

A Meta-Analysis Essay on the Environmental Resistance Movement and the Role of its Deniers

by Austin Routtⁱ

Abstract

The environmental resistance movement, also called the green resistance movement, the ecological resistance movement, or simply environmentalism, is perhaps one of the most discussed and analyzed movements in modern society. As with any resistance movement, it finds places in politics, culture, business, and individual lives, but there are certainly aspects of this particular movement that make it unique. In this analysis, I will bring together current research to make the claim that the environmental resistance movement is unique in the fact that it is, in reality, unopposed. I will analyze the deniers of the scientific basis of environmentalism relating to the role of opposition in resistance movements, rather than as scientific skeptics.

Current Research and Literature

The environmental resistance movement is like any other movement in many respects. It has within it groups of varying beliefs, it has “radical” and “moderate” wings, it has protests and public displays, and it has both an oppressing and oppressed party. The purpose of this paper, however, is not to justify the classification of the environmental movement within resistance movements but to discuss a certain aspect of it that makes it somewhat unique. To understand this aspect, it is also important to understand the motivation and source of the movement in distinction to classical movements. Most resistance movements stem from political upset and the desire of a group of people to make some sort of a change. For justification, the movements need only to show that citizens are unhappy. This is sufficient for most, since political movements are based on the idea of fixing a system that is supposed to serve citizens. The environmental resistance movement, however, is different in this respect because it is not a political movement and is not a response to governmental or political oppression. It is therefore not fueled by upset citizens who feel injustice—at least not in whole. Instead, the environmental resistance movement is founded on a body of scientific work, loosely beginning in the 1800’s and culminating somewhere around the 1960’s and 70’s—for example by breaking into popular work such as Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax*. It is in this respect that the movement is unique, in that all of its evidence and justification comes from science (though this is not to say there are not some unscientific tangents to the movement.) Historically, movements such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s and the Chicano Movement of the same era are based on political systems of oppression. It is indeed the scientific aspect of the movement around which the central argument of this paper is formed; namely that other interpretations of the science, known commonly as climate skepticism in this case, are not, by any means, to be analyzed within the context of the movement as opposition but as a media- and politics-driven phony to confuse the public and those outside of the movement. As a fine-grain detail in relation to this argument, there is the distinction between oppositional forces, which disagree with a movement and aim to end it, and dissenting forces, which agree with the foundation of a movement but make non-conventional arguments or conclusions (e.g. extremism). Rather than focus on the credibility of skeptic “science”, which has already been discussed and debunked extensively in other literature including James Lawrence Powell’s *The Inquisition of Climate Science*, I will attempt to prove that

climate skepticism cannot be considered in the context of the environmental movement as an oppositional force dissenting force or anything else. In doing so, my support and argument will be structured, firstly, with an analysis of the existing research regarding the environmental movement as a social movement and from other perspectives. The analysis will describe the research in its own context, in the context of this paper, as well as attempt to determine the legitimacy of the skeptics as a part of the environmental movement. Having described and evaluated the current research, I will make the argument that so-called scientific skeptics and climate change skeptics cannot be considered an aspect of environmentalism, even as opposition or dissent.

The bulk of the research on the topic of ecological and environmental resistance, when it applies to the existence and nature of environmental skeptics, is intended to discredit the skeptics and explain their fallacies and mistakes. A sub-question that exists in similar and related research is about the nature of the movement itself, including within it the nature of the skeptical side (having accepted it as some credible aspect of the movement). This question is answered historically, culturally, and socially. Andrew Kirk, for example, in his book *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism*, remarks on the origin of the movement. Going as far back as the 1960's in referring to one of the first grassroots environmental conferences, Alloy, Kirk says that "Alloy represented a critical convergence of ideas and the birth of a community and ultimately a movement" (Kirk 73). Kirk believes that the movement began with a group of people holding certain ideas and then creating a community based on them. This is a sort of traditional perspective of a resistance movement, since it is the historical norm for many others. His claim that the movement started the way it did is essentially a claim of causality, saying that the existence of ideas and the convergence of them in a community caused the birth of ecological resistance.

Yash Tandon is an author who provides some context for the movement. History is the main lens of his essay, "Grassroots Resistance to Dominant Land-Use Patterns in Southern Africa" and it pays particular attention to the political landscape during the environmental struggles to which it refers. This implies that the Green movement is not only scientific, as it may be construed in this paper and other sources, but is indeed a social movement as well. Tandon makes a claim about the cause of the movement, saying that "Privatization is the curse of humanity in the present era...[land's] entrustment to individuals is an act against humanity and life itself" (Tandon 173). This is an interesting claim in itself, but is more important by implicitly identifying oppressors (land owners and sellers and those who develop it) and therefore suggesting that the oppressed party may consist of all human beings, including the unwitting owners and developers of land. The book also talks about the movement in terms of its tactics and its goals (dismantling a broken social and economic system) which strips it of its scientific base and turns it into something that can be analyzed fully in terms of social resistance. Much modern research works to highlight the lack of validity of climate change denial. This is mostly a definitional claim that says that climate change denial is not a valid argument or belief, in terms of science. Though it is the goal of this paper to determine whether the denier side is actually a valid faction of the movement, it is an important piece of this argument to determine if the internal claims of the deniers are credible. Existing research attempts to answer these questions directly.

"Attacks on IPCC Report Heat Controversy Over Global Warming", an article in the journal, *Physics Today*, by Toni Feder, covers and comments on a report which gained much notoriety in the climate change debate. The controversy was related to a removal of a certain portion of the report which skeptics believe may have helped their case. The interesting part of the controversy, according to Feder, was that the attacks from the skeptics were not directed toward the science, but the scientists themselves. Explaining this, Feder says in the beginning that "A statement by scientists that the 'balance of evidence suggests a discernible human influence on global climate' has stirred up

a political controversy that seems to be about everything except the science” (Feder 55). The article then goes on to explain that the skeptics have no science on their side at all, and that their attacks are directed towards scientists because there are no solid arguments against the science. This research is important, because it discredits skeptic “science” and creates a political frame for the movement by recognizing motivations for “skepticism” other than science. This political frame is important because the environmental movement is characterized by its scientific backbone, not political unrest or upset. This reframing now puts skeptics in a political camp rather than a scientific one, even without ascribing a particular partisanship to it.

Taking a more aggressive approach, Mark Hertsgaard wrote the article, “Confronting the Climate Cranks” in the journal, *The Nation*. In it he continues the research and claim that climate change skeptics may indeed be skeptics or deniers, but certainly are not skeptical for scientific reasons. Rather than focus on the real reasons for denial, Hertsgaard simply explains that there is no science on which skeptics can rely. He goes on to firmly attack the credibility of deniers, saying that “countless subsequent warnings have gone unheeded, largely because of stiff resistance from the carbon lobby, to borrow author Jeremy Leggett’s term—the energy and auto companies that profit from carbon dioxide emissions, the politicians and propagandists these companies sponsor and the right-wing ideologues who share their anti-government sympathies.” Hertsgaard makes it very clear that there is no such thing as skeptical climate science and that all real science confirms those who understand climate change and call for action.

Author James Lawrence Powell aids Hertsgaard in the effort to debunk claims by skeptics and prove their logic and science false. In his book, *The Inquisition of Climate Science*, Powell makes it clear that climate change deniers are not scientists and their evidence not scientific. He goes on to talk about the conferences and think tanks of the deniers, and how they appear in every way to mimic scientific conventions, but are actually something else entirely. This is where his most important argument comes in, by denying that the skeptics have anything at all to say about climate science. He claims that, “While some deniers argue there is no consensus on global warming, others take a different track, implicitly accepting that a consensus exists, then denouncing consensus itself as false and malicious” (Powell 33). By highlighting this obvious lack of logic, Powell gives reason to disregard the skeptics. Powell gets the closest of any author to articulating the true classification of climate change skepticism and that it is not a scientific position, a valid position, or a position that can be taken seriously in any context.

In *Deep Green Resistance: Strategy to save the Planet*, Aric McBay, Lierre Keith, and Derrick Jensen make it clear who the movement of environmentalism is targeting, saying that “Since industrial civilization is systematically dismantling the ecological infrastructure of the planet, the sooner civilization comes down, the more life will remain afterwards to support both humans and non-humans” (McBay 424). This identifies the whole of civilization as an oppressor, as something against which all environmentalists should rebel and resist. As the book continues, a continuation of logic makes it clear that those in power are those who encompass civilization in a very profound sense, since it is the powerful that have shaped civilization the way it is. This highlights at the very least a conflict of interest. In principle, scientists should have no more stake in the conclusions of climate research than an average person, but it is quite clear that those in charge of the most dangerous activities (oil and gas companies, politicians) would have some stake in anti-climate change conclusions. If civilization can itself be considered as the oppressor due to its activities (heavy industry, politics, etc), then it is only sensible to hold the leaders of those activities accountable. This is not to say that the rest of civilization, e.g. the powerless, is to be exonerated.

The idea of denial being a non-scientific viewpoint is reiterated by many scientists and authors, including Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer in her book, *Environmental Activism: A Reference*

Handbook. For example, in talking about the history of environmental activists, Switzer says that "...the Bush and Reagan administrations had promulgated regulations that so favored industry and business interests that environmental groups struggled to keep up" (Switzer 10). This may be only a historical fact, but the fact itself makes a subtle implication. The regulations which stood so firmly in the way of activists were put in place by politicians, specifically ones who expressed a great deal of doubt about climate change. The point here, especially when understood with other works about the subject, is that the obstacles to activists and environmentalists are not legitimate scientific skeptics that cast doubt on the movement, but political or media ones that simply sensationalize the denial or push agendas.

One last iteration of this destruction of skeptic credibility is the article, "Global Warming: How Skepticism Became Denial" from the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, written by Spencer Weart. This article is somewhat historical in its basis that climate change skepticism used to be a legitimate scientific viewpoint. Weart talks about how scientists operate; they demand evidence of a certain quality and amount before accepting any conclusion. Any normal scientist will begin a skeptic on any subject at all before analyzing evidence. Thus, Weart concludes that many scientists were at one point skeptical of climate change. He goes on to claim, however, that the evidence is now such that all actual scientists accept the reality of climate change. Weart says that the persistence of some "skeptical" side is simply the result of deniers masked as scientific doubters. In reference to these deniers and their influence on the populace, he adds that "the public has yet to be convinced [of climate change]. This may never be completed if the new idea contradicts widely cherished assumptions about the natural world. There is yet another barrier if the idea seems to attack established interests such as religion or an industry" (Weart 41-42). He says here simply that there is no scientific validity to the skeptical side of the debate, rather attributing their denial position to their desire to protect their interests. But he makes another claim that is more implicit; that deniers are not just wrong in their beliefs, but are being immoral since they have influence on the public. He concludes that these deniers are wrong to confuse the public about a matter that is extremely urgent and dangerous.

Other scientists and groups agree that climate change denial has a quite sinister side to it. William C. Tucker of *Ecology Law Quarterly*, in his article "Deceitful Tongues: Is Climate Change Denial a Crime?" argues that it may even be a criminal act to publicly deny climate change. He assumes the claim of many others, that climate change is happening and that deniers are unscientific, but goes on to its main point that climate change deniers wish to deny more than just that. Drawing historical parallels to deniers of the effects of secondhand smoke and the actions of the tobacco industry to conceal and distort scientific evidence in order to protect itself, Tucker says that climate change deniers are frequently people who will gain from the belief that climate change is not happening, such as fossil fuel corporations. But the article makes one more, extremely important, claim. It says that the corporations, since they hide evidence knowingly, are hurting the entire human species and therefore participating in perhaps the most immoral act possible.

More articles and scientists seem to agree with the evaluation of climate change denial as immoral, highlighting other examples. D.C. Barker and D. H. Bearce, for example, identify modern theology as a problem in their article "End-Times Theology, the Shadow of the Future, and Public Resistance to Addressing Global Climate Change" in *Political Research Quarterly*. They say that most Americans seem to believe in climate change as a real phenomenon, but somehow disregard it as an important or pressing issue. To explain this strange behavior, Bearce and Barker discuss the idea that theology which stresses focus on the end of days or the rapture is to blame for stripping people of much needed concern. In talking about people who follow this type of theology, the authors state that, "all else being equal, end-times believers 'know' that life on Earth has a preordained expiration

date, no matter what” (Barker and Bearce 269). They blame this type of religious belief for American apathy regarding climate change policies and therefore blame this religious belief for a continuation of the immorality and unethical behavior of denying climate change.

Adding to research of a similar nature is Joachim Radkau and Patrick Camiller in their book, *The Age of Ecology: A Global History*. As with many books about climate change, this one has a historical perspective and the author analyzes the ecological resistance movement in this way. It focuses in part on the exceptional aspects of the movement, specifically its unordinary lack of violence. Resistance movements are historically violent, but the environmental movement seems to be extraordinarily placid. This testifies to its scientific foundation, since there are few or no cases of a scientific concept being the catalyst of a violent movement. This is a sort of proof that the movement itself is scientific and implies that a violent or aggressive act within the movement or under the guise of environmental resistance would be atypical. It is worth noting here that the environmental movement is not free of aggression as can be proven by attacks on genetic engineering facilities or other acts of “eco-terrorism”. These actions are easily classifiable (though not dismissible) as dissent within the movement as they are unconventional views coming from the same generally peaceful premise. Sympathizing a bit with the resisters, the author says that “...space travel made us aware how empty and lifeless space is, and that this planet of ours is all we have” (Radkau 93). The underlying evaluation here is that it is important and good for environmental resistance to continue the way that it is, nonviolently, and for there to be few obstacles in the way.

The Role of Deniers in the Environmental Resistance Movement

There are a few points that can be distilled from the research as a whole, which together create a useful set of statements as background for discussing the role of deniers. First, there seems to be a consensus that climate change is happening, and it is pressing. Furthermore, the research agrees that the so-called climate change “skeptics” are no more than deniers who seek to confuse the public about an important matter and, generally, those who benefit from industries which would be diminished by environmental protection policies. Finally, there is agreement that it is nothing short of immoral to deny climate change, since it deeply affects all humans and that confusing the public by concealing or twisting research is contributing to our eventual demise. So there is not much disagreement in the research and the topic seems fairly well-understood. But there is another matter that steps outside of the scope of scientific questioning only. Scientists and environmentalists know that climate change “skepticism” is not a scientific viewpoint and therefore not a valid position in science. But are the deniers a valid party, faction, or side of the movement? It is the question of context, whether or not they are an internal, dissenting group which operates within the scope and characteristic of the movement. It may be agreed that they are wrong, but are they actually a contrary yet legitimate side to a movement which is characterized by a debate?

This question is a philosophical one, and surely a difficult one to answer. It is helpful, firstly, to understand the side of the movement that is the traditional, environmental resisters. These are the people that began the movement by protesting activities and policies which contribute to climate degradation. Historical research is deeply important here, contributing to an understanding of the tactics and decisions of the protestors and of how the movement has played out. The existence of Andrew Kirk’s *Green Earth Catalog* is evidence suggesting that the movement was created by a group of concerned people who evolved into a community. This is historically typical of a resistance movement; they tend to start small and gain momentum as other people hear and agree with the ideas. It is also important to note that the movement was extremely social in nature at its start, and then later developed into the full movement that it is.

The deniers, on the other hand, have absolutely no such history or validity, but their background comes into view here as well, showing how the skeptics got started and who they were. As Powell details, most of the denier groups are just think-tanks or industry men and women who have no scientific foundation. Also, there was no community or social aspect to its conception, as with other movements. Rather, their ideas and industries and companies became threatened, so they reacted by developing a pseudo-scientific argument against the people who espoused the dangerous (to them) ideas. It is in this sense that the skeptics have no part in the movement, because the movement was not founded on the “debate” to which they cling so desperately, but rather on the science and community. By debunking the idea that their skepticism is scientific, it can be said that they play no part in the movement, but are some external agency that only seeks to dismantle a self-contained resistance. The phrase, “in the movement” deserves some additional focus because it is, on its face, a rather strong point to make. Having a role *in* a movement must be distinguished from interaction *with* one. As an example consider the United States’ involvement with the Apartheid movement. Without a doubt the Apartheid movement was a movement of South Africans, not Americans, but that is not to say that the United States had no interaction with the movement or its politics. Whether or not an interaction is positive is irrelevant here; the only point to make is that climate change deniers have no intra-movement part to play.

A related criterion which situates something in the definition of resistance movement is the tactics or way in which the ideas of the movement are expressed. In a traditional movement, this consists of protesting and other forms of increasing public awareness. The environmental resistance movement has followed this example by doing demonstrations and denouncing practices that degrade the environment while supporting those which conserve it. This is not to say of course that movements cannot be innovative or different, as the ecological resistance is, particularly in its lack of violence and reliance on science. These, however, are still considered *characteristic* of the movement since they are part of its foundation, part of its platform. So, in order to be classified outside of and external to the movement, there can be no instance of things which are both atypical of resistance movements generally and of the ecological resistance movement specifically. If “lack of violence” can be distilled to “lack of aggression”, then the side of the deniers is illegitimate by breaking this characteristic of the movement. To clarify, lack of aggression pertains not to aggression towards ideas, as all movements must exhibit (e.g. aggression towards racism, sexism), but to aggression towards others. The ecological resistance movement has never been characterized by aggression, but the deniers have a history of attacking scientists and reports, such as the deniers who attacked the scientists involved in the IPCC report covered by Toni Feder. Again, in these regards, the deniers play no part in the movement itself, even as dissenters within it. Consider once more the distinction between movement opposition and dissention. The argument made here is in regards to the legitimacy of skeptics as dissenters, which must be characteristic of the movement. Legitimacy as opposition is another point to be made and considered, but does not depend on tactics being characteristic of the movement.

In another tactical evaluation, it can be seen that the deniers have no grounding in the movement. This paper makes no such claim that movements must be one-sided. Contrarily, many movements have two or more sides that react differently to the same concerns or which interpret issues differently and debate (bringing rise to dissenting and contrarian groups). But this is not what happens with resisters and deniers. The deniers claim that they see the same data and disagree with the conclusions of scientists. They say there is no reason for concern because the data is only misinterpreted, and then occasionally offer explanations for the data other than climate change. Having already agreed that this much is wrong and that the deniers are mistaken scientifically, some may be left to wonder what exactly the deniers are doing if not actually interpreting data differently.

Indeed, science is often riddled with scientists on either side of a debate, both sides claiming the evidence supports them and neither side being conclusively disproved. But the deniers are disproved. So what are they and what are they doing? Mark Hertsgaard, along with Powell in *The Inquisition of Climate Science* (121) and others, points out the manipulation of media and the creation of propaganda for which the deniers are guilty. Instead of reinterpreting the data and ideas of the ecological resistors and activists, the deniers do all in their power to make them ignored or misunderstood. Examples of this can be seen in denier conventions and media coverage of the apparent climate debate. This is not an intra-resistance action but an action made by people and groups that see the movement itself as threatening, and is the kind of action that identifies the deniers as outsiders and wrongdoers, and even those that are targeted by the environmentalist movement, rather than underdogs in the movement itself.

Adding to a philosophical discussion of resistance movements is the question of whom. In order to understand a movement clearly, it must be understood against whom the movement resists. In the case of ecological resistance, this is not always clear. Different activists and scientists may answer this question differently, but among the best possibilities are the politicians and CEOs and others in power that are responsible for the upkeep of unsustainable practice, and, according to Derrick Jensen and fellow authors Aric McBay and Lierre Keith, human civilization itself, loosely characterized by Jensen as a groupings of people in high densities that require food import and other large scale organization of basic necessities, since it is unsustainable by nature (26). If all these groups are added together, it can be concluded that the green resistance resists against everyone and everything responsible for environmental degradation, even if that includes the resistors themselves. This has been true since the very inception of the movement, and is its central point. Historically, opposition to resistance movements comes from the powers that be. This is a perfectly intuitive answer, but it for some reason becomes cloudy in the green resistance movement. Indeed, opposition directly from politicians and governing bodies has been spotty and voiceless since public relations and the democratic system depend on making choices according to the opinions of the citizens. Instead, the aforementioned think-tanks and deniers step up to decry it on falsely scientific grounds. Traditional opponents to any given movement simply protect their current position from protesters and activists, but the deniers do no such thing. In the clear and immensely helpful article by William C. Tucker, he ties together the climate change deniers and the deniers of other scientific conclusions in history, such as the understanding of the danger of secondhand smoke, which while agreed upon now, was once sternly denied by tobacco companies. Tucker shows how the same types of people use the same tactics to deny climate change, eventually concluding that these people are essentially just denying science (845). In terms of a resistance movement, this is invalid and illogical, because it is not opposition towards a movement, but denial of its premise. This is a subtle point to make, and one that deserves an analogy. The American Civil Rights Movement experienced oppositional force from those that wanted the movement to end (those with ideological differences and specifically politicians), but these people were also the very *oppressors* that were the cause of the movement. The same can be said of the Apartheid movement or even such historical movements as the French Revolution. The protesters were opposed to the oppressors, and the oppressors were opposed to the protesters. They acted as oppositional forces to each other. Green activists protest the oppressors who indirectly hurt humans by hurting the environment. If science is supposed to be the main opposition of the deniers, then climate change deniers have no oppressors. Science by its very nature cannot oppress since oppression is a purely human action and even breaks down linguistically unless one relies upon personification. I contend now that there must be an oppositional force in a resistance movement of any kind, so that there is indeed something against which to resist—a fact evident in every historical resistance movement. Although the point is deeply

philosophical, it is clear: without oppressors, there is no legitimate way to speak of climate change deniers as the opposition of the movement.

It is at this point that some discussion regarding the oppositional criteria of resistance movements is required. Political opposition, meaning opposition to a law or policy, is extremely common and seems to be in direct disagreement with the discussion in this paper. This kind of opposition is not related to the discussion of *oppressors* presented in this paper, but is opposition in a conventionally defined way. Opposition, as used in this paper, has the contextual characteristic of being directly related to oppression. It is in this sense that I contend that oppositional forces to a resistance movement must be oppressive and, therefore, that climate change deniers cannot be the opposition of the ecological resistance movement (not being themselves the oppressors or cause of the movement) nor their own wing within the movement because they themselves have no oppressors (and therefore no opposition).

At the very crux of this paper is the distinction between *scientific validity* of denier arguments and *resistance* validity, which is here defined as validity of something by how well it fits in the definition of the green, ecological, or environmental resistance movement. It is perfectly clear from historical standpoints that the movement is a partially classical (having oppressors, social aspects, etc), partially innovative (use of science, etc.) movement in its design. It is perfectly clear also from scientific standpoints that the scientific foundation of the movement (part of its innovativeness) is valid and correct. But it seems un-argued outside of this paper whether or not the position of the deniers can be considered an oppositional side of the movement, or if it is actually incorrect to call it an internal side or faction at all. Hopefully, it has been made clear that the deniers are not the opposition to the green resistance or any other intra-movement aspect. They are not dissenters since they do not work within the context of the movement and therefore have no resistance validity and face no oppression. They are external and perhaps relevant, but they are not a part of the movement. It seems, at first, a little pointless at best to say that a particular group is not a part of a movement. One could list hundreds of groups that have nothing whatsoever to do with the environmental resistance movement. The significant point, however, is that skeptics make an indirect claim to be a part of the movement by their attempted use of the premises of the movement and the manipulation of media and science. Finally, it is the goal of this paper, once this thesis has been accepted, to define its purpose beyond a philosophical curiosity. With deniers officially being ruled out as an oppositional force, the ecological resistance movement can continue unopposed. Though masquerading as an opposition movement, climate change denial amounts to nothing beyond a series of fabricated obstacles to the real movement. Knowing this, deniers can be ignored and denial opinions disregarded, allowing the movement to accomplish what it may as an unobstructed, self-contained resistance.

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