

“MAKE IT A GREEN PEACE”: THE HISTORY OF AN INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATION

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In the early 1970s, the United States Congress's House Subcommittee on Fisheries and Wildlife Conservation held a series of hearings on the subject of marine mammal protection. Among those who testified were representatives of America's oldest and most established wilderness protection groups, such as the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, and the National Wildlife Federation. Although it was important to ensure that the world's populations of whales and seals remained as healthy as possible, these organizations argued, they did not support a policy of absolute protection. As long as the survival of the species was ensured, they believed, it was legitimate to use its "surplus" members for the benefit of people. In his testimony before the subcommittee, Thomas Kimball of the National Wildlife Federation employed phrases such as "renewable resources," "stewardship," and "professional wildlife management." The "harvesting of surplus wildlife populations," his organization felt, was an "important management tool if the continuing long-range well-being of an animal population is the ultimate objective."¹

A few years later, a group of environmental protesters off the coast of California came across a fleet of Soviet whaling boats. Using motorized inflatable dinghies, the activists positioned themselves between a whaler's harpoon and a fleeing pod of sperm whales, acting as human shields to protect the defenseless giants. Whaling, these activists insisted, was not merely an issue of wildlife preservation or resource stewardship. Rather, it was an unconscionable act of violence perpetrated against a species whose intelligence and sensitivity put them in the same biological category as human beings. In short, whaling was an act that was the moral equivalent of murder. Who were these activists? How did they come to hold such uncompromising views? What inspired them to take such drastic and dangerous actions to protect another species? These are some of the major questions that I address in my research on the history of the organization with which this new breed of activists were associated: Greenpeace.

Today, Greenpeace is a genuinely international organization, as well as being the great icon of the environmental movement. Its logo, at least in Western countries, is almost as recognizable as those of Coca-Cola and

McDonald's.² Its headquarters are in Amsterdam and it has branches in over thirty countries. It has a complex hierarchical structure with multiple administrative bodies located throughout the world. Though still largely associated with direct action, Greenpeace involves itself in a variety of activities, from lobbying governments and inter-governmental organizations, such as the International Whaling Commission, to sponsoring the production of new technologies, such as environmentally friendly refrigerators and automobiles. While holding on—just barely—to a radical and hip image, Greenpeace has become, in reality, a part of the environmental establishment. However, this was not necessarily the kind of organization that its founders had in mind. Furthermore, throughout its early history, there were moments when Greenpeace could have turned down a number of different roads. Some of these might have led to oblivion, while others may have allowed the organization to develop as more of a grassroots social movement rather than an international environmental “corporation.”

The high profile and international renown that has resulted from Greenpeace's spectacular style of direct action means that there is no shortage of literature dealing with the organization. The existing works can be broken down into several broad categories. 1) *Memoirs and autobiographies of prominent figures throughout Greenpeace's history*. These seem to have become something of a cottage industry, indicating the unique role that Greenpeace has occupied in the environmental movement. Perhaps no other environmental group has inspired so many of its members to write about their experiences in the movement.³ 2) *Official and semi-official histories of the organization*. These, naturally enough, tend to be generally sympathetic to Greenpeace and its aims, and rarely situate it in a broader historical context.⁴ 3) *Studies of Greenpeace and the media*. Not surprisingly, given Greenpeace's emphasis on media-oriented campaigns, there are several studies that analyze how the organization has attempted to use the mass media to its advantage and how this, in turn, has helped shape the organization.⁵ 4) *Treatments of Greenpeace's strategy and structure*. There are also countless studies that attempt to analyze Greenpeace's strategies and its structure, as well as using it as a vehicle to test or promote various sociological theories.⁶ 5) *Accounts of individual campaigns*. Finally, there are the numerous journalistic accounts—both critical and supportive of Greenpeace—which try, with varying degrees of success, to describe how the organization functions and to analyze some of the more prominent campaigns and events in which Greenpeace has been involved.⁷

While journalists and sociologists have devoted considerable effort to understanding this unique environmental organization, historians have conspicuously ignored it. This may be due in part to the fact that Green-

peace, formed in 1972, is a relatively young organization, and hence is seen by historians as the preserve of sociologists and political scientists. Also, most historians continue to specialize in the history of a particular nation. This means that Greenpeace, with its international focus and complex origins in both Canada and the United States, does not fit neatly within the narrow parameters of American history, unlike groups such as the Sierra Club or Earth First! Since Greenpeace has generally been viewed as an environmental organization, it has almost entirely escaped the attention of scholars of the peace movement. Yet the people who founded Greenpeace had deep roots in the American peace movement. Indeed, the trait for which Greenpeace is most famous—its use of non-violent direct action—stems from the radical pacifism that emerged in the United States after the Second World War. Only by situating Greenpeace within this context can historians begin to develop a solid understanding of the origins of Greenpeace's brand of radical environmentalism.

To historians of the American environmental movement, Greenpeace has presented something of a paradox: Despite the fact that it has become one of the major environmental outfits in the United States, its Canadian origins seem to put it outside their bailiwick.⁸ A closer examination of the organization's history, however, reveals that while Greenpeace sprouted from Canadian soil, its roots were deeply American. The movements and ideas that influenced it the most—radical pacifism, popular ecology, the counterculture, and the New Left—emerged from the swirling currents of a broader oppositional subculture that was formed in the United States in the post-war era. These movements shared several fundamental traits that can broadly be described as anti-modern: a fear, represented most vividly by the atom bomb, that science and technology had run amok; a deep antipathy toward rampant consumerism and the shallow materialistic culture they felt it produced; and a strong opposition to what they saw as the United States' increasingly imperialistic and militaristic foreign policy. While Canada had its own versions of these movements, they were all strongly influenced by their American counterparts. This is not to suggest that Canada was merely a stage for what was otherwise a purely American production. Certain Canadian traits—such as a latent but pervasive anti-Americanism and the work of the Canadian social theorist Marshall McLuhan—were also important elements in Greenpeace's early history. Nevertheless, from a historical perspective, it is fair to say that Greenpeace owed more to its American heritage than its Canadian.

The early chapters of my study attempt to demonstrate these American origins, as well as analyzing the historical circumstances, or, in more theoretical terms, the "political opportunity structures" that explain why Greenpeace emerged from Vancouver, British Columbia. While broad

social and intellectual trends form a vital part of this history, it is important not to forget that social movements are also the result of groups of individuals whose interactions, both with each other and with their society as a whole, determine the movement's values, tactics and priorities—in short, its culture. As the sociologist C. Wright Mills writes, “neither the life of an individual nor the history of society can be understood without understanding both.”⁹ Hence I devote considerable space to the stories of the individuals who founded Greenpeace and who determined its actions and shaped its culture during its early years.

After examining the historical context from which Greenpeace emerged, I focus on the early voyages that established Greenpeace as a primarily sea-based protest group. The first of these, in 1971, was a protest against U.S. nuclear testing in the Aleutian Islands in the far North Pacific. Although the maiden voyage failed to reach its target, it was nonetheless important in helping to forge Greenpeace's identity, as well as revealing fundamental tensions that would remain with the group for many years. The most obvious of these was the split between the older generation of protesters who were inclined toward scientific rationalism and a group of younger activists who embraced various countercultural beliefs and values. The participants labeled this dichotomy the “mechanics versus the mystics,” and it would remain a fundamental cleavage within the organization throughout the 1970s. The Aleutian voyage also inspired the birth of one of Greenpeace's core myths—the idea that they were the “warriors of the rainbow,” a reference to a Native American prophecy that foretold the coming of a band of earth warriors who would save the world from environmental destruction.

From 1972 to 1974, Greenpeace directed its attentions toward French nuclear testing in the South Pacific. This time, their boat successfully reached its target—twice—and proved to be a considerable headache for the French military. Although the young organization came to the brink of collapse, it nonetheless survived a difficult period. An important result was the establishment of the first Greenpeace group outside Canada—in New Zealand—a step toward the creation of an international organization. These campaigns also marked Greenpeace's tentative entry into the arena that Paul Wapner has called “world civic politics”: a level of politics where the promotion of broad cultural sensibilities represents a mechanism of authority that is able to shape human behavior.¹⁰

In 1975, Greenpeace underwent a dramatic change in its campaign focus, its philosophy, and its membership base. Until then, it could best be described as an anti-nuclear group with an environmental emphasis. By deciding to mount a direct action campaign against whaling, however, the organization embraced a biocentric philosophy that challenged the idea that humans were the supreme beings on the face of the planet. They

vividly illustrated their commitment to this notion by placing their bodies between pods of fleeing whales and the harpoons that were being used to kill them. In the process, the activists captured a series of spectacular images that would make them renowned throughout the world, giving them entrée into the world's most lucrative environmentalist market—the United States. There was, however, a problematic element to their campaign. By arguing that *all* whales deserved to be saved because of their supreme intelligence, Greenpeace perpetuated a hierarchical view of species that was incompatible with ecology and biocentrism, in which nature has an intrinsic value that is independent of humans. This would lead to a particularly awkward situation when members of the Inuit population in Alaska—the inspiration behind the “warriors of the rainbow” myth—demanded that they be allowed to continue their traditional practice of hunting whales.

In the wake of the successful anti-whaling campaign, new Greenpeace branches began springing up throughout North America. Then, in 1976, the organization embarked on another campaign, this time against the slaughter of harp seals on the ice floes off the coast of Newfoundland and Quebec. It was an early example of the kind of conflict that environmentalists have had to face countless times over the past few decades: one in which their interest in saving a species or a habitat conflicts with local working people for whom that species constitutes a resource. Along with the whale campaign, the anti-sealing protests attracted a substantial number of animal rights activists to Greenpeace, a situation that made the idea of compromise increasingly difficult. From an animal rights perspective, there can be no question of compromise when it comes to the killing of whales or seals—abolition is the only goal worth pursuing. Therefore, those within Greenpeace who were willing to take a more pragmatic, ecological approach to sealing found that they had almost as much trouble with some of their own supporters as they did with the sealers. Despite these problems, Greenpeace's leaders did make a concerted effort to work with the mostly impoverished Newfoundlanders who constituted the sealing industry's labor force. The fact that they failed was due as much to the intransigence of the sealers and their supporters within the Canadian government as to Greenpeace's shortcomings. Another outcome of the campaign was that as a result of the questionable actions of some of its activists, Greenpeace was forced to define the acceptable boundaries of its direct action approach.

By 1978, Greenpeace began to experience severe growing pains. The Vancouver group, the members of which considered themselves to be the leaders of the rapidly expanding, though loosely controlled, organization, found themselves facing a mountain of debt from several years of non-stop campaigning. Meanwhile, the various American offices, particularly

the relatively wealthy San Francisco branch, were beginning to chafe at what they perceived to be Vancouver's authoritarian leadership style. Furthermore, the controversy that the seal campaign was causing in Canada had led to a significant diminution of donated funds to the Vancouver group, thereby making them even more reliant on the San Francisco office to finance their major campaigns. Thus when Vancouver tried to tighten its control over the various Greenpeace branches throughout the world, it met considerable resistance from the Americans, who felt that they were being used as mere cash cows. The resulting conflict ended in an acrimonious legal battle in which the Vancouver branch of Greenpeace sued its brethren in San Francisco. While the various North American sections of the organization were engaged in this in-fighting, the nascent European groups took advantage of the opportunity to consolidate their power. After a complex series of deals, the European offices emerged as the leaders of Greenpeace, and the organization's center of power shifted from the Pacific coast of North America to the countries bordering the North Sea. The result was that Amsterdam, Hamburg, and London replaced Vancouver and San Francisco as Greenpeace's most important offices, a situation that has continued to the present day.

The German section of Greenpeace was not established until 1980, the same year that the German Green Party was officially born. Like other Greenpeace groups throughout the world, the German branch emerged as a result of various grass-roots environmental campaigns. Unlike other branches to that point, however, the establishment of Greenpeace Germany was heavily influenced by the newly-formed Greenpeace International. By 1980, there were two German groups that claimed to be acting in the name of Greenpeace. The first was a band of animal rights activists in Bielefeld who were mostly interested in campaigning against sealing; the second was a more direct-action oriented group, based in Hamburg, that was involved in various campaigns to combat water pollution in the Elbe and Weser Rivers. In countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands, where Greenpeace offices had emerged before the formation of Greenpeace International, such groups had largely been left to their own devices, either competing or cooperating until a dominant group emerged to proclaim itself the official Greenpeace organization in a particular country. In the German case, however, the newly-formed Greenpeace International played a decisive role in ensuring that it was the Hamburg group, rather than the Bielefeld one, that would become the official representative of Greenpeace in Germany. There were two main reasons for this decision: First, the anti-sealing campaign, which had always had more support from the North Americans than the Europeans, was seen as a lower priority issue by the Europeans who largely controlled Greenpeace International. Second, the Hamburg protesters, with

their willingness to use disruptive direct action tactics such as maneuvering rubber dinghies into the path of chemical dumping ships, were engaged in actions that closely resembled those that were being used by the other European Greenpeace branches.

In contrast to the United States, which already had a well-established environmental movement with myriad organizations representing a host of environmental philosophies and issues, the Federal Republic of Germany was virgin territory. With their high-profile, attention-grabbing actions, Greenpeace Germany quickly became the most well known environmental group in the country. This success rapidly translated into power at the international level, and by the early 1990s, when Greenpeace USA underwent a considerable decline, the German branch became the wealthiest and most influential member of the Greenpeace International family, a position it continues to occupy to this day. The strength of Greenpeace Germany has had a considerable impact on the rest of Greenpeace, particularly in the United States, where Greenpeace situated itself firmly on the left of the environmental spectrum. However, Greenpeace USA's involvement in grass roots campaigns such as the environmental justice movement, as well as its willingness to occasionally collaborate with more radical organizations such as Earth First!, set off alarm bells among the Germans, who felt that such actions risked sully Greenpeace's more mainstream image in Europe. Thilo Bode, the German economist who became the head of Greenpeace International in the mid-1990s, launched an aggressive campaign against Greenpeace USA's environmental justice campaigns, arguing that such grass roots activities were better left to other groups and that Greenpeace should concentrate on its traditional media-driven campaigns. The schism, in which the Germans eventually prevailed, is an example of how some American environmentalists have come to see environmental and social justice issues as being inextricably bound, a view that has not yet gained much currency in Germany or in Europe as a whole.

The Greenpeace story is worth telling merely for its abundant drama, pathos, and absurd moments of comic relief. Beyond that, however, it has much to teach us about environmentalism, as well as enhancing our understanding of how social movement organizations develop. In one sense, it represents another example of compromised idealism. For all its successes, Greenpeace never became the revolutionary, world-changing movement that its more optimistic founders had planned. Various structural constraints, personality conflicts, and unexpected developments closed certain doors while opening others. Most of these, however, led the organization down progressively narrower corridors, thereby further constricting its options. Nevertheless, there is much that is inspiring and uplifting about Greenpeace's story. Whatever the organization's short-

comings, there is no doubt that it has highlighted environmental problems in ways that no other group has managed. In the process, it has revealed some of the cracks in the broad structural constraints—such as global capitalism and Cartesian dualism—that have dominated the ways in which people think and act in the modern world. As some of the organization's founders have quipped during their more optimistic moments, this was quite an achievement for a bunch of peaceniks and hippies from a provincial city on the west coast of Canada.

Notes

¹ Quoted in Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison & London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 174.

² In fact, *Der Spiegel* once referred to Greenpeace as the “McDonald’s of the environmental movement.” See “McDonald’s der Umweltszene.” *Der Spiegel*, 9/16/1991, 87.

³ Some of the more significant works include: Robert Hunter, *Warriors of the Rainbow: A Chronicle of the Greenpeace Movement* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979); David McTaggart with Helen Slinger, *Shadow Warrior: The Autobiography of Greenpeace International Founder David McTaggart* (London: Orion, 2002) and David McTaggart with Robert Hunter, *Greenpeace III: Journey into the Bomb* (London: Collins, 1978); Rex Weyler, *Song of the Whale* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1986); Paul Watson, *Ocean Warrior: My Battle to End the Illegal Slaughter on the High Seas* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1994); Pete Wilkinson with Julia Schofield, *Warrior: One Man’s Environmental Crusade* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1994); Jim Bohlen, *Making Waves: The Origins and Future of Greenpeace* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2002); Monika Griefahn (Porträtiert von Jürgen Streich), *Monika Griefahn: Politik, Positionen, Perspektiven* (Cologne: Zebulon Verlag, 1997). There are at least two more in progress—another from Weyler and one from Alan Thornton.

⁴ Michael Brown, & John May, *The Greenpeace Story* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 1989); Michael Szabo, *Making Waves: The Greenpeace New Zealand Story* (Auckland: Reed Books, 1991); Paul Brown, *Greenpeace* (New York: New Discovery, 1994); Greenpeace Deutschland, *Volle Kraft voraus für die Umwelt : Greenpeace stellt sich vor - Aktionen, Themen, Lösungen* (Hamburg: Greenpeace e.V., 2001); Greenpeace Deutschland, *Das Greenpeace Buch: Reflektionen und Aktionen* (Munich: Beck, 1997). Hunter’s *Warriors of the Rainbow* also fits into this category.

⁵ Stephen Dale, *McLuhan’s Children: The Greenpeace Message and the Media* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1996); Sean D. Cassidy, “Mind Bombs and Whale Songs: Greenpeace and the News” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1992); Frances Mary Widdowson, “The Framing of Greenpeace in the Mass Media” (masters thesis, University of Victoria, 1992); Christian Krüger & Mattias Müller-Henig, eds., *Greenpeace auf dem Wahrnehmungsmarkt: Studien zur Kommunikationspolitik und Medienresonanz* (Hamburg: Büro für Publizistik, 2001); Anders Hansen, “Greenpeace and the Press Coverage of Environmental Issues.” In Anders Hansen, ed., *The Mass Media and Environmental Issues* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993).

⁶ Prominent examples include: Ronald G. Shaiko, “Greenpeace U.S.A.: Something Old, New, Borrowed.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Vol. 528 (July 1993), 88–100; Paul Wapner, *Environmentalism and World Civic Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Dieter Rucht, “Ecological Protest as Calculated Law-Breaking: Greenpeace and Earth First! in Comparative Perspective.” In Wolfgang Rüdiger (Ed.), *Green Politics Three* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995); Christian Lahusen, *The Rhetoric of Moral Protest: Public Campaigns, Celebrity Endorsement, and Political Mobilization* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996); Kevin Michael DeLuca, *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism* (New York & London: Guilford Press, 1999).

⁷ Jürgen Streich, *Betrifft: Greenpeace: Gewaltfrei gegen die Zerstörung* (Munich: Beck, 1986); Christian Altmann & Marc Fritzler, *Greenpeace: Ist die Welt noch zu Retten?* (Düsseldorf: ECON Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995); Bernhard Knappe, *Das Geheimnis von Greenpeace: Die Andere Seite der Erfolgstory* (Vienna: Orac, 1993); Jochen Bölsche, *Die Macht der Müitigen: Politik von Unten: Greenpeace, Amnesty & Co.* (Hamburg: Spiegel Verlag, 1995); Charles Pelligrini, *Greenpeace, la Manipulation* (Paris: Carrière, 1995); Jochen Reiss, *Greenpeace: der Umweltmulti: Sein Apparat, Seine Aktionen* (Rheda-Wiedenbrück: Daedalus Verlag, 1988); Xavier Luccioni, *L’Affaire Greenpeace: Une Geurre des Médias* (Paris: Payot, 1986); Jean-Paul Picaper & Thibaud Dornier, *Greenpeace : L’écologie à l’an vert* (Paris : Editions Odilon Media, 1995); Sunday Times Insight Team, *Rainbow Warrior: The French Attempt to Sink Greenpeace* (London: Hutchinson, 1986); Michael King, *Death of the Rainbow Warrior* (Auckland: Penguin, 1986); Isobelle Gidley & Richard Shears, *The Rainbow Warrior Affair* (Sydney: Unwin Paperbacks, 1986); Grant Jordan, *Shell, Greenpeace and the Brent Spar* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave, 2001).

⁸ Three of the more significant works on the history of American environmentalism do not mention Greenpeace in their indexes. All, however, devote considerable space to organizations such as the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, and the Environmental Defense Fund. See Stephen Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1981); Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Hal Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation?: Environmentalism in the United States Since 1945* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998). Roderick Nash confines his discussion of Greenpeace to the group’s more animal rights-based activities of the mid- to late 1970s. See *The Rights of Nature*, 179–189. Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1993) and Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Green Revolution: The American Environmental Movement, 1962–1992* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993) do a better job of integrating Greenpeace into the history of the U.S. environmental movement. However, both fail to situate the organization within the broader history of the American peace movement. The more polemical works on radical environmentalism, such as Christopher Manes, *Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990) and Rik Scarce, *Eco-Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement* (Chicago: The Noble Press, 1990), take a similar approach, emphasizing Greenpeace’s innovative direct action tactics without examining their origins.

⁹ *The Sociological Imagination* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1973), 9–10.

¹⁰ Wapner, *Environmental Activism*, 65.