit individuals' options, making it difficult to opt for environmentally responsible alternatives. Urban planning that prioritises car usage over public transportation, coupled with the high costs associated with eco-friendly options like hybrid vehicles and renewable energy sources, constrains viable choices for many individuals.[37] Consequently, individuals may feel compelled to engage in activities that harm the environment due to the lack of accessible and affordable sustainable alternatives.

Though this theory underestimates the cultural and moral dimensions of harm as it focuses too narrowly on situational conditions, its emphasis on environmental design and systemic accessibility makes it particularly relevant to policy-oriented approaches for reducing ecological harm. Societal conditions not only facilitate environmental harm but also restrict individuals' capacity to adopt more sustainable practices. Addressing these structural barriers is essential for promoting environmentally friendly behaviours and mitigating the adverse impacts of human actions on the environment.

IV. CONCLUSION

The criminological theories discussed above shed light on the range of human behaviours that contribute to environmental harm, especially through seemingly routine and ordinary actions. These theories highlight distinct dimensions of ordinary harms; collectively, they demonstrate the multifaceted nature of environmental destruction. Strain and self-control theories emphasise internal motivations and psychological pressures. Social control and learning theories reveal how cultural norms and institutional values sustain ecologically harmful practices, while opportunity theory contextualises these behaviours within material infrastructures.

[36] Katherine Bunting-Howart, Avi Brisman, et.al., "Structure of Environmental Action" 34 *Southern Anthropologist* (2009).
[37] Tim Kurz, *supra* note 29 at 262; Martin Patchen, *supra* note 26 at 49.

These frameworks are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Strain theory connects with opportunity theory in showing how structural inequalities and material scarcity produce both motivation and opportunity for harm. Self-control and social learning intersect in explaining how impulsivity interacts with cultural reinforcement. Meanwhile, social control and rational choice highlight the paradox that conformity to dominant norms, rather than deviance, often drives environmental harm.

A holistic criminological understanding of ordinary harms thus requires acknowledging personal agency while confronting structural inequalities and policy failures that enable ecological degradation. A major challenge lies in the underreporting and lack of prosecution of such harmful acts. Many people dismiss these actions as insignificant or believe they have no real impact, which leads to a culture of inaction. This mindset contributes to the 'trivialisation' of environmental harm and undermines accountability. It is crucial to recognise that every act of environmental degradation matters and should not be dismissed lightly. Particularly in the case of powerful corporations and industries, harmful conduct must be promptly identified, reported, and prosecuted to deter future violations.

Green criminology, through its ecological model of justice, aspires to ensure the health and well-being of both human and non-human life by safeguarding ecological rights. However, the discipline also faces the complex task of addressing the invisibility, borderlessness, and often unacknowledged nature of environmental crimes. There is an urgent need for clear answers to pressing questions: How do we define and regulate environmental harm? How can such harm be prevented? What systems of authority should be responsible for enforcement? Without addressing these questions, and without a shift in awareness and responsibility, humanity risks not only devastating ecosystems but also endangering its own survival.