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The story of anthrax island and Operation Dark Harvest

The 1980s ecoterrorist campaign to draw attention to the contaminated island, used for biological weapons testing in the 1940s, reveals much about today's ecological challenges.

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Photo by Chip Hires/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

Operation Dark Harvest went public on 9 October 1981, with a letter to the major Scottish newsrooms. "By the time you read this statement," its authors declared, "the campaign will have started in earnest. The first delivery will have been made. And where better to send our seeds of death than to the place from whence they came?" The delivery in question was a bucket of soil, infested with *bacillus anthracis,* or anthrax. The first target was Porton Down, the UK government's secretive military laboratory in Wiltshire.

Initially it was thought that the statement might be a hoax. A sweep of Porton Down found nothing. Then a second sweep found the bucket, and tests confirmed the presence of anthrax. They also confirmed that the soil matched that of a tiny, uninhabited island just off the north-west coast of Scotland – a long drive with a biological weapon in the boot – called Gruinard. Then the second package of soil appeared, during the Conservative Party's conference in Blackpool, in a locked cupboard at the top of Blackpool Tower.

The story of the so-called "Dark Harvest Commando", told in a new BBC Scotland documentary called *The Mystery of Anthrax Island* (in which I appear, briefly, as a talking head), began forty years earlier, in 1941, when the Ministry of Defence acquired the island for the purpose of testing biological weapons. A team of Porton Down scientists began work on Gruinard, where they fixed about 60 sheep in place while vials of liquid anthrax were exploded upwind, leaving small clouds of death drifting towards the creatures. When humans are exposed to anthrax externally — internal exposure is far more gruesome — it begins with swelling at the points of contact. This soon becomes large pustules or boils, which burst, leaving blue-black scabs, along with fever and collapse. The scientists took appropriate precautions, but the sheep on Gruinard began dying the next day and the experiment was proclaimed a success.

A secretive military lab nestled in the south of England and Gruinard's exposed lump of rock and heather seem almost completely foreign to each other. When the poet Edwin Muir travelled from Orkney to Glasgow at the beginning of the twentieth century, he felt that he had set out in 1751 and arrived in 1901: "A hundred and fifty years had been burned up in my two days' journey... All my life since I have been trying to overhaul that invisible leeway." Separated by 600 miles as well as several centuries, Porton Down's effect on Gruinard was transformative. Anthrax is an extremely stubborn bacteria that can lie dormant for well over a century in the right conditions. When two years of tests wrapped up, Gruinard was not decontaminated beyond a cursory and ineffectual burning of the heather. The island was rendered off-limits for decades, with signs warning away visitors — a forbidden island of death left to stew in its poison just a kilometre from the mainland.

The consequences were not confined to Gruinard. As far as we know the UK has never used its anthrax bombs, which were soon deemed to be a relatively ineffective biological weapon against humans — compared, for instance, to the bubonic plague, which the UK and US governments tested on a pontoon full of monkeys and guinea pigs near the Isle of Lewis in 1952. Anthrax remained an option as a form of economic and environmental warfare, however, due to its ability not only to wipe out livestock but also to create long-term contamination. In 1943 reports began to reach the Ministry of Agriculture of dozens of unexplained livestock deaths on the mainland around Gruinard, where crofters had spotted the drifting clouds of anthrax from what was presumed to be a safe distance. Somehow — perhaps through a sheep corpse floating across from the island after being exhumed by winter storms — anthrax had crossed the water, and the government deployed agents to the area with compensation, inoculation and a cover story: a diseased sheep had fallen from a passing Greek ship, so the Greek government was footing the bill.

The government's efforts worked and the truth about Gruinard faded into local folklore for decades, resurfacing only occasionally in probing queries by concerned MPs and titillated journalists. In 1971 a government review of possible means of decontamination deemed the various options too costly, and it disappeared without a trace. So long as the problem was confined to a small, unremarkable island — and the occasional heifer across the bay — it could be ignored.

Dark Harvest transformed neglect into crisis. "That we still have the problem to worry about today is due to 40 years of total official indifference," the group wrote. "The indifference is about to end. In 1941 the government of the day took our island away. We want it back, properly laundered." They claimed that "a team of microbiologists from two universities guided by members of our local population" had landed on the island and retrieved 300lb of soil, packages of which would be "deposited at appropriate points that will ensure the rapid loss of indifference of the government and the equally rapid education of the general public with regard to this particular problem".

When tests on the soil confirmed the claims, Dark Harvest became front page news. They were met with predictable condemnation from across the political spectrum — this was ecoterrorism, after all. The Highland Anti-Nuclear Group — conscious, perhaps, that they might be suspects — were quick to distance themselves, describing Dark Harvest as "a shower of cranks acting in a mistaken belief they are being ecologically responsible". The *Herald*'s editorial accused them of "poisoning democracy", "stretching legitimate protest beyond its limits" and risking "the loss of much public sympathy with the aims of this campaign". Hamish Gray, the local Conservative MP and Thatcher's energy minister, warned that "these people have put the whole country at danger by such a silly action".

Yet as Brian Wilson, the editor of the *West Highland Free Press*, noted, "if [Gray's] assessment accurately reflects the degree of danger which the soil carries, is it not extraordinary that nothing has been done in the past 40 years to negate the danger, other than the erection of some signposts telling obedient citizens to keep off?" The *Herald* conceded that "there is a strong case for a fresh investigation of how best and at what cost Gruinard could be decontaminated".

Having made their point, Dark Harvest announced an end to their campaign with one final sting: they claimed that the soil dumped outside Porton Down was not actually taken from Gruinard itself, but from the mainland nearby — raising the prospect that the tests had spread spores far beyond the intended area. While publicly pouring scorn on the claim, the Ministry of Defence also announced it was renewing its decontamination study. In a private ministry memo unearthed by the documentary-makers, one official confessed: "On at least one occasion a test was performed when the surface wind direction was at the limit of safety... It is possible that one or more clouds of the Anthrax aerosol passed over the mainland coast." While they claimed that this would have carried less than a tenth of a lethal dose, it also meant they could not rule out mainland infection. "It would clearly be potentially embarrassing to the department to renew the argument with Dark Harvest if a more searching review of our data were to follow."

In 1986 the Ministry of Defence finally decontaminated the island by dousing it with diluted formaldehyde solution and removing the most contaminated areas of topsoil. While enough time was allowed to pass to avoid allegations that they had been cowed by Dark Harvest's demands, the latter's campaign was an unqualified success: not only had they forced the issue into public consciousness, but they had illuminated the real danger the island posed, not only to the public but to the authorities. So long as the soil was poisoned, it offered a reservoir of toxic material to any enterprising terrorists with access to a boat and a shovel. Proposals for an enhanced police or military presence around the island, briefly considered by the authorities, were ultimately deemed less practical than simply getting rid of the anthrax altogether.

There was no public effort to test the levels of anthrax on the mainland. One Ministry of Defence memo from May 1982 said: "I do not believe... it would be sensible to disturb the sleeping dog of whether there is any anthrax contamination on either of the two headlands downwind of Gruinard Island."

The story of "anthrax island" retains a thrillingly mythic aura, despite most of the facts being well established today. The real mystery concerns Dark Harvest themselves, who have never been identified. *The Mystery of Anthrax Island* hones in on various possible culprits, some of whom the director, John Maclaverty, even interviews, though all deny any involvement. At the time environmentalists and local activists were suspects in a fruitless manhunt, from the off-grid hippy community on the nearby Scoraig peninsula to a local ex-military man who organised a petition to decontaminate the island.

In the years since, however, militant Scottish nationalists have become the favourite suspects of Gruinard-botherers, chiefly the notorious "Tartan terrorist" Adam Busby and his Scottish National Liberation Army, as well as the leading SNP lawyer and anti-nuclear campaigner Willie McRae, who died in 1985 in mysterious circumstances. The theory goes that McRae wanted to expose the state's neglectful pollution of mainland Scotland at a time of fierce debates over nuclear waste dumping. There is little evidence of nationalism in Dark Harvest's own rhetoric — a ploy, perhaps, to avoid contaminating the national cause with ecoterrorism, instead letting the facts, once exposed, speak for themselves.

Yet part of the appeal of the story is the apparent sincerity of these anonymous activists, who — they claimed — were simply trying to clean up the local environment after decades of indifference. If they were pursuing a wider nationalist agenda — and if Busby's alleged claims of involvement, worth several pinches of salt, are to be believed — then the baggage of ego and cynicism would weigh down the simplicity of the cause. *The Mystery of Anthrax Island* pitches the story of Dark Harvest as a romance of cavalier insubordination and plucky, practical community self-defence, free from the culture wars and identitarian freight that hinders present-day successors like Extinction Rebellion.

In reality, things are messier than that, and the Gruinard story is also a sobering microcosm of wider problems we face now. Since the 1970s academics and campaigners have developed the concept of "sacrifice zones" to encompass those places whose abandonment is deemed by the authorities to be a fair price for success or continuity elsewhere, from industrial desolation in the American Midwest to the global south as temperatures rise. Gruinard, empty and ignored, was sacrificed to the British war machine, which relied above all on public disinterest and the careful rationing of information. Dark Harvest succeeded in part because they realised that delegated sacrifices always risk rebounding on those who outsource them, and were able to catalyse a crisis along these lines.

Gruinard was ultimately an easy problem to solve. Today's sacrifice zones pose greater difficulties. Russia and the West continue to heroise their inadequacies via a long-neglected buffer zone in eastern Europe, which is now plunging the world into crisis. Thanks to soaring bills and prices, kitchen tables have become sacrifice zones for the sake of corporate profits, promising new waves of political turmoil to come. Looming over it all, global heating sacrifices whole swathes of the planet to the maintenance of a social and economic system in which we are too embedded to overthrow it. As some recent environmentalist antics indicate, resisting all of this will surely require some of the political flair, inventiveness and risk-taking exhibited by the Dark Harvest Commando — but at a hitherto unimagined scale, with the whole world as our Gruinard.