

In order to assess whether “Greenpeace works” or not, some up-front clarifications are necessary. First, what is “Greenpeace”, and second, what is meant by the verb “work”?

Greenpeace: Greenpeace is an international environmental organisation, claiming independence from governmental or corporational influences and originally known for its use of non-violent direct action in campaigns to stop atmospheric and underground nuclear testing. Additionally, Greenpeace tried to put an end to high seas whaling. Nowadays, the focus has shifted towards other environmental issues, always based on either pacifistic or ecological issues, including bottom trawling, global warming and genetic engineering. The organization has been reshaped from a loose international network, united by style more than by focus, to a global, hierarchal organization, focusing on clear key projects, and governed similar to one of its chief foes, the multinational corporations. In a way, Greenpeace has become a corporation itself, receiving its funds from an estimated 2.8 million financial supporters and charitable foundations – its customers. It refuses money from corporations or governments and screens donations to ensure compliance. From 1996 to 2001, its largest financier was the Turner Foundation, founded by media mogul Ted Turner (ActivistCash). Its existence is justified by the belief that “Greenpeace exists because this fragile world deserves a voice” (Greenpeace).

Work: Just as a “traditional” multinational corporation only works when it achieves its main objective – to provide global investors with a better return on investment than otherwise available – the “work” in regard to Greenpeace entails the question whether its 2.8 million “customers” receive their money’s worth and whether Greenpeace lives up to its official mission statement: “Greenpeace is an independent, campaigning organisation which uses non-violent, creative confrontation to expose global environmental problems, and to force solutions for a green and peaceful future. Greenpeace’s goal is to ensure the ability of the earth to nurture life in all its diversity”.

Does Greenpeace work? The main question in this regard has to be whether Greenpeace is capable of exposing global, environmental problems and force their subsequent solution in a “green” and “peaceful” manner. Notably, Greenpeace’s mission statement does not entail any direct work towards the nurturing of all life, as Greenpeace sees its function mainly in the exposition of affronts to a fragile, voiceless world.

Historically, Greenpeace has a promising track record, bringing global attention and forcing changes of the status quo to issues such as nuclear testing and whale hunting. A problematic issue surrounding Greenpeace is its obvious dependence on appalling issues and media coverage for its non-violent direct actions. Without running cameras, little can be exposed. Greenpeace clearly competes for airtime. Understandably, money only flows if issues are at hand and “customers” see Greenpeace at work. It is therefore not surprising that Greenpeace tends to stick to worst-case scenarios, as “when most people do not feel that the world is about to fall off its hinges at any moment, they have problems taking the environmental organisations seriously” (Hestvedt). Consequently, it could be argued that if our ecosystem is not about to collapse and global warming will not pose a devastating problem for mankind’s future, as “sceptical environmentalist” Bjorn Lomborg proposes, Greenpeace’s activists are, at best, solving non-pressuring issues. Under such a scenario, these issues distract from ones that are more serious and Greenpeace thus operates along the lines of “The truth is that many environmental issues we fought for ten years back are as good as solved. Even so, the strategy continues to focus on the assumption that everything is going to hell” (Lomborg). Not surprisingly, Greenpeace currently “extends its sympathies to the people of New Orleans, southern Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama who have lost so much in the wake of Katrina”, an “unnatural disaster”, but then goes on to hammer home the message that climate change is a greater danger to humanity than terrorism (Greenpeace).

While this may or may not be true, Greenpeace has committed provable errors in the past, none more famous than the lengthy Brent Spar standoff versus oil-giant Royal Dutch/Shell. Activists routinely made international headlines and boosted Greenpeace as a household name. Shell’s position became untenable, as Brent Spar gained a symbolic significance “out of all proportions to its environmental impact” (Shell). Public criticism, hostile politicians and calls for consumer boycotts convinced Shell to act as Greenpeace insisted, with Greenpeace claiming 50,000 tons of oil in Brent Spar versus Shell’s own estimates of 50 tonnes. During the standoff’s aftermath, the absurdity of Greenpeace’s claims was revealed. Greenpeace’s credibility was damaged, even though its media presence during the platform’s occupation was probably well worth it, and the NGO managed its image by historical revisionism, claiming that “In the absence of a full inventory, Greenpeace, during our occupation, attempted to find out what was on the Brent Spar. The estimates resulting from this sampling were in no way central to the campaign”.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the question whether Greenpeace works or not depends on whether the issues it draws attention to deserve such attention or not, or if they deserve attention, whether the global media is pointing its cameras or not. This varies from case to case. Greenpeace was exceptionally successful in its campaign against atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons, but an embarrassment to the environmental movement during Brent Spar. Greenpeace has become a household name, and promotes a counter-history of humanity’s domination of nature as voiced by the likes Bjorn Lomborg or George W. Bush, with the latter repeatedly stating that “we do not know how fast change will occur, or even how some of our actions could impact it”. Generally, no matter the occasional misstep, organizations as Greenpeace are vital organs to promote environmental issues, which would otherwise be far easier to marginalize. Being a corporation financed by its “customers”, it cannot be of any surprise if Greenpeace’s sales-pitch frequently paints exaggerated doomsday-scenarios. Nevertheless, regarding environmental issues, it appears preferable to err on the side of caution. Regarding its mission statement, Greenpeace appears to “work”, even though no organization alone can be expected to “ensure the ability of earth to nurture life in all its diversity”.