

Detrimental Demonstration: The Counter-Productivity of Greenpeace's Activist Campaigns

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Introduction

Stoked by the ever-growing presence of social media, the newest generation of youth has embraced many movements towards social and environmental justice. A new wave of activism and awareness among young people reflects the 1960s and 70s: the hippie and civil rights' movements are strikingly similar to today's Green and Black Lives Matter campaigns. Among the most notable environmental movements past and present is Greenpeace, a massive and world-renowned Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). Extensive media coverage of its frequent high-profile demonstrations, ranging from blocking the path of oil tankers to destroying fields of genetically modified crops to hanging or spreading banners in outrageous places, has raised Greenpeace's profile as a highly mobile activist organization whose demonstrations have become simultaneously more disruptive and less focused. Many of the NGO's campaigns lack or conflict with scientific evidence, and while they continue to fight for the environment, they pay less and less attention to the human beings that their actions impact in the long run.

Through analyzing some of Greenpeace's best-known campaigns and considering the statements of both their supporters and their adversaries, I conclude that Greenpeace's campaigns increasingly lack substance and scientific support. Furthermore, while civil disobedience - direct actions such as protest and picketing, or boycotts- can often be effective, Greenpeace has lost focus of its mission, and now prioritizes media attention over truly making a difference. In this paper, I argue that Greenpeace's most well-known campaigns have little effect against global warming, deforestation, and sustainable energy. Alternative forms of "creative confrontation" in advertising and social media could help Greenpeace better fulfill its commitment to a "green and peaceful future."

Tenets of Greenpeace

Founded in the 1970s in the wake of the hippie movement, and to protest nuclear development during the Cold War, Greenpeace has become a household name for environmentalism. Greenpeace is considered the brainchild of the “Don’t Make a Wave” committee formed in 1969, which functioned on the Quaker principles of non-violence and “bearing witness” (Alvarez 99); while Quaker principles originally derived from religious conviction, traditions of civil disobedience followed, drawing attention to injustice, including environmental injustice. Currently a network of 2.8 million members worldwide, and spanning over 30 countries, Greenpeace is entirely funded by private donors – it does not accept subsidies from the government or donations from major corporations. With such massive numbers, Greenpeace has established itself as a force to be reckoned with, a conglomerate that backs the “little man” fighting other institutions. Greenpeace is self-described as “the leading independent campaigning organization that uses peaceful protest and creative communication to expose global environmental problems and to promote solutions that are essential to a green and peaceful future” (Greenpeace). By defining its campaign practices as “creative communication”, Greenpeace eschews conventional methods such as governmental lobbying and campaigning, and instead, orchestrates statement-making public demonstrations. While these displays are excellent at garnering immediate attention that resonates through social media, they can also miss the mark when it comes to clarity of message, and they rarely accomplish more than increased notoriety. Yet, the social costs of environmental injustice continue to rise.

Though they’ve been previously criticized for ignoring the local populations in their active areas, Greenpeace has a self-stated commitment to indigenous peoples, whom they acknowledge are the most impacted by over-fishing and climate change. Their website states that “Greenpeace USA will conduct its campaigns in a manner that respects and reinforces [indigenous peoples’] authority and autonomy” (Greenpeace). This is an important tenet to acknowledge: many of the NGO’s campaigns and demonstrations have been staged in developing or indigenous areas, and many of these have less-than-clean track records. The damage of the Nazca Lines, ancient geoglyphs in Peru, during a demonstration in 2014, for example, damaged the integrity of an important cultural structure, deemed an “extraordinarily irresponsible publicity stunt” by *Guardian* writer Andrew Monford. The

destruction of Genetically Modified golden rice fields in 2012 represents another blemish on Greenpeace's record. Part of GE's Golden Rice Field Project, the fields were intended to counteract the Vitamin A deficiency present in 190 million children in developing areas; their destruction resulted in the loss of important nutrients for developing communities (Activist Facts). The contrast between many of Greenpeace's stated tenets and their actions is tangible.

Notable Greenpeace Campaigns and Demonstrations

Greenpeace is becoming less known for its actual causes and missions than for its demonstrations and campaigns, which have amassed incredible media attention. To foster this sort of attention, many of Greenpeace's campaigns involve illegal or deviant behavior. In one of their most recent demonstrations, 13 protestors suspended themselves from St. John's Bridge in Portland, Oregon to block the passage of an ice-breaker oil tanker headed out of port in August of 2015. The activists hung from the bridge for several days before being removed and fined by police, leaving the tanker to continue on its way ("More Greenpeace Activists Fined"). Ice-breakers such as the one these protestors tried to stop have been scientifically proven to be risky towards the ecosystem of the Arctic. While a reasonable cause for Greenpeace to advocate for, this particular demonstration achieved very little. Though the protestors (and Greenpeace by proxy) gained substantial attention from the media, most of that attention was focused on the act itself rather than the cause it was supporting – for example, a *New York Times* article detailing the demonstration was titled "Greenpeace Activists Dangle from Oregon Bridge for Second Day to Protest Arctic Drilling" (Hauser). The title leads with the observation of the activity rather than the concept of drilling, and the following article focuses little on the cause itself. Additionally, the men and women hanging from the bridge only delayed the tanker for two days, after which it continued on its way. It is fair to argue that congressional action from Greenpeace would have been more effective in the long run in preventing ice drilling. While certainly creative, this demonstration did little to help its cause other than creating a spectacle.

A similar statement can be made about the 2009 Greenpeace demonstration in Rio de Janeiro, in which 6 skilled climbers suspended a massive banner reading "RIO + 10 = 2 CHANCE" across the arms of the famous "Christ the Redeemer" monument. The

demonstration was in protest of the “lack of change” achieved at the Johannesburg summit earlier in the year, a conference at which major powers discussed the progress of sustainable development (“Greenpeace Hangs Banner”). All six of the climbers were arrested and fined after the incident. While highly publicized and worthy of attention given the difficulty and danger involved in hanging the banner, the campaign was protesting something that could not be changed and did little towards actually helping the cause of sustainable development. Both of these campaigns have similar undertones: both involved illegal and potentially disruptive or damaging behavior; both achieved little beyond amassing attention from popular media.

Dr. Maria Alvarez of the Philippines Sociological Society acknowledges the deviant nature of Greenpeace’s campaigns and their apparent contradiction to its original tenets and commitment to non-violent protest, yet argues that demonstrations like this are centrally important to Greenpeace’s success. She notes that, with its core value of “bearing witness”, Greenpeace’s campaigns are “inextricably linked to direct action”. Yet Alvarez also argues that direct action must always be linked to illegal or deviant behavior; common violations such as trespassing and unsafe positioning (i.e. sit-down and lie-down protesting) are essential parts to sending the message intended by direct action. She references the frequent forgiveness given to Greenpeace protesters as evidence to the legitimacy of their illegal activity. While others who violate the same laws may experience sharper punishment for the violation, it is acknowledged by law-enforcers that advocates such as those from Greenpeace commit these crimes with a purpose (Alvarez 105). Despite the fact that displays such as the ones Greenpeace puts on are typically excused by law enforcers, the fact that they are initially illegal enforces an anarchic image. This image creates an “all or nothing” effect: observers to these displays misinterpret them as a condemnation of institutions as a whole rather than certain ecologically damaging practices.

Given these two examples of demonstrations that appeared to have little direction, Greenpeace has conducted several campaigns that did not involve demonstration and proved very successful. Greenfreeze technology, for example, was introduced by Greenpeace as part of the Ozone retention campaign of the 1990s. Examined by John Maté, project director, in his article "Making a Difference: A Case Study of the Greenpeace Ozone Campaign", Greenfreeze technology is the ecofriendly system of refrigeration using

hydrocarbon, developed and promoted by Greenpeace. Maté outlines the four elements of the ozone campaign: public outreach, which was achieved through the penning of multiple reports on ozone depletion; policy advocacy, which consisted of extensive lobbying and campaigning within the government; confrontation of major producers of ozone-depleting substances; and marketing solutions, where the Greenfreeze technology was categorized. Greenfreeze and hydrocarbon technology is now used by a large portion of western European countries and major corporations including McDonald's and Coca-Cola (Maté 190-197). The overall success of this campaign provides substantial contrast to the relatively minimal effect of the demonstrations mentioned previously. While it perhaps received less media buzz, Greenpeace's ozone campaign was executed systematically and methodically, producing impressive results over a ten-year period and creating the argument that all of Greenpeace's campaigns and efforts should be focused the same way the ozone campaign was.

Sociology and Direct Action

Greenpeace's actions are aimed towards garnering a reaction from society – as a result, one must look at society in order to gauge the effectiveness of the NGO's various campaigns. In her paper, Dr. Alvarez speaks of the sociology behind direct action and deviant behavior. Since organizations such as Greenpeace are most often fighting some sort of established institution rather than trying to implement a new or novel system, Alvarez argues that direct action is not only effective but inevitable (Alvarez 103-110). Deviant behavior is a mark of social movements and an effective rallying point for people who may fear the massive institutions and corporations who most frequently participate in behaviors dangerous to the environment. The “David and Goliath” situation that results from such deviant behavior taken by Greenpeace activists may appear symbolic to the general public as a viable challenge to the institutions they have felt unchallengeable. Alvarez argues that such a flagrant show of defiance imbeds a sense of strength in the public and incentivizes them to act now that they have seen a role model successfully fight “the man.”

There is, however, the alternative argument made by Andrew Montford, a Greenpeace adversary, in which he cautions against excessive direct demonstration. He argues that direct action demonstrations can easily be wrongly attributed and misinterpreted as a show of

dangerous anarchism than as activism, leading society to fear the cause and its activists. rather than support it. Montford instead suggests the use of more direct approaches such as advertising, lobbying, and photo campaigning, which can be captioned and clearly attributed to an issue (Montford). The success of the Great Bear Forest campaign (Rossiter), which relied heavily on a number of photos to send its message, for example, supports Montford's point. Society reacts well to photo campaigns and advertisements *alongside* non-violent direct action, but not direct action alone, which is interpreted as anarchistic. Greenpeace has the best results when they combine the two and behave non-obtrusively, leaving people with a feeling of security that can urge them to go forward rather than feeling threatened.

Advocates for Greenpeace's Methods of Demonstration

Many individuals, environmental advocates or not, have stated approval for Greenpeace's tendencies towards demonstration. John Maté, aforementioned project director of the Greenpeace Ozone Campaign, has described Greenpeace's techniques for advocacy as:

[aiming] to weave together scientific and technical research, moral and philosophical discourse, public outreach and information dissemination, non-violent direct actions and confrontations, [and] media and public communication strategies...a fluid and dynamic interaction between careful planning and spontaneous opportunistic responses (Maté, 192).

Maté, as an internal part of the Greenpeace network, is a biased but legitimate source. He clearly sees the Greenpeace methods as reasonable and well-planned. However, the ozone campaign was different than many other Greenpeace campaigns in the sense that it was not advocating for or against a one physical entity. While certain actions could help slow the depletion of the ozone (which the Greenfreeze technology did), protesters could not easily picket or demonstrate at the site of the ozone itself, as they could with GMO fields or aquaculture facilities. In the case of the latter, Greenpeace's campaigns were forced upon the sites without public outreach or meaningful policy advocacy.

Maté is an internal Greenpeace employee, but other environmentalists unassociated with Greenpeace also see method to the madness that is much of environmental demonstrations. In his article, "Confessions of an Eco Terrorist", film director and

environmental advocate Peter Jay Brown states a need for the active, and often disruptive or damaging, modes of demonstration, the modes associated with Greenpeace. Brown comments on the apparent ineffectiveness of governmental policy, using efforts to end whaling as an example: “One has to wonder, with all the adverse publicity, the diminishing of markets and their aging fleet, why the Japanese still are still whaling?” (Brown). Brown’s tangible frustration with the slow change in environmental policy over seemingly simple issues to solve reflects the feelings of many other “Eco terrorists” – environmental activists who use destruction or deviant behavior to interrupt ecologically-damaging activity – who employ the use of demonstration to incite change. Brown argues that he and his peers should not be labeled as “‘revolutionaries’ or ‘terrorists’, but as heroes and visionaries” (Brown). Advocates of Greenpeace activists’ behaviors make the same argument: demonstrations such as these are essential in garnering attention and provoking change. Although the slow bureaucracy of the governmental process may seem slow, however, Brown fails to recognize any success the political route has yielded in environmental change, which is far from non-existent. Additionally, Brown also does not reference any actual demonstrations or protests that have yielded true results for an environmental cause – his lack of evidence all but invalidates his argument.

Another advocate for Greenpeace is David Rossiter, who, in his paper, argues that Greenpeace’s extensive use of advertising and public outreach was highly effective in decreasing deforestation in British Columbia in the mid 1990s. This was during their “Great Bear Rainforest” campaign, in which he argues they also garnered public support for implementing a change in logging frequency. Rossiter argues that Greenpeace’s displays, far from being unnecessary or lacking focus, were actually instrumental in getting the public to act. He accredits Greenpeace with this change because of the correlation between protests and civilian letters to a local newspaper:

the number of letters addressing the ‘War of the Woods’ published by the *Province* and *The Sun* increased substantially... by identifying the opinions about the debate contained in these letters... it is possible to get a sense of the degree to which the representations of nature promoted by these ENGOs have resonated with interested publics. (148)

By representing nature through their protests and campaigns, Rossiter argues that Greenpeace increased public interest, which became the driving force in the eventual decrease of logging the area. This being said, Rossiter also frequently mentions the photographic advertising Greenpeace used in their campaign as a significant factor in spreading awareness, especially in the long-term. The advertising featured photos of a fruitful forest alongside one that had been subjected to extensive logging, creating a moving contrast between beauty and destruction. While he accredits their protests for part of the campaign's success, he gives particular mention to the success of the advertising especially; other methods of communication not involving demonstration or protest are often more effective and focused in treating an issue – the Great Bear Rainforest campaign would likely not have experienced the success it did without the photographic advertising that accompanied it.

Adversaries to Greenpeace's Methods of Demonstration

For as many vocal advocates Greenpeace has, there is an equal or greater number of adversaries to their methods. In his article "How Green and Peaceful Really is Greenpeace?", Andrew Monford, opinion writer for *The Spectator* and frequent environmental advocate questions the gradual change in Greenpeace's behavior over the years. He argues that, for years, Greenpeace "has had what amounts to a free pass from the media, its claims and methods rarely questioned by credulous environmental correspondents", and as a result has become more threatening and troublesome with its campaigning (Montford). Recent pollution among Greenpeace's high-ranking members and damage to historical sites such as the Nazca Lines in Peru give reason enough to doubt the purity and directness of Greenpeace's actions. The website *Activist Facts* makes a similar argument to Montford's. While highly active and advocating reasonably just causes, Greenpeace has made destructive behavior a major part of its agenda. Advocates have repeatedly destroyed aquaculture farms and fields of GMO crops in pursuit of preventing a "dangerous" outcome in the long run. Additionally, Greenpeace has lost the support of science in many of its campaigns. Multiple scientific studies have asserted the safety of GMO foods as a means to increase the durability and abundance of crops, especially in developing areas (*Activist Facts*). Greenpeace's refusal

to accept this almost assured fact indicates a lack of commitment to changing actual issues and an increased focus on garnering attention more than anything else.

Finally, and likely most notably, Greenpeace has been defiantly denounced by Patrick Moore, a founding member of the NGO who defected in 1986 over disputes over their changing policies. In an article written for *Cfact*, "Has Greenpeace Lost its Moral Compass?", Moore voices direct criticism of Greenpeace's apparent shift of focus away from helping the environment in order to benefit humans. He argues that Greenpeace has shifted "from concern for the welfare of people to a belief that humans were the enemy of the earth", leaving advocates feeling free to participate in behavior destructive to native peoples so long as it fits a goal of saving the environment (Moore). He particularly mentions the destruction of Golden Rice fields in the Philippines, which were destroyed in 2013 by Greenpeace activists since the fields were planted with GMO seeds. Moore brings to light the increasing lack of observance of the needs of people in the areas they are active in. This provides more evidence towards the ineffectiveness and even counterproductive nature of Greenpeace's demonstrations and techniques.

Conclusion

Greenpeace's campaigns have become a vessel through which advocates can act out. While their campaigns are based on tangible issues with real need of a solution, the NGO has become more of a deviant group completely opposed to governmental or corporate action more than anything else. Though they have achieved a fair amount of success through their campaigns in which they used other methods of communication such as advertising and the introduction of new technology, Greenpeace's dependence on demonstration as a form of defying the will of structured systems has stunted their success. I can conclude through the evidence I have collected that Greenpeace's form of demonstration is not only ineffective but also counterproductive. Their displays lack focus and act as little more than promotions for the NGO as a whole rather than as a method of sending a message. As they are dealing with such important issues as climate change, over-fishing, deforestation, and ozone depletion, one would hope that, in the future, Greenpeace can refocus its efforts into a more effective and lasting form of advocacy for change.

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