

Animal rights extremism in the Netherlands

fragmented but growing



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1 Introduction

“In the Netherlands, too, it’s starting to look like the lawmakers are in bed with those who wield the power, and so for animal rights activists the battle is against a power that can’t be fought in a legal fashion. There is no choice but the path of illegality.”¹

In June 2007 the General Intelligence and Security Service (Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, AIVD) published the report *Animal rights activism in the Netherlands – springboard for Europe*. That document, an update of the July 2004 report issued at the request of the Second Chamber of the States-General, *Animal rights activism in the Netherlands – between peaceful and burning protest*, concentrated upon the then major role of the organisation Respect for Animals (*Respect voor Dieren*, RvD) and its splinter group the Coalition Against Animal Testing (*Anti Dierproeven Coalitie*, ADC) in directing radical activities in continental Europe. In fact, the report concluded, RvD and the ADC were Dutch arms of the British extremist group Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC).

The present report describes the principal developments in Dutch animal rights extremism since 2007. The key trends observed by the AIVD are as follows:

- A shift in definitions;
- Increased interconnection between animal rights activism and extremism;
- Fragmentation within both activism and extremism, but at the same time growth;
- Increased use of violence and of campaigning methods which are perceived as threatening;
- An increasingly important international dimension;
- High security awareness amongst animal rights extremists;
- An extension in the range of targets selected by animal rights activists and extremists.

The report concludes with a section examining the effectiveness of direct action by animal rights extremists, and the reasons for that.

¹ Henk, “Stop animal testing”, www.anti-dierenleed.hyves.nl/forum, 3 July 2008

2 Activism, extremism or terrorism?

For many decades, large numbers of people in the Netherlands have been concerned about animal welfare and, to a greater or a lesser extent, prepared to take action to improve it. The base of this movement is the millions of Dutch men and women who make a relatively modest contribution by, for example, joining or giving money to an animal protection organisation or voting for the Party for the Animals (*Partij voor de Dieren, PvdD*). There are numerous groups and associations active in this field, some focusing upon specific categories and others upon animals in general. And they organise a wide range of activities: distributing publicity material, public and political lobbying, fundraising and so on. A number of them also engage in so-called “extraparliamentary” activities, such as occupations and blockades, but in so doing remain within bounds of legitimate protest in a democratic society. A very few, however, probably totalling no more than a few dozen people, are prepared to go to any lengths in their efforts to improve the lot of animals. They are inspired by an ideology which ascribes animals the same rights as people, although their extremist nature lies first and foremost in the type of direct action they carry out: releasing animals, starting fires and intimidating or threatening people they consider responsible or complicit in the abuse of animals.

The patchwork of individuals and organisations dedicated to the furtherance of animal rights has been evolving rapidly in recent years. And so too has the way in which their activities are perceived by the general public. One consequence of this has been a change in the terminology used to describe them. Whereas once the activities were referred to as animal rights activism or militancy, today there is a greater tendency to use the term animal rights extremism. In some countries, including the United States, it is even sometimes called animal rights terrorism. On the other hand it is striking that in the United Kingdom, which was the birthplace of the modern form of radical direct action and has responded by imposing heavy judicial penalties upon those involved, the word “terrorism” is carefully avoided. Instead, the term “domestic extremism” is preferred.

In the Netherlands, the AIVD considers it extremely important to distinguish clearly between those individuals and organisations operating within the law and those involved in activities which go beyond it. This distinction, and that with terrorism, is expressed through the use of the following definitions.

- Animal rights activism

The phenomenon whereby individuals or groups seek to improve the rights of animals through extraparliamentary activities, but in so doing remain within the law.

- Animal rights extremism

The phenomenon whereby, in seeking to improve the rights of animals, individuals or groups deliberately overstep the bounds of the law to commit illegal, sometimes violent, acts.

- Terrorism

Ideologically motivated violence or other destructive acts – whether actual, planned or threatened – against persons, property or the fabric of society, committed with the aim of bringing about social change, causing serious public disquiet or influencing the political decision-making process.

Those organisations which operate in an extraparliamentary fashion but remain within the law are classified under the heading animal rights activism. But those who use violence, arson and intimidation in an effort to “enforce” animal rights – in other words, they are prepared to commit crimes in pursuit of their objective – are classified as animal rights extremists. These crimes may be serious, as in the case of intimidation, but even apparently more minor transgressions of the law can have a major impact. And it is that impact above all which makes animal rights extremism a threat to the democratic legal order.

The AIVD has no evidence at present that the aim of any animal rights extremists in the Netherlands is to provoke general public disquiet or to seriously disrupt society with a view to bringing about social change or influencing the political decision-making process. In this light, there is currently no reason to classify their activities as terrorist in nature.

3 Connections between animal rights activism and extremism

In the Netherlands, as in various other countries, the dividing line between animal rights activism and extremism is not always clearly defined. This blurring is particularly manifest in the case of the organisations Respect for Animals (*Respect voor Dieren, RvD*), the Coalition Against Vivisection (*Anti Dierproeven Coalitie, ADC*) and Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty Netherlands (*SHAC-NL*): in the public domain they carry out direct action within the bounds of what is permissible by law, but persons closely associated with them also commit clandestine and violent illegal acts. These are carried out by individuals acting alone or in small cells. When claiming responsibility, they never mention their own organisation. Instead, a cover name is always adopted. Many such actions are “signed” Animal Liberation Front (ALF) or its Dutch counterpart, *Dierenbevrijdingsfront (DBF)*, whilst others are claimed under one-off names adopted for the occasion.

By creating a climate in which acts of violence against institutions and individuals are apparently justifiable, the public activities of RvD, the ADC and SHAC-NL – including their declared principles and the information they disseminate – provide an ideological umbrella and source of inspiration for extremists who commit serious crimes. For example, it seems highly likely that a series of arson attacks in Hilversum and Wassenaar towards the end of 2008 was directly related to the establishment of SHAC-NL. The perpetrators may well be actual members of that group, but they could also be autonomous individuals inspired by its ideology. In fact, it is not unknown for extremist actions to be carried out by persons unaffiliated with any of the organisations mentioned and acting alone. These so-called “lone wolves” can be defined as individuals who identify with the ideology or philosophy of an extremist group without actually communicating with it. Although they carry out actions in pursuit of the group’s aims, they receive no direct instructions or orders from it and they devise their own tactics and methods.

Like their more organised counterparts, these lone wolves often “sign” their attacks ALF or DBF. But other cover names are also used. For example, the arson attack in Hilversum in November 2008 was claimed by the “NYSE Euronext Bomb Squad”.²

2 Well-known international “lone wolves” include Theodore Kaczynski, the American one-time university lecturer who became known as the Unabomber, and Timothy McVeigh, the right-wing extremist who blew up a US federal government building in Oklahoma City. In the Netherlands Volkert van der G., the murderer of politician Pim Fortuyn, falls into the same category

4 Fragmentation versus growth

Sometimes working together and sometimes at odds with one another, three left-wing or apolitical groups play a key role in Dutch animal rights activism and extremism. They are Respect for Animals (*Respect voor Dieren, RvD*), founded in November 2004, its splinter group the Coalition Against Animal Testing (*Anti Dierproeven Coalitie, ADC*) and Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty Netherlands (*SHAC-NL*), which was formed in 2008. There are also two activist groups with an extreme right-wing background: *Voorpost* (“Outpost”) and *With the Animals Against the Beasts* (*Met de Dieren tegen de Beesten, MDTB*).

Strategic disagreements have caused the extremist animal rights groups to fragment in recent years. Differences of ideology and outlook between the two leading figures in RvD finally fractured the organisation during the first few months of 2007. One of these men is a committed follower of Straight Edge, a restrained lifestyle that eschews any form of political affiliation and is rooted in strict veganism. The other, by contrast – although also a vegan – is a committed extreme-left campaigner active in militant anti-fascism as well as animal rights. He retained the leadership of RvD after the split, with his rival forming the ADC. For major protests, however, the two groups set aside their differences and appear together.

Since the split, RvD has mainly targeted fur retailers and circuses. It has recently been attracting new activists in significant numbers, the majority of them young people with anarchist beliefs. The organisation now has branches throughout the country, which are active both locally (but still under the auspices of the national leader) and nationally. This structure has arisen in part out of a wish by the mainly youthful activists to be able to operate close to their own living environments. As well as larger groups in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, RvD currently has “sections” in Groningen, Zwolle, Assen, Emmen and district, Brabant, Flevoland and the Zaanstreek area. This latter group, for example, focuses mainly upon a retail chain which uses fur in children’s toys. In Drenthe province especially, but also in other parts of the country, there have been many direct actions targeting circus workers and fur retailers, with property daubed with graffiti and in some cases destroyed. Overall, several dozen – mostly young – people are involved in RvD activities nationally. The composition of the group taking part changes frequently.

The ADC originally set its sights upon companies involved in the breeding and sale of animals for use in testing, as well as companies directly or indirectly involved in the tests themselves. An association with the major British animal testing firm

Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS) was the most common reason for inclusion on the group's list of targets. In 2007 and 2008 it conducted an intensive campaign against the ScienceLink project in Venray: a proposed cluster of life sciences businesses, which would include firms performing tests on animals. Following a sustained campaign of both public protests and clandestine direct action, the project was eventually cancelled.

Also during 2007 and 2008, the ADC increasingly aligned itself with the international "Gateway to Hell" campaign against the global trade in monkeys for use in experiments. As a result, the Biological Primate Research Centre in Rijswijk became a major target for radical activists. Tilburg-based importer Hartelust and the diplomatic missions of monkey-exporting nations – Nepal, Mauritius and, more recently, Surinam – have been the subject of noise protests.

However, this shift in focus engendered some resistance from a number of members who wanted the group to return to its original mission: direct action against HLS and all those associated with it. It was out of this conflict that the new group SHAC-NL was established in September 2008.³

From its inception, SHAC-NL targeted a number of the same pharmaceutical companies as the original RvD campaign. Its aims are stated explicitly on its website.⁴ As well as firms which have a relationship with Huntingdon Life Sciences through its animal testing activities, the group has made the NYSE Euronext stock exchange – on which HLS shares are listed – a particular focus of its activities. SHAC-NL's numerous demonstrations tend to be poorly attended, not least because many of its activists are very young indeed: often, they still have a legal obligation to attend school. But although no more than ten people turn up on many of these occasions, they make their presence felt by demonstrating very noisily.

Animal rights groups with extreme-right origins, like *Voorpost* and MDTB, have been active for some years now. However, there is no indication that they are involved in any extremist actions, either directly or indirectly. The two groups originally focused upon McDonald's, due in part to their underlying anti-American sentiments, and upon halal butchers because of the nature of Islamic ritual slaughter. But in recent years they have turned their attention against circus performances involving animals, a move which has brought them into conflict with the extreme-left dominated RvD.

3 Some sections of the media have created the erroneous impression that this is a group of British activists operating in the Netherlands. In fact, it is a Dutch group which has simply adopted the name of the UK organisation

4 <http://shacnederland.blogspot.com>

Ideologically, RvD wants nothing to do with the extreme right. It regards animal rights as a “left” issue and believes that those at the other end of the political spectrum have nothing to contribute. In fact, it considers their motives highly dubious. This aversion has led to scuffles between RvD and extreme-right activists on a number of occasions recently. One such incident occurred at a large public demonstration in Venray against the ScienceLink project. Having originally been allowed to join the gathering, a small number of local extreme right-wingers were forcibly removed by extreme-left protestors. On other occasions, RvD has called upon left-wing activists not involved with animal rights to help it “excise” extreme-right elements.

For the majority of the people and groups active in the movement, however, this conflict between the extremes of left and right is irrelevant. As far as they are concerned, the key issue is animal rights: they have no interest whatsoever in the political colour of others who choose to involve themselves in that effort.

5 Increased violence

The recent past has seen an increase in the number of violent incidents associated with animal rights campaigning. In many cases, moreover, the victims are targeted in their domestic environment or have their personal property damaged or destroyed. Direct action against individuals, such as so-called “home visits”, is generally not illegal in the formal sense as it does not go beyond non-violent demonstrations, or is only considered a “minor” offence, for example when defacing property with graffiti is committed. Usually, though, the psychological and emotional impact upon the victims and those around them is immense. And that can ultimately have a huge effect upon decision-making processes. The most serious recent events illustrate this perfectly.

One of the businesses scheduled to participate in the ScienceLink project in Venray was the Horst-based animal breeding firm Harlan. In August 2007 a car owned by one of the company’s directors was destroyed by fire. The incident was originally blamed on a pyromaniac who happened to be active in the area at the time, but on 1 October 2007 the attack was claimed by “Alf-France”. In that claim, moreover, a direct link was drawn with Harlan’s involvement in ScienceLink.

As part of its campaign against ScienceLink, on 8 December 2007 the ADC organised a torchlight march in Venray. Several hundred people took part, about half of them concerned ordinary citizens. Outside the home of the local authority executive member responsible for the scheme, a wreath was laid “for the animals”. For those inside the property, this was a highly intimidating experience. Not long afterwards, on Christmas Eve, the homes of the directors of project developer Van der Looy were daubed with slogans, including the “signature” DBF. In a subsequent letter claiming the attack, the culprits wrote, “This time it was just paint. Next time we won’t be so friendly. See you next year.”⁵

Almost as soon as SHAC-NL was founded in September 2008, direct action increased in both scale and intensity. Noise protests were immediately staged outside a large number of pharmaceutical businesses and financial institutions associated in some way with Huntingdon Life Sciences. There were also several “home visits”. Properties were sprayed with threatening graffiti, and in November and December 2008 several cars were destroyed by fire bombs.

5 <http://www.directaction.info>, 30 December 2007

One particularly serious incident took place in Noordwijkerhout on 20 December 2008, with graffiti including the words “We will kill your wife”. And a senior employee of the Euronext stock exchange in Belgium suffered the destruction of vehicles and other acts of vandalism. That attack was claimed under the name – probably a cover – Animal Rights Militia, a group which in the past has sent letters containing razor blades and has threatened to contaminate foodstuffs.⁶

⁶ <http://www.directaction.info>, 21 October 2008

6 Security awareness

Due primarily to the system of cells into which animal rights extremists organise themselves, as well as their extremely high level of security awareness, it has proven difficult for criminal investigators to discover plans for violent direct action in advance or to track down the perpetrators of actual criminal acts. In some cases the culprits are so-called “lone wolves”, who prepare and carry out deeds inspired by radical ideas concerning animal rights in total isolation from the rest of the movement. Although a few actions occur spontaneously, as a rule they are meticulously planned. Preparations include research in publicly available information, as well as reconnaissance of the intended target and its surrounding area.

Under published Animal Liberation Front and *Dierenbevrijdingsfront* guidelines, potential arsonists are specifically urged not to join established animal rights campaign groups: the very fact that they are known makes it possible that they have been infiltrated by the police or the AIVD. It is also for this reason that attacks are claimed under the ALF or DBF banner, or another cover name. There is in fact little or no control over these titles: anyone can use a “signature” like ALF or DBF.

7 The international dimension

As described in the report *Animal rights activism in the Netherlands – springboard for Europe*, after the June 2006 International Animal Rights Gathering in Kent, England, RvD in the Netherlands assumed responsibility for co-ordinating and guiding the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) campaign throughout continental Europe. After it split, this role was assumed by the new ADC. In fact, RvD was effectively the Dutch arm of the British SHAC, which has been engaged in a violent campaign of threats, large-scale destruction of property and personal attacks directed against businesses and institutions in any way associated with Huntingdon Life Sciences.⁷ RvD targets in the Netherlands have included organisations with a financial relationship with HLS, most notably the NYSE Euronext stock exchange and trading firm Van der Moolen.

The need for RvD/ADC co-ordination of the international SHAC campaign diminished during the course of 2006 as organisations in various individual countries solidified and became better acquainted with effective direct action methods. Today, nations throughout Western and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and the Baltic States – and even Israel – host flourishing indigenous animal rights extremist movements. Their growth has brought an end to the international leadership role once played by RvD and the ADC.

Clearly, the cradle of this internationalisation was the United Kingdom. Especially up until 2007, prior to the arrest of the SHAC leadership, many campaigns throughout the world were directed by British extremists. Groups with members of different nationalities targeted pharmaceutical companies across Europe, in some cases subjecting their directors and/or researchers to “home visits”. There are also numerous indications that activists from one country will strike in a neighbouring territory. Animal rights extremists of various nationalities have been encountered on Dutch soil, whilst some campaigners from the Netherlands have been active against targets in many other parts of Europe.

With the exception of those drawn from the extreme right, all the animal rights extremist groups operating in the Netherlands remain heavily influenced by their British counterparts. Many joint actions were carried out in the past, most of them on the continent including some in the Netherlands. But the ties have loosened since the arrest of the leading SHAC extremists in the UK. Hardly any Britons are now involved

⁷ On 21 January 2009, an English court sentenced the original founders of SHAC to prison terms of eleven and nine years respectively for crimes committed in their campaign against HLS

in direct action on Dutch territory. On the other hand, extremists from the Netherlands still collaborate regularly with Belgian and French comrades. Activists from countries throughout the region meet during the SHAC campaign week, which is held almost every year – although 2008 was an exception. The International Animal Rights Gathering, also in principle an annual event, provides yet another opportunity to share information and experiences.

For funding, the Dutch groups at first had to partially rely upon contributions from the UK. Now, they are able to support themselves. Money is regularly collected at busy locations like shopping centres, with public generosity being encouraged by the display of shocking photographs. Benefit concerts at alternative venues also raise substantial amounts, whilst many of the activists use part of their own income for activities that benefit the cause.

8 Extension of targets

Recent years have shown a diversification in the range of targets selected by animal rights extremists. Until about the year 2000, the meat and fur production industries were the principal subjects of their campaigns. Under the influence of their British counterparts, the focus then shifted towards animal testing and the retail fur trade. And now other sectors are also coming under attack.

The formation of SHAC-NL in September 2008 was followed immediately by an increase in the number of “home visits” to companies associated with Huntingdon Life Sciences. Prior to that, their incidence had been significantly lower than in 2007. Up to March 2009, the principal target of the latest wave of attacks has been NYSE Euronext, the stock market on which HLS shares are traded. Cars belonging or thought to belong to directors of the company have been burnt out, and their homes daubed with graffiti. Two vehicles were destroyed by fire in Hilversum on 7 November 2008, and two more in Wassenaar on 20 December 2008. These attacks were probably carried out in an identical way, using the simple fire bombs favoured by the extremists.

The large-scale releases of animals being farmed for their pelts which typified the animal rights activism of the late 20th century have been superseded by direct action against fur retailers, in the form of noise protests and on occasions graffiti spraying and the smashing of shop windows. RvD is particularly active against the sale of fur. A number of retail chains, amongst them Maison de Bonneterie and Max Mara, have been subjected to loud demonstrations and pickets intended to deter customers.

Direct action against circuses has increased substantially since 2007. Again, and particularly since its split with the ADC, RvD has been in the forefront of this activity. The animal rights groups on the extreme right of the political spectrum, *Voorpost* and MDTB, have also protested against circuses throughout the Netherlands. On several occasions, these protests have descended into scuffles between activists and circus staff.

Based in Lelystad, Duke Faunabeheer is a firm specialising in the clearing of animals – for the most part birds – causing a public nuisance. To this end, it has been licensed to kill several thousand geese on the island of Texel. In June 2008 the company’s premises were damaged by fire. ALF slogans were daubed at the scene, together with a reference – in poor English – to the death of the birds. Early in January 2009, two cars belonging to the firm were damaged. Although this attack was not “signed”, it too was probably the work of animal rights extremists.

Late in 2006, Parliament began considering a bill to outlaw the breeding of animals for fur in the Netherlands. Since then mink farming has been back on the political agenda, and back on that of the animal rights extremists. After a long respite, breeders have in recent months again become the subject of direct action. Animals have been freed, property destroyed or covered with graffiti and threats made by telephone. In the long term, the resumption of releases on a large scale, as in the latter decades of the last century, cannot be ruled out. Whether this happens, and to what extent, seems likely to depend in part upon how the parliamentary debate unfolds.

As yet, hunting is not a major issue for the Dutch animal rights groups covered by this report. However, there have been some recent incidents associated with it.

In a number of cases, the presence of campaigners has actually disrupted a hunt. And on occasions this has led to physical fights between them and hunters. Drawing upon sources including a list of locations available on the internet, from time to time opponents of hunting also destroy shooting boxes. Precise numbers are not known, but there are most probably several dozen such incidents a year.

After many years in which very few animals were released from captivity, a slight revival in this form of activity has been observed in recent months. Particularly in the run-up to Christmas 2008, small numbers of animals destined for the table – chickens, turkeys and rabbits – were set free. These actions were claimed under the names Animal Liberation Front and *Dierenbevrijdingsfront*. Elsewhere, animals in private ownership have been freed due to what those responsible perceive as abuse or neglect. For the time being, though, it remains unclear whether releases are once again set to become a regular part of the extremists' pattern of activity.

9 Conclusion

Actions by animal rights extremists tends to be highly effective. There are various underlying reasons for this, virtually all of which have already been detailed in this report. One important factor is the widespread public empathy with the theme of animal welfare, one effect of which is to generate a constant stream of new activists. They are mainly young, highly motivated individuals who take up this kind of activism for a variety of reasons. Modern urban children are to a great extent estranged from the more rural society of the past, in which animals played a different role. Whereas their use and consumption were once considered normal, many people nowadays encounter them only as cuddly, strokable pets and “friends”. As the “non-human animal” is increasingly placed on equal footing with the “human animal”, so the resulting anthropomorphism (the attribution of human characteristics to non-humans) is reaching ever-greater heights. In June 2008 the Spanish Parliament officially granted all primates certain basic “human” rights: the right to life, to freedom and to protection from abuse.⁸

Also significant is the presence of dozens of potential targets in the Netherlands, and the ease with which they can be found. Not only do primary targets like laboratories attract interest, but also secondary ones such as their business associates. With information about them widely available, from the Chamber of Commerce to professional and social networking websites, for example, it is also reasonably easy to find the addresses of individual targets. The result: nocturnal activities around the homes of researchers and directors of companies and institutions.

Many animal rights campaigns combine legal public activities, such as demonstrations, with violent and intimidating illegal acts like arson and threatening letters. A good example of this mix can be seen in the ADC campaign against the ScienceLink project in Venray, where it proved highly effective. In this case, the fact that the ADC managed to mobilise concerned ordinary citizens in the region against the scheme was an important contributing factor. It should be pointed out here that most of the residents of Venray and the surrounding area who backed the campaign probably had no idea of ADC’s background and its underlying objectives.

As mentioned earlier, another factor is the highly secretive way in which a very small number of people plan, prepare and carry out extremist direct action. In some cases

⁸ Reuters, 25 June 2008

acts of violence are committed spontaneously, without any advance preparation, and so obviously cannot be identified beforehand.

A final factor contributing towards the effectiveness of direct action by animal rights extremists is the movement's internationalisation. As already stated, RvD and the ADC have boosted this form of extremism throughout Europe. At the International Animal Rights Gathering in 2006, a leading Dutch activist was asked to co-ordinate activities across the continent. Time and again, international meetings of this kind have proven an ideal forum for the exchange of ideas and choices of target. Tactics are also discussed on such occasions, as are details of the activist agenda.

