MAKE IT A GREEN PEACE!
the rise of countercultural environmentalism

frank zelko
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FRANK ZELKO
For Ana and Stefan
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Introduction

Most of us probably don’t know how it feels to unexpectedly have our head clamped in the jaws of a live killer whale. Not an angry or hungry killer whale, but a friendly killer whale in an aquarium. Bob Hunter, Vancouver’s most famous hippie intellectual and one of the founders of Greenpeace, knew what it felt like. It happened to him in 1974 while he was visiting the Vancouver Aquarium at the behest of a whale scientist who was hoping to convince Greenpeace to mount a campaign against whaling. The experience changed his life: “I had been through marathon t-group therapy sessions and emotionally exhausting workshops with the great Gestalt therapist Fritz Perls, but neither experience had been so far out of the framework of my understanding that it left me as shaken as I was now.” Hunter quit his job, divorced his wife, and devoted his life to saving “the serene superbeings in the sea,” those exquisitely adapted creatures that “had mastered nature by becoming one with the tides and the temperatures long before man had even learned to scramble from the shelter of the caves.”¹ Hunter’s cetacean-inspired epiphany fired him with fierce conviction: the abominable practice of whaling had to end. This was not a view shared by all environmentalists.

In the early 1970s, the U.S. Congress 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 maintained, was an “important management tool if the continuing long-range well being of an animal population is the ultimate objective.”²
Bob Hunter would have none of this. A few years after these hearings, he and his fellow Greenpeacers came across a fleet of Soviet whaling boats off the coast of California. They leaped into several motorized inflatable dinghies and skidded across the open ocean, zipping between whalers’ harpoons and fleeing pods of sperm whales, in effect acting as human shields for the defenseless giants. Not long after that, these same individuals were scrambling across ice floes off the coast of Newfoundland, throwing their bodies over harp seal pups to save them from club-wielding seal hunters. Whaling and sealing, these ardent activists insisted, were not merely issues of wildlife conservation or resource stewardship. Rather, they were ecologically destructive and morally reprehensible acts that represented humanity’s ignorance and thoughtless cruelty toward other sentient life-forms.

How should we understand these activists, whose impassioned antics under the Greenpeace banner challenged the heretofore staid conservation-oriented discourse of wildlife protection—and the standard repertoire of environmentalism in general—and supplanted them with a form of nonviolent protest and countercultural holism that has influenced environmentalism ever since? Hunter had felt the firm clamp of orca teeth on the back of his skull, but even this dramatic experience cannot fully explain his commitment.3 What else inspired him and his fellow activists to take such drastic, self-imperiling actions to protect other species? How did they come to hold such uncompromising views? In an effort to answer such questions, this book explores the complex roots of Greenpeace, tracing the development of the organization from its emergence amid the various protest movements of the 1950s and 1960s to the end of its volatile, dramatic, and at times quirky first decade in 1980.

Since the beginning of the 1970s, no single organization has done more than Greenpeace to bolster and reshape environmental protest around the world. Its founders were the first environmentalists to adopt the Gandhian nonviolent protest strategies employed by the peace and civil rights movements. They combined this with the Quaker notion of “bearing witness”—the idea that a crime or atrocity can be challenged by observing it and reporting it to others—and hitched it to a media strategy heavily influenced by Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian communications scholar who developed such enduring concepts and aphorisms as “the global village” and “the medium is the message.” In addition, Greenpeace’s founders were self-conscious internationalists, a stance motivated both by a form of postnationalist romanticism that envisioned a world without borders and by the ecological imperative that nature did not recognize the artificial boundaries of nation-states.

Greenpeace also made environmentalism look cool. Its vivid and confrontational protest style resonated with the antiwar demonstrators of the 1960s and 1970s, while its iconic imagery and links with popular musicians challenged
older stereotypes that associated environmentalism with middle-aged Sierra Club hikers in corduroys and cardigans. The new Greenpeace-inspired environmentalists wore tie-dyed T-shirts and long hair, smoked dope and dropped acid, and fomented a consciousness revolution that sought nothing less than a radical change in Western culture. For better or worse, this hip, edgy, occasionally somewhat flaky image continued to linger long after Greenpeace had largely abandoned its more eccentric countercultural traits. The fact that Greenpeace became for many people a kind of synecdoche of environmentalism, therefore, means that in some quarters environmentalism continues to be tainted by its association with the sixties counterculture.

By the early 1980s, Greenpeace had grown into an international environmental powerhouse centered in Europe, with a complex hierarchical—some might say “corporate”—structure and branch offices in numerous countries. Today, it is one of the planet’s most recognized environmental groups. Its logo is almost as familiar as those of Coca-Cola and McDonald’s. Its present-day activities involve a variety of campaigns, from lobbying governments and intergovernmental agencies, such as the International Whaling Commission, to sponsoring the production of new technologies, like environmentally friendly refrigerators and automobiles. While its prominence and influence are undeniable, the institution that Greenpeace has become is not necessarily what its founders had in mind. Throughout its early history, there were moments when Greenpeace could have taken different paths. Some might have led to its demise, while others may have allowed it to develop as more of a grassroots social movement. Despite its unpredictable evolution and the internecine struggles that gave rise to its present form, it has retained the direct-action style that first set it apart in the 1970s and imbued its activists with unique élan.

Drawing on a wide-ranging set of sources, from newspaper articles, meeting minutes, internal correspondence, and numerous interviews with former Greenpeacers, to philosophical writings, manifestos, and personal accounts by prominent and lesser-known thinkers, including Bob Hunter, this book investigates the diverse ideologies and outlooks that gave Greenpeace its distinct character from its founding forward. How did its origins shape the path the organization took? To what extent has it lived up to the vision and ideals of its founders? And how have its multifaceted origins proved both inspiring and problematic in its evolution and present incarnation?

By situating Greenpeace within the context of the postwar peace movement and the sixties counterculture and examining its spectacular rise on the world scene through simultaneously quixotic and muscular media-savvy campaigns, this book seeks to provide a much deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the organization’s brand of radical, direct-action environmentalism than other scholarly and journalistic works. Previous studies of Greenpeace can
be broken down into several broad categories: members’ memoirs and autobiographies, which seem to be something of a cottage industry among former participants and provide an indication of the unique role that Greenpeace has occupied in the environmental movement; official and semi-official organizational histories; media studies that analyze Greenpeace’s skillful use of mass communications and these campaigns’ effects, in turn, on the organization itself; and sociological analyses of Greenpeace’s strategies and structure. There are also several journalistic accounts that describe how Greenpeace functions and some of the more prominent campaigns in which it has been involved. As far as historical scholarship is concerned, there is an almost inexplicable incongruity between the minor consideration given the organization in the historiography of environmentalism and the significant role it has played in shaping environmental activism in the United States and abroad for the past four decades.

The dearth of serious historical scholarship on Greenpeace means that certain important elements in the history of environmentalism have received little attention. Most prominent among these is the influence of the twentieth-century peace movement. Chapter 1, therefore, explores the “peace” half of Greenpeace through the lives of two of the organization’s founding couples, Irving and Dorothy Stowe from Rhode Island and Jim and Marie Bohlen from Pennsylvania. The Stowes and Bohlens had strong connections with various pacifist and antiwar organizations, particularly those inspired by Quakers. These groups foreshadowed Greenpeace’s protest tactics and strategies; in fact, Greenpeace’s first campaign closely mimicked Quaker-organized antinuclear protests from the 1950s.

Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the protest culture that the Stowes and Bohlens found when they moved to Canada in the late 1960s to escape, in their eyes, the clutches of U.S. militarism. Much to their surprise, the city in which they settled—Vancouver—was simmering with alternative politics and grassroots activism, from antiwar groups to antipollution organizations. The Stowes and Bohlens, seasoned activists in their forties and fifties, brought to local peace and ecology movements the tactics and values they had learned from decades of activism. In turn, they found themselves interacting with younger activists—Canadians and Americans—whose ideas and lifestyles presented interesting challenges and opportunities. Many of these individuals would play a key role in the emergence of Greenpeace, chief among them Bob Hunter. Hunter was only in his late twenties but had already published three books—one novel and two ambitious works of cultural criticism—and was a columnist for the Vancouver Sun. A critical examination of Hunter’s texts and columns reveals a fertile mind with a penchant for grand theory. Apart from his considerable role in shaping Greenpeace’s innovative and controversial media strategies, Hunter did more than anyone to inject Greenpeace with the spirit and values of the sixties counterculture and holistic ecology.
Chapter 4 narrates and examines Greenpeace's first campaign—an attempt to disrupt an underground nuclear explosion by sailing into the testing area, a remote region of the Aleutian Islands southwest of Alaska. The maiden voyage was important in forging Greenpeace's identity and revealed fundamental tensions among the group's many founders. The most obvious of these was the split between the older generation of peace movement protestors who were inclined toward a sober and respectable form of 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 attention toward French nuclear testing in the South Pacific, a campaign taken up in chapters 5 and 6. Ben Metcalfe and David McTaggart, the two most prominent figures during this period of Greenpeace's history, were in many respects completely unrepresentative of the nascent organization's internal culture. Metcalfe was a wily and cynical journalist who felt that the manipulation of public opinion by elites offered the only hope for substantive social and political change. Despite this—or perhaps because of it—he proved to be a more than adequate exponent of “mind bombing,” a media theory that Bob Hunter had derived from Marshall McLuhan. McTaggart was a conservative forty-year-old resort developer with no prior connection to either the peace movement or the counterculture. Yet he successfully sailed his little ketch all the way from New Zealand to the test site near Tahiti twice, in the process proving to be a considerable headache to the French military. He went on to play a major role in the formation and running of Greenpeace International.

The South Pacific campaign represented an early attempt at global environmental activism. It required coordinating activists in several countries and led to the establishment of the first Greenpeace group outside Canada—in New Zealand. While McTaggart was taking on the French Navy, other Greenpeacers were organizing protests in New York, London, and Paris, before eventually setting up camp at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the UN's first major conference on international environmental issues. Thus the South Pacific campaign marked Greenpeace's entry into the arena that political scientist 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.11

In 1975, Greenpeace underwent a dramatic change in its campaign focus, philosophy, and membership base. Until then, it could best be described as an