
From Green Warriors to Greenwashers

by Dr. Sharon Beder

When Greenpeace emerged as an international organization in the 1970s, it embodied a spirit of courageous protest by activists who were willing to place their bodies on the line to call attention to environmental injustice. Its mission was to “bear witness” to environmental abuses and take direct nonviolent action to prevent them.

In the 1990s, however, a new current of thought emerged, both at the international level and at the level of national affiliates such as Greenpeace Australia. Greenpeace leaders and many members began to talk of going beyond negative criticism. The Greenpeace Australia website proudly asserts this new philosophy: “We work with industry and government to find solutions.”

This approach carries an obvious emotional and intellectual appeal, but it also carries dangers. Greenpeace continues its traditional work of exposing some of the worst instances of environmental degradation, but its new focus on “solutions” can undermine that work. Its activists are often committed and genuinely concerned to save the environment, but are caught in the contradiction between “bearing witness” and the compromises that arise in the process of seeking solutions.

The philosophy that Greenpeace espouses today contrasts markedly with positions that it took in the early 1990s, when “green marketing” first emerged as part of a strategy that the PR industry calls “cause-related marketing.” A series of media reports and books, such as *The Green Consumer Guide* by John Elkington and Julia Hales, gave the impression that the environment could be saved if individuals changed their shopping habits and bought environmentally sound products. There was a surge of advertisements claiming environmental benefits, and green imagery became a symbol used to sell products.

When green marketing first emerged, it came under criticism from a number of Greenpeace campaigners. Paul Gilding, then head of Greenpeace Australia, described it as a strategy of “Bung a dolphin on the label and we’ll be right.” *Greenpeace Magazine* asked rhetorically whether people should buy recycled paper from a company that pollutes rivers with pulp mill effluent.

“It’s not that all these ads are untrue,” observed Peter Dykstra, then media director of Greenpeace USA. The problem, he said, is that “they depict 5 percent of environmental virtue to mask the 95 percent of environmental vice.” Juliet Kellner called this the “bit-less-bad” trap, where green claims for one aspect of a product belie other aspects of the product or company policies.

Yet this is just what Greenpeace has done for the Olympic games scheduled to be held in Sydney, Australia in the year 2000. They have not only allowed the organizers to “bung a dolphin on the label,” but they have

helped market environmental virtues of the Games while ignoring some key environmental vices. In particular, as I pointed out in my previous article (*PR Watch* vol. 6, no. 2), they helped sell the concept of the Green Olympics to the International Olympics Committee without alerting it to the extent of the toxic waste problem.

LANDFILL LOVERS

In recent years, Greenpeace has staged protests to highlight the toxic waste on land surrounding the Olympic site. It has also campaigned and initiated legal action against some decisions of the Olympic Coordination Authority (OCA) which breached the environmental guidelines that Greenpeace helped write.

Even today, however, Greenpeace continues to promote the Games as “green.” The Greenpeace web site (<http://www.greenpeace.org/Olympics/summary.htm>) states that “the Olympic site itself has been made safe.” A June 1999 Greenpeace brochure states that “Sydney authorities were thorough in their efforts to remediate before construction began. Most of the waste remains on site, in state-of-the-art landfills, covered with clay, vegetated to blend in with the Olympic site.”

These statements contrast with Greenpeace’s past history of campaigning against the use of landfills to dispose of toxic waste, particularly when the waste includes dioxin, organochlorines and heavy metals. Greenpeace has campaigned against this in the past because it is impossible to prevent these toxic materials from leaking into underlying groundwater. The major landfills on the Olympic site contain these sorts of wastes without even linings to mitigate the flow of leachate through the underlying soil. When I questioned Greenpeace’s current Olympic campaigners, they seemed unaware of the absence of liners, which makes me wonder what basis they have for labeling the landfills “state of the art.”

In its own literature, Greenpeace Australia still states that “landfills eventually leak pollution into the surrounding environment” and makes it clear that this is not a suitable disposal method for waste near the Olympic site. Yet, as part of its green marketing role, Greenpeace Australia has turned round and stated categorically that an unlined landfill on the Olympic site is “safe.”

Darryl Luscombe, Toxics Campaigner for Greenpeace Australia, wrote in a 1997 letter to the editor that Greenpeace has long advocated the closure of Castlereagh, a landfill facility on the outskirts of suburban Sydney that leaked despite being chosen for its impermeable clay soil (unlike the more permeable soils at the Olympic site). When asked what he thought of the landfills on the Olympic site, he opined that the biggest issue was what was going to happen to the waste after-

wards. The landfills should only be a temporary solution, he argued, since “tens of thousands of liters” of material was leaching out of them. He admitted there was “no guarantee” that the government would do anything more once the Olympic Coordination Authority ceases to exist, and the government had made no commitments to do any further remediation after the games.

“The site is safer than it was,” Luscombe said when asked if it was realistic to expect that any further cleanup would occur on site after the Games. Previously the area was a toxic waste dump, he explained, but “now there is a toxic waste dump that is more highly managed.”

According to Blair Palese, participation in the “green Games” was an opportunity for Greenpeace “to push for environmental solutions.” In reality, however, the most likely legacy of the year 2000 Olympic Games will be the notion that landfilling toxic waste is an acceptable way to deal with it. By endorsing this “solution,” Greenpeace has provided an excuse for other waste-generating industries to continue with business as usual. Its public acceptance of the “remediation” process on the Olympic site, and its active promotion of the Olympics as green, has been interpreted as an endorsement of landfills as a safe way to dispose of toxic waste. Greenpeace has helped turn the site and its surroundings into highly desirable real estate. They are now suggesting this can be done elsewhere.

Sydney’s example has not been lost on other potential host cities for future Olympic Games. Toronto is bidding for the 2008 Games and has formed an Environmental Committee in an effort to put together a “green” bid. Luscombe traveled to Toronto to attend this committee’s first meeting. Toronto has even copied the idea of siting the Olympic athlete’s village on a former industrial contaminated site. The land was originally going to be the site of low-income housing but the remediation would have cost too much. Now the Sydney Olympic example has shown how the cleanup can be done on the cheap. The added bonus for the Toronto bidders is that if they turn the village over to low income housing afterwards, they might get endorsements from social justice groups that opposed Toronto’s bid in 1996.

And don’t think the Olympic precedent is being lost on developers in other parts of Australia. The greenwashing in this case suits not only the Olympic organizers, but also manufacturers who generate toxic wastes, those who bury them, and developers who seek to profit from the land on which these toxic wastes have been buried. A whole polluting industry that Greenpeace has been trying to phase out has now been given a PR boost by Greenpeace Australia.

GRADING CURVES

The landfills are not the only problem associated with the Olympic site, as Greenpeace itself acknowledges. In a “Special Olympic Report” issued in September 1998, Greenpeace included an “environmental report card” that gave the project mixed marks. The Olympic site’s air-conditioning system received a grade of “F” for using chemicals that attack earth’s ozone layer and contribute to global warming—a decision that the Greenpeace brochure describes as “promises betrayed.” The “report card” also gives an “F” grade to toxic remediation of land near the Olympic site and the bay.

Current Greenpeace literature on the “Green Games” is full of praise for the solar design of the athletes’ village and other environmental virtues. It says nothing whatsoever, however, about the dangers posed by the Lidcombe Liquid Waste Plant (LWP), which is located between the Olympic sporting facilities and the athlete’s village. This omission is particularly noteworthy since the proximity of the athletes’ village to the LWP was known to Greenpeace when it offered its design for the village. A year before Greenpeace issued its “Special Olympic Report,” in fact, Greenpeace’s Darryl Luscombe made a 1997 submission to the government in which he argued that the plant “should be phased out as a matter of priority.”

Concerns raised in Luscombe’s submission included “health and safety issues associated with the close proximity (240 meters) of the LWP to existing or proposed residential areas (e.g. Newington/Olympic village)” and its “potential to contribute significant adverse effects on the area during major public events such as the Olympics.” He noted “complaints from nearby residents regarding noxious odors and VOC emissions,” and warned, “A facility that emits toxic, carcinogenic, persistent and bioaccumulative compounds to the environment, particularly within 250 meters of residential housing, clearly contradicts all of the principles of sound urban planning and environmental responsibility.”

Greenpeace Olympics Campaign International Coordinator Blair Palese cites the Olympics Report Card as evidence of Greenpeace’s integrity and independence, noting that the report card gives failing marks in several areas to the Olympic Coordination Authority. She sees nothing wrong, however, with continuing to endorse the games as green. “Greenpeace doesn’t believe anything is perfect,” she said, “We don’t believe demanding absolute success in advance makes sense.”

“You can’t promote these as the green Games on the world stage while at the same time allowing the use of HCFCs in the cooling system of one of the main venues,

especially when there are alternatives such as ammonia," said Greenpeace Olympics campaigner Michael Bland in an interview with *New Scientist* magazine. Yet this is just what Greenpeace is doing, despite its report card.

Nor is this shift in direction confined to the Australian branch. Greenpeace International has written to Olympic sponsors, including BHP, Coca-Cola, General Motors-Holden, McDonalds and others, inviting them to use the "Green Games" to enhance their own environmental images: "As sponsors, you have the opportunity to play a key role in this success. One of the many benefits of being part of the Green Games is the chance to demonstrate your company's commitment to the environment and to future generations. The Sydney Olympics offer your staff the opportunity to take part in a long-term global initiative to protect the world's environment. . . . Greenpeace would like to work with you to explore the areas in which you can make an environmental contribution during the Sydney 2000 Games."

To take just one example from the companies on this list, BHP was named one of the worst 10 corporations in 1995 by *Multinational Monitor* for polluting the Ok Tedi River in Papua New Guinea. According to the *Monitor*, the pollution amounted to a "daily dose of more than 80,000 tons of toxic mining waste." In 1996, BHP settled a legal battle over its pollution by agreeing to pay local landowners more than \$300 million. At the Olympics, however, it will get to "demonstrate its commitment to the environment" by supporting energy conservation or the use of environmentally-safe refrigerants.

Greenpeace Australia has done a similar service for Nike, a company much in need of good PR following media coverage of working conditions in sweatshops that produce Nike shoes in third world countries. In its 1998 Olympic Report, Greenpeace congratulates Nike for promising to phase out PVC in its products, making "PVC free sportswear available to athletes and consumers." The report features a picture of Greenpeace presenting a Nike representative with a cake in the shape of a green Nike shoe, complete with trademark swoosh.

A SOLUTIONS-ORIENTED APPROACH

Although it would be an oversimplification to say that Greenpeace's change in direction was prompted purely by PR and financial concerns, the change occurred in the early 1990s, while Greenpeace was in the process of organizational soul-searching as its membership began to decline after the boom years of 1989-1992. The number of paying supporters worldwide fell from 4.8 million in 1990 to 3.1 million in 1995. The loss was particularly pronounced in the US, Canada, Sweden, New Zealand, Denmark, the Netherlands and Australia. In

Nike Goes PVC Free

The Environmental Guidelines, which aim to minimise and ideally eliminate the use of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) on the Olympic site have been adhered to in much of the construction. Now athletes can join the PVC phase-out. A recent decision by sporting manufacturer, Nike to eliminate the use of PVC in its products and facilities, should make PVC free sportswear available to athletes and consumers.

Greenpeace welcomes the Nike move as another step in the green for the last plastic and calls on all sportsman companies to just do it and follow Nike's lead in phasing out PVC. In particular Greenpeace calls on Olympic sponsors to end their use of PVC, as recommended by the Olympic Green Guidelines.

The manufacture of PVC involves the production and release of hazardous chemicals, including dioxins — the most toxic chemical produced by humans. Dioxins have been linked to a range of health problems including both defects, cancer, diabetes, neurotoxicity, immune system suppression, a disruption of the hormone system and decreased fertility. Because it undergoes several steps in effective recycling, PVC is usually burned or buried at the end of its life cycle. Burning it, however, merely releases further dioxins and other dangerous chemicals, generating more hazardous waste to be buried.

Greenpeace worked hard to ensure that the Environmental Guidelines included a commitment to phase out PVC. We continue campaigning to ensure that the Guidelines help kick start alternatives to the PVC industry. The Nike initiative shows that it can be done. Greenpeace is calling on other sportsman manufacturers to follow suit and just do it!

The Good Wood?

Timber should be sourced from sustainably managed forests. Environmental Guidelines for the Sydney Olympic Village.

All timber used in the Sydney Olympic Village must meet the Environmental Guidelines. Unfortunately the jury is still out on whether or not the New South Wales (NSW) Government, which has purchased a new world class system of forest reserves by the end of the year.

Currently timber buyers, such as Olympic builders, purchasing timber from NSW state forests are left guessing about when the timber came from and whether their purchase has contributed to damaging environmentally sensitive areas.

Until the government announces its forest reserve plan, the future of many important NSW old growth, carbon and endangered species habitat areas hangs in the balance. Greenpeace has called on the government to ensure that all high conservation value forests be protected as National Parks. The NSW Government must make the right decision to allow Olympic officials to live up to their Green Guidelines commitments on timber.

Olympic officials have been told to avoid the use of timber in the Olympic Village, but some remaining environmental trails.

Construction of the Olympic Village, including the home where Olympic athletes will be based, has just been completed. The large timber beam structure of the Southern Hemisphere, the home site, now stands for timber construction. Its design successfully blends timber and steel to create an exciting and harmonious architectural environment.

Since the early days of Olympic venue design, Greenpeace has been environmentally conscious timber to be used instead of steel. Steel production is energy intensive and produces polluting greenhouse gases which warm the earth's atmosphere. When sourced from well-managed plantation forests, timber is a better environmental alternative. The massive timber beam used in the home's impressive roof archway is made entirely of pine timber from Australian softwood plantations.

Over 50 percent of the timber in the Olympic Village will come from softwood timber plantations. Tropical timber used in the village has been responsibly certified by the non-profit Forest Stewardship Council. Only the sustainability of NSW softwood remains the last hurdle to environmental timber use in the Olympic Village.

Greenpeace congratulates Nike with a shoe-shaped cake on their decision to go PVC-free. See Page 2 1998.

Olympic Village construction site with Olympic venues by Ben Agnew.

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Greenpeace's 1998 "Special Olympic Report" praised Nike's announcement that it would phase out the use of polyvinyl chloride in its products. The photo inset at the top right is captioned, "Greenpeace congratulates Nike with a shoe-shaped cake on their decision to go PVC-free." The only part of most Nike shoes made from PVC is the "swoosh," according to a Nike representative in Australia.

Australia subscriptions declined from 103,000 in 1992 to 60,000 in 1997.

Like many large environmental organizations that depend on subscriptions and donations, Greenpeace became sensitive to media portrayals of it as being "too radical" and "too negative." When Paul Gilding was promoted from head of Greenpeace Australia to head of Greenpeace International in 1992, he argued that the organization should reinvent itself as an organization that offered "solutions" and worked with industry and government to get those solutions in place. "If we had just kept on saying there was a problem, then people would have switched off," he told the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

When Lynette Thorstensen replaced Gilding as executive director of Greenpeace Australia, she continued his emphasis on "solution strategies" such as the Olympic Games village design and work on a CFC-free refrigerator. "Greenpeace is now convinced the best path to

progress is via the country's boardrooms," said Australia's *Good Weekend* magazine when it interviewed Thorstensen in 1993. The state Minister for the Olympics, Bruce Baird, wasn't complaining. "They've shown a much more constructive approach lately," he told *Good Weekend*. "It is a new style of environmentalism I find much more persuasive. Before they were seen as ultra-green and opposing everything."

Gilding's business-friendly approach was unpopular with "old guard" environmentalists, and in 1994 he was ousted from his position as head of Greenpeace International. A year and a half later, however, the "solution"/business partnership approach won a major victory when Thilo Bode was appointed to head the organization. An economist from industry with World Bank experience, Bode had no environmental credentials before being appointed to head Greenpeace Germany in 1989. He was hired for his management skills, which he demonstrated by making Greenpeace Germany the richest of all Greenpeace operations. Bode also "engineered internal changes that reduced the power of the seven-member Greenpeace International Board," according to *Time* magazine, "and shifted authority to the executive director."

Like Gilding, Bode believes in working with industry and allowing the Greenpeace name to be used to endorse "green" products such as CFC-free refrigerators made by Westinghouse. This is despite the fact that Westinghouse was listed in *The Greenpeace Book of Greenwash* as a prime example of corporate greenwashing. "In the US, when people hear the name 'Westinghouse' they think of household appliances," it states. "Only rarely does the company publicize another side of its business: nuclear weapons and reactors." This effort at image control will no doubt benefit from the endorsement that Greenpeace has given to its new fridges.

One of Bode's "solutions-oriented" initiatives has been to work with car companies to produce more fuel-efficient cars. Greenpeace Germany has invested \$1.3 million in a Renault car to cut its fuel consumption by about half. This investment and the ensuing promotion of the car has caused some disquiet within Greenpeace among those who believe that the best way to adequately address pollution is to promote public transport rather than energy-efficient cars. One campaigner told Polly Ghazi, who was writing for the *New Statesman*, "We should not be getting into the business of selling cars of any kind."

Even Greenpeace USA is using "solution-oriented" campaigns that give "positive support for new technologies, products, and companies where appropriate,"

Tim Andrews told *Time* magazine in 1996. "It's an effort to sit down with businesses instead of coming out of the woodwork yelling. We use that as a last resort, yes. But we're trying a more diplomatic approach."

In London, Greenpeace UK hosted a \$600-per-head conference in 1996 to identify solutions that could be achieved through alliances between environmentalists and industry. In attendance were delegates from corporations like ICI (a British-based multinational chemical company), British Nuclear Fuels (BNFL), BP, Shell, British Agrochemicals and Nestlé. Greenpeace UK Director Peter Melchett argues that "solutions enforcement" is a new form of direct action.

In her article in the *New Statesman*, Polly Ghazi argued that Greenpeace has strayed from its defense of nature to forge "closer ties with its former business enemies," noting that its support of the British Petroleum oil company for its solar power initiatives gave BP huge "public relations capital" for a mere investment of 0.1 percent of the BP group's gross income. Ghazi's article prompted a reply from the campaign program director of Greenpeace UK, who wrote that Greenpeace still opposed "the plan of the other 99.9 per cent part of that company to expand its oil operations into the Atlantic. . . . In the course of our campaigns governments often turn from being opponents to allies. That does not mean Greenpeace is becoming an adjunct or supporter."

More recently BP Amoco has received environmental criticism in the form of a special Greenhouse Greenwash Award from the US group Corporate Watch for its "Plug in the Sun" Program. Corporate Watch noted that "the company hopes that by spending just .01% of its portfolio on solar as it explores for more oil and sells more gasoline, it can convince itself and others of its own slogan: BP knows, BP cares, BP is our leader."

In a similar satiric vein, Greenpeace USA has given BP Amoco's CEO, John Browne, an award for "Best Impression of an Environmentalist" for his "portrayal of BP Amoco as a leader in solar energy" while running a company "with far greater investment in dirty fossil fuels that are causing global warming." Greenpeace USA has opposed drilling and exploration by BP Amoco in Alaska. In this case, the "solutions" approach taken by Greenpeace UK clearly conflicts with Greenpeace campaigns in the USA.

As these examples illustrate, Greenpeace still carries on its historic mission of "bearing witness," but its focus on "solutions" has required Greenpeace to sometimes turn a blind eye to the environmental sins of the companies it works with. The problem is not that everyone in Greenpeace has sold out but that the new emphasis

on solutions is leading to compromises that the former Greenpeace would not have considered.

Corporations and their business magazines are encouraging this nascent tendency, which they see as evidence of growing “maturity” on the part of Greenpeace. “We’ve reached a detente with Greenpeace,” a spokesman for the multinational chemical firm Hoechst told *Time* magazine. A spokesman for Bayer, another multinational chemical company, said “we can conduct substantive discussions with their people.”

“Some in Greenpeace acknowledge that the group’s confrontational tactics are losing effect and can be costly,” crowed *Chemical Week*, noting the shift to “solutions-based campaigning” and to “targeting shareholders and bankers involved in project finance.”

“Mature” is also a word Michael Bland uses to describe the new Greenpeace. Its approach is “now more sophisticated,” he says, because it recognizes “the potential to use the market when that is appropriate.”

“Maturity,” however, can either mark the culmination of development or the beginning of decline. And “sophistication” is sometimes a mere nudge away from sophistry. Greenpeace campaigners may view their emphasis on “solutions” as a natural evolution and a necessary response to changing world conditions. For some

environmentalists such as myself, however, the fear is that this new path is a slippery slope. Will Greenpeace continue to uphold the principles of its founders, or will it become just another symbolic marketing hook, a subscription sold to suburban householders to be taken in regular doses as a palliative for environmental anxiety while they continue their lifestyles as polluting producers and consumers?

The Greenpeace Book of Greenwash, by Jed Greer and Kenny Bruno, points out that “industry has devised a far-reaching program to convince people that [transnational corporations] are benefactors of the global environment.” It warns citizens to look under the surface of corporate announcements of environmental initiatives “and be aware of the overall context in which they exist. It is clear that certain basic characteristics of corporate culture have not changed.” What may be changing, however, is the culture of Greenpeace so that corporate culture is no longer seen to be the problem. n

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Mining PR Exec Lauds Peter Sandman

*Letter from Geoff Kelly, Group Manager Corporate Communication, WMC Limited
Victorian President, Public Relations Institute of Australia*

In “Sandman’s Cagey Tactics” (readers’ letter, Second Quarter 1999), the Nevada Nuclear Waste Task Force (NNWTF) seems to miss the point of Peter Sandman’s magic.

I’ve worked with him a number of times, and his greatest impact isn’t with the catchy concepts that are the hallmark of most high-profile consultants. It’s his ability to reduce the outrage that corporate leadership feel when attacked by those they believe use bad science to justify their own righteous outcomes. For issue advocates, the exquisite weakness of most large corporations is their tendency to dumb down to an angry or fearful response when faced by a strong high-profile attack by groups prepared to play hard and dirty with media and public sentiment. They then play them like a fiddle.

Sandman sells a powerful alternative, but one that comes at a price. He provokes corporations to reassess the issue and listen to communities. As the NNWTF allude, this won’t work if it is not backed by genuine flex-

ibility and willingness to change. No group wants to talk for the sake of it. The magic is that the corporate culture has to change, and industrial czars have to share control over outcomes with outsiders who have a stake in the consequences. If you’ve been used to calling the shots in a major company, that is no fun at all. However, Sandman often persuades these reluctant maidens that the alternative is worse.

The result? It cuts the knees off groups who play fast and dirty to achieve an ideological goal with little connection with real community interest. It also humbles corporate people who thought that they knew enough, being people of good values and having done thorough internal research on the project or issue. They often discover new and better ways to achieve their results working with community allies they never dreamed possible.

Peter Sandman? Take another look. He’s dangerous to dinosaurs on both sides of a controversy.

—Geoff Kelly