Greenpeace campaigns against dumping the Brent Spar oil rig, 1995

April 30, 1995
to: June 20, 1995
Country: International
Location Description: North Sea and Shell stations throughout Europe
Goals:
To prevent ocean dumping of the Brent Spar oil rig by Shell

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 071. Consumers' boycott
• 077. International consumers’ boycott
• 140. Hiding, escape, and false identities
• 173. Nonviolent occupation
• 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws

Methods in 4th segment:

• 002. Letters of opposition or support
• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 077. International consumers' boycott
• 173. Nonviolent occupation
• 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws

Methods in 5th segment:

• 002. Letters of opposition or support
• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 026. Paint as protest
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 077. International consumers' boycott
• 173. Nonviolent occupation
• 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws

Methods in 6th segment:

• 002. Letters of opposition or support
• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 077. International consumers' boycott
• 173. Nonviolent occupation
• 196. Civil disobedience of "neutral" laws

Classifications

Classification:
Defense

Cluster:
Economic Justice
Environment

Group characterization:

• Greenpeace activists
• consumers of Shell oil

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Greenpeace

Partners:
Not known

External allies:
Ritt Bjerregaard (EU Commissioner for the Environment), Svend Auken (Danish Minister for Environment and Energy), and Peter Sand Mortensen (Chair of the Fishermens Sector, International Transport Federation); all opposition parties in the UK, Belgium and Iceland; European Parliament; Germany; Greenpeace supporters and organizers in Germany; activists in Aberdeen Harbour; Environmental ministers from all North Sea Conference nations except the UK and Norway; fishing vessels in the Shetland Islands; consumers of Shell oil (including in Australia, Ireland and Spain); German Chancellor Kohl

Involvement of social elites:
Ritt Bjerregaard (EU Commissioner for the Environment), Svend Auken (Danish Minister for Environment and Energy), and Peter Sand Mortensen (Chair of the Fishermens Sector, International Transport Federation); all opposition parties in the UK, Belgium and Iceland; European Parliament, Germany; Environmental ministers from all North Sea Conference nations except the UK and Norway; German Chancellor Kohl

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
Groups in 2nd Segment:

• All opposition parties in the UK
• International Transport Federation
• Ritt Bjerregaard (EU Commissioner for the Environment)
• Svend Auken (Danish Minister for Environment and Energy)
• and Peter Sand Mortensen (Chair of the Fishermens Sector

Groups in 3rd Segment:

• Belgium and Iceland
• European Parliament
• Greenpeace supporters in Germany

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

• Activists in Aberdeen Harbour
• Environmental ministers from all north sea conference nations except the UK and Norway
• Fishing vessels in the Shetland Islands

Groups in 6th Segment:

• Consumers of Shell oil (VI)
• Demonstrators outside Shell stations internationally
• German Chancellor Kohl

Segment Length: Approximately 8-9 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Shell oil and the UK Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Reports of incidents of violence at Shell stations include a firebombing and a drive-by shooting. Greenpeace condemned the acts of violence against Shell property, and urged people to use nonviolent methods of protest.

Repressive Violence:
On May 16, a larger Greenpeace ship arrived and transferred a second group of activists to the Brent Spar. While they scaled up, Norwegian rig support vessel Rembas endangered an inflatable by pushing it against the side of the Brent Spar.

On June 7, Vessel Rembas met attempts to paint slogans on the side of the Spar with blasts from water cannons. The blasting reached its dangerous peak when, as the last climbers returning to the Moby Dick were hanging from a rope, Rembas sprayed them for a full 20 minutes.

Rembas continued blasting Greenpeace activists with high-pressure water hoses, and on June 10, a Shell vessel rammed the Greenpeace boat, throwing three people overboard.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points
Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
Greenpeace activists achieved their immediate goal to prevent ocean dumping of the Brent Spar, and gained an international European agreement that disallowed dumping of obsolete oil rigs in the sea.

Greenpeace survived after the campaign.

Following media coverage of the occupation, support for Greenpeace’s campaign against dumping the Brent Spar grew greatly. Organizers launched a successful boycott of Shell products, and government officials from all across Europe spoke out against the dumping.

The Brent Spar, a 450-foot-long floating rig used as a loading buoy and storage tank for oil from the North Sea for fifteen years, was decommissioned in 1991. When Greenpeace learned of plans to dump the Brent Spar by sinking the structure in the North Atlantic, just west of Ireland and Scotland, and of the UK government’s approval, it jumped into action. More than 24 activists from 6 North Sea countries made plans to occupy the rig. Video and photo staff documented the occupation.

Greenpeace’s Moby Dick landed at the Brent Spar on April 30, 1995. Four climbers scaled up and occupied the rig. The Moby Dick stood by to provide a continued supply of food and water and to act as a safety vessel. When Captain Pelle Pettersson alerted surrounding rig support vessels to the action, a Shell vessel harassed the ship and accompanying inflatables. Activists unrolled a banner reading “Save the North Sea.” On the same day, Greenpeace released a report, “No Grounds for Dumping: The Decommissioning and Abandonment of Offshore Oil and Gas Platforms,” which provided other decommissioning options. Given the 400 other contaminated structures at work in the North Sea, Greenpeace believed that ocean disposal of the Brent Spar would set an unacceptable precedent for future dumping of toxic substances into marine environments.

By May 4, fourteen Greenpeace activists from four countries were occupying the Brent Spar. Shell warned them of potential safety problems on the platform, without realizing that Greenpeace had the manual to the entire facility. Campaigner Tim Birch responded that whatever risks the occupiers encountered were nothing in comparison to the threat dumping posed to the marine environment. While activists conducted live TV interviews using satellite equipment, the action generated publicity around Europe. On the 9th, Greenpeace constructed a wind generator on the helicopter deck. On the 13th, a Shell helicopter landed and two Sherriff officers emerged with a legal injunction. Greenpeace lawyers studied the 12-page legal document. Shell also obtained an interim interdict preventing resupply of food. Meanwhile, Ritt Bjerregaard (EU Commissioner for the Environment), Svend Auken (Danish Minister for Environment and Energy), and Peter Sand Mortensen (Chair of the Fishermens Sector, International Transport Federation) demonstrated growing international support for the occupation by making statements on Danish TV. On the 16th, a larger Greenpeace ship arrived and transferred a second group of activists to the Brent Spar. While they scaled up the rig, Norwegian rig support vessel Rembas endangered an inflatable by pushing it against the side of the Brent Spar. By the 16th, all opposition parties in the UK denounced dumping. By the 17th, Belgium and Iceland joined Denmark in condemning the British government for allowing dumping. The European parliament sent a list of objections to member states of the North Sea Conference.

On May 19, Shell obtained the court’s consent to evict one Greenpeace member, but not all. On the same day, Greenpeace challenged the legality of the dumping license in the High Court in London (High Court would later state that Greenpeace could not challenge the government in a British court). Inclement weather on the morning of May 22 prevented Shell from removing Greenpeace, but on May 23, fifteen police and oilrig security attempted to board in a metal cage hanging from a crane. At first, Greenpeace activists pushed the cage off the surface of the Brent Spar, but later decided to allow it to land. The activists then scattered across the oil platform and handcuffed themselves to pre-arranged positions. Bolt cutters were used to remove them, and then eight activists and six journalists were taken aboard the oilrig-servicing vessel. Other activists remained hidden throughout the Brent Spar.
On land, Germany added its voice to growing international pressure on May 24. Greenpeace supporters distributed leaflets at over 300 petrol station locations throughout Germany. The June 8-9 meeting of the North Sea Conference steadily approached.

On June 7, as a tug in Aberdeen Harbour prepared to depart for the Brent Spar, activists blocked it. While some locked down to the superstructure, two divers disabled the propeller. Ten people were arrested without charge, but two remained perched on the mast of the tug, and succeeded at delaying dumping for 12 hours. Back at the Spar, five climbers hung another banner. Vessel Rembas met attempts to paint slogans on the side of the Spar with blasts from water cannons. The blasting reached its dangerous peak when, as the last climbers returning to the Moby Dick hung from a rope, Rembas sprayed them for a full 20 minutes. At the end of the North Sea Conference on June 9, Environment Ministers from all nations except the UK and Norway agreed ‘that it is unacceptable to dump offshore installations at sea and recommend the decommissioning of platforms on land.’

Rembas continued blasting Greenpeace activists with high-pressure water hoses, and on June 10, a Shell vessel rammed the Greenpeace boat, throwing three people overboard. Two days later, vessels began to tow the Brent Spar to its deep-sea dumpsite, and the Greenpeace ship followed closely. Outside opposition to the dumping continued to grow. In the Shetland Islands, fishing vessels flew Greenpeace flags with “Don’t Dump the Sea” and the Shell logo dripping in oil. By June 15, protests against dumping the Brent Spar had led to a consumer boycott, and Shell petrol stations in Germany reported a 50% loss in income.

On June 16, two Greenpeace activists reoccupied the Brent Spar while Shell officials blasted the drop-off helicopter with water cannons. Meanwhile, protesters gathered at over 100 Shell stations in the UK, and press coverage continued with images of the water cannon. Also on the 16th, at the G7 Summit, German Chancellor Kohl raised the issue with British Prime Minister John Major. Greenpeace realized that its previous estimate of the amount of oil left on the Brent Spar was miscalculated, and admitted the mistake. A media myth was created around the scientific confusion, as Shell, politicians, and media outlets, suggested that the error undermined Greenpeace’s opposition to dumping the Brent Spar. Greenpeace, however, maintained that data was not central to the campaign, and the primary issues remained the need to prevent using the oceans as a dumping ground for obsolete platforms by offshore industry.

On June 19, Greenpeace protesters demonstrated outside Royal Dutch Headquarters in The Hague, the Netherlands. The scope of the campaign grew to include a successful consumer boycott of Shell products and gasoline stations, which resulted in a significant drop in sales and millions of dollars lost. Austria, Ireland, and Spain promised to join eight other countries calling for a boycott on Shell products. Not all actions remained nonviolent. Reports of incidents of violence at Shell stations include a firebombing and a drive-by shooting. Greenpeace condemned the acts of violence against Shell property, and urged people to use nonviolent methods of protest.

On June 20, after over two months of mounting protest, worsening publicity, and growing public pressure, Shell stopped its ocean disposal plan for the Brent Spar. The company agreed to dismantle and recycle the Spar on land.

Following the campaign’s success, European nations at the Olso and Paris Commission (OSPAR) agreed to a ban on dumping of offshore steel oil rigs. In 1997, an independent commission assessed eight disposal options, and listed dumping as the worst environmental option. Finally, in 1998, Shell announced on-land recycling of the Brent Spar in Norway, with plans to use scrap for foundations of a new ferry terminal.

**Research Notes**

**Sources:**


<http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/about/history/the-brent-spar/>.

**Additional Notes:**
The campaign against dumping the Brent Spar forms part of Greenpeace’s larger campaign to stop ocean dumping.

**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**
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