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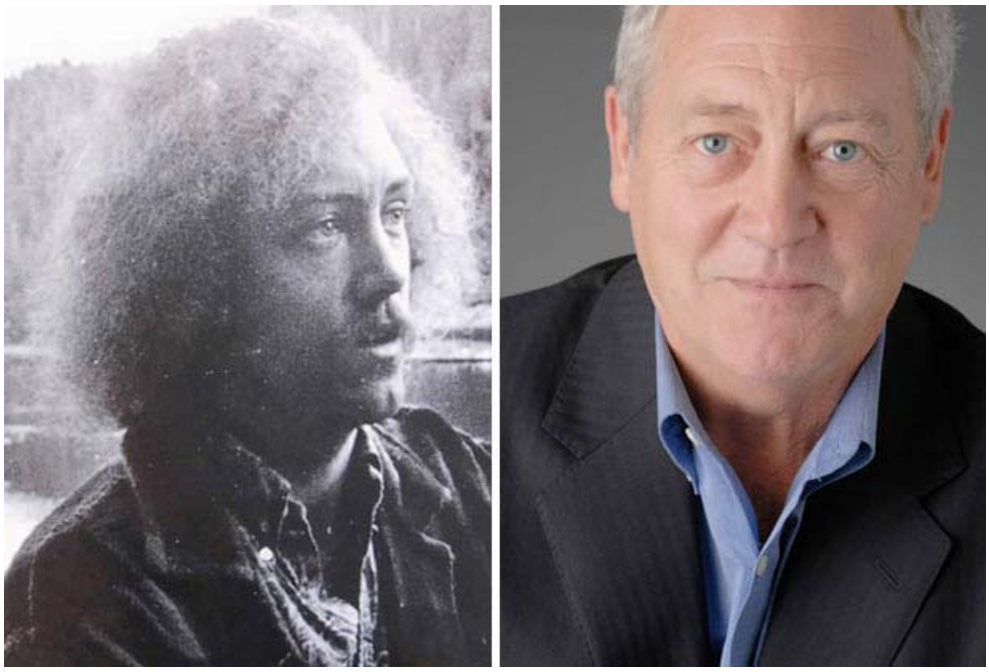
Confessions of a Greenpeace founder

New book describes environmental group's descent into extremism, author's conversion to reason

By Patrick Moore, Special To The Sun January 7, 2011



Left, an undated photo of Patrick Moore, one of the founding members of Greenpeace. Right, Patrick Moore, today, is a lobbyist for nuclear power.

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You could call me a Greenpeace dropout, but that is not an entirely accurate description of how or why I left the organization 15 years after I helped create it. I'd like to think Greenpeace left me, rather than the other way around, but that too is not entirely correct.

The truth is Greenpeace and I had divergent evolutions. I became a sensible environmentalist; Greenpeace became increasingly senseless as it adopted an agenda that is anti-science, anti-business, and downright anti-human. This is the story of our transformations.

The last half of the 20th century was marked by a revulsion for war and a new awareness of the environment. Beatniks, hippies, eco-freaks and greens in their turn fashioned a new philosophy that embraced peace and ecology as the overarching principles of a civilized world. Spurred by more than 30 years of ever-present fear that global nuclear holocaust would wipe out humanity and much of the living world, we led a new war -- a war to save the earth. I've had the good fortune to be a general in that war.

My boot camp had no screaming sergeant or rifle drills. Still, the sense of duty and purpose of mission we had at the beginning was as acute as any assault on a common enemy. We campaigned against the bomb-makers, whale-killers, polluters and anyone else who threatened civilization or the environment. In the process, we won the hearts and minds of people around the world. We were Greenpeace.

I joined Greenpeace before it was even called by that name. The Don't Make a Wave Committee was meeting weekly in the basement of the Unitarian church in Vancouver.

In April 1971, I saw a small article in The Vancouver Sun about a group planning to sail a boat from Vancouver across the North Pacific to protest U.S. hydrogen bomb testing in Alaska. I immediately realized this was something real I could do, way beyond taking ecology classes and studying at a desk. I wrote the organizers and was invited to join the weekly meetings of the small group that would soon become Greenpeace.

The early days of Greenpeace were heady indeed. It was 1971 and the height of the hippy era. I was in a bitter battle to obtain my Ph. D in ecology at the University of British Columbia over the objections of a few industry-backed professors who had forced their way onto my thesis committee. I became radicalized and joined the group of anti-nuclear activists.

We realized all-out nuclear war would be the end of both civilization and the environment -- hence the name we soon adopted, Greenpeace, as in "let it be a green peace." We chartered an old fishing boat to sail to ground zero to focus public attention on the nuclear tests. We believed the revolution should be a celebration. We sang protest songs, drank beer, smoked pot and had a generally good time.

We survived that first voyage, but we never made it to the test site. The U.S. Coast Guard cut us off at Akutan Harbor and made us turn back. However, our mission was a success because our protest was reported in the media across North America. As a result, thousands of people from Canada and the U.S. marched on border crossings across the continent on the day of the H-bomb test and shut the crossings down. Soon after, President Richard Nixon cancelled the remaining tests in that series. We could hardly believe what our ragtag band of peaceniks had accomplished in just a few short months. We realized that a few people could change the world if they just got up and did something.

It was the beginning of a very wild ride. High on the victory of vanquishing a world superpower, in early 1972 we repeated our "take it to ground zero" protests with France, which was still conducting atmospheric tests of atomic and hydrogen bombs on Mururoa, a small atoll in the South Pacific. France had refused to sign the 1963 treaty banning atmospheric testing signed by the Soviet Union, Britain and the United States.

We found David McTaggart, a Canadian living in New Zealand who was willing to sail his small boat across the South Pacific, and the next protest was on. The first year the French navy rammed a hole in the boat and forced it ashore. The second year they beat up our captain, an event secretly photographed by one of the crew. The beating catapulted the story to the front pages of French newspapers. Within the year France announced it would no longer conduct nuclear tests in the atmosphere.

In three years our little band of protesters had forced two superpowers to substantially alter their nuclear weapons testing programs. We proved again that a small group of dedicated people could effect real change at a global level. Nothing could stop us now.

In 1975, we took on the challenge of saving the whales from extinction at the hands of huge factory whaling fleets. This campaign really put Greenpeace on the map and made us a worldwide icon. By the early 1980s, we were confronting the annual slaughter of baby seals, opposing driftnet fisheries, protesting toxic-waste dumping, blocking supertankers and parachuting into nuclear reactor construction sites. Our campaigns were highly successful at changing opinions and energizing the public. Through the power of the media and the people, we were steadily influencing government policies and forcing industries to clean up their acts. We had achieved the support of the majority of people in the industrialized democracies.

By 1982, Greenpeace had grown into a full-fledged international movement with offices and staff around the world. We were bringing in $100 million a year in donations and half a dozen campaigns were occurring simultaneously. During the early 1980s two things happened that altered my perspective on the direction in which environmentalism, in general, and Greenpeace, in particular, were heading. The first was my introduction to the concept of sustainable development at a global meeting of environmentalists. The second was the adoption of policies by my fellow Greenpeacers that I considered extremist and irrational. These two developments would set the stage for my transformation from a radical activist into a sensible environmentalist.

In 1982, the United Nations held a conference in Nairobi to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the first UN Environment Conference in Stockholm, which I had also attended. I was one of 85 environmental leaders from around the world who were invited to craft a statement of our collective goals for environmental protection. It quickly became apparent there were two nearly opposite perspectives in the room -- the anti-development perspective of environmentalists from wealthy industrialized countries and the pro-development perspective of environmentalists from the poor developing countries.

As one developing country activist put it, taking a stand against development in his woefully poor country would get him laughed out of the room. It was hard to argue with his position. A well-fed person has many problems, a hungry person has but one. The same is true for development, or lack of it. We could see the tragic reality of poverty on the outskirts of our Kenyan host city. Those of us from industrialized countries recognized we had to be in favour of some kind of development, preferably the kind that didn't ruin the environment in the process. Thus the concept of sustainable development was born.

This was when I first fully realized there was another step beyond pure environmental activism. The real challenge was to figure out how to take the environmental values we had helped create and weave them into the social and economic fabric of our culture. This had to be done in ways that didn't undermine the economy and were socially acceptable. It was clearly a question of careful balance, not dogmatic adherence to a single principle.

I knew immediately that putting sustainable development into practice would be much more difficult than the protest campaigns we'd mounted over the past decade. It would require consensus and cooperation rather than confrontation and demonization. Greenpeace had no trouble with confrontation -- hell, we'd made it an art form -- but we had difficulty cooperating and making compromises. We were great at telling people what they should stop doing, but almost useless at helping people figure out what they should be doing instead.

It also seemed like the right time for me to make a change. I felt our primary task, raising mass public awareness of the importance of the environment, had been largely accomplished. By the early 1980s a majority of the public, at least in the

Western democracies, agreed with us that the environment should be taken into account in all our activities. When most people agree with you it is probably time to stop beating them over the head and sit down with them to seek solutions to our environmental problems.

At the same time I chose to become less militant and more diplomatic, my Greenpeace colleagues became more extreme and intolerant of dissenting opinions from within.

In the early days we debated complex issues openly and often. It was a wonderful group to engage with in wide-ranging environmental policy discussions. The intellectual energy in the organization was infectious. We frequently disagreed about specific issues, yet our ultimate vision was largely shared. Importantly, we strove to be scientifically accurate. For years this had been the topic of many of our internal debates. I was the only Greenpeace activist with a Ph. D in ecology, and because I wouldn't allow exaggeration beyond reason I quickly earned the nickname "Dr. Truth." It wasn't always meant as a compliment. Despite my efforts, the movement abandoned science and logic somewhere in the mid-1980s, just as society was adopting the more reasonable items on our environmental agenda.

Some activists simply couldn't make the transition from confrontation to consensus; it was as if they needed a common enemy. When a majority of people decide they agree with all your reasonable ideas the only way you can remain confrontational and antiestablishment is to adopt ever more extreme positions, eventually abandoning science and logic altogether in favour of zero-tolerance policies.

The collapse of world communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall during the 1980s added to the trend toward extremism. The Cold War was over and the peace movement was largely disbanded. The peace movement had been mainly Western-based and anti-American in its leanings. Many of its members moved into the environmental movement, bringing with them their neo-Marxist, far-left agendas. To a considerable extent the environmental movement was hijacked by political and social activists who learned to use green language to cloak agendas that had more to do with anti-capitalism and anti-globalization than with science or ecology. I remember visiting our Toronto office in 1985 and being surprised at how many of the new recruits were sporting army fatigues and red berets in support of the Sandinistas.

I don't blame them for seizing the opportunity. There was a lot of power in our movement and they saw how it could be turned to serve their agendas of revolutionary change and class struggle. But I differed with them because they were extremists who confused the issues and the public about the nature of our environment and our place in it. To this day they use the word industry as if it were a swear word. The same goes for multinational, chemical, genetic, corporate, globalization, and a host of other perfectly useful terms. Their propaganda campaign is aimed at promoting an ideology that I believe would be extremely damaging to both civilization and the environment.

The main purpose of my new book is to establish a new approach to environmentalism and to define sustain-ability as the key to achieving environmental goals. This requires embracing humans as a positive element in evolution rather than viewing us as some kind of mistake. I believe we should celebrate our existence and constantly put our minds toward making the world a better place for people and all the other species we share it with.

A lot of environmentalists are stuck in the 1970s and continue to promote a strain of leftish romanticism about idyllic rural village life powered by windmills and solar panels. They idealize poverty, seeing it as a noble way of life, and oppose all large developments. James Cameron, the multimillionaire producer of the most lucrative movie in history, Avatar, paints his face and joins the disaffected to protest a hydroelectric dam in the Amazon.

I believe:

- We should be growing more trees and using more wood, not cutting fewer trees and using less wood as Greenpeace and its allies contend. Wood is the most important renewable material and energy resource.

- Those countries that have reserves of potential hydroelectric energy should build the dams required to deliver that energy. There is nothing wrong with creating more lakes in this world.

- Nuclear energy is essential for our future energy supply, especially if we wish to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. It has proven to be clean safe, reliable, and cost-effective.

- Geothermal heat pumps, which too few people know about, are far more important and cost-effective than either solar panels or wind mills as a source of renewable energy. They should be required in all new buildings unless there is a good reason to use some other technology for heating, cooling, and making hot water.

- The most effective way to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels is to encourage the development of technologies that require less or no fossil fuels to operate. Electric cars, heat pumps, nuclear and hydroelectric energy, and biofuels are the answer, not cumbersome regulatory systems that stifle economic activity.

- Genetic science, including genetic engineering, will improve nutrition and end malnutrition, improve crop yields, reduce the environmental impact of farming, and make people and the environment healthier.

- Many activist campaigns designed to make us fear useful chemicals are based on misinformation and unwarranted fear.

- Aquaculture, including salmon and shrimp farming, will be one of our most important future sources of healthy food. It will also take pressure off depleted wild fish stocks and will employ millions of people productively.

- There is no cause for alarm about climate change. The climate is always changing. Some of the proposed "solutions" would be far worse than any imaginable consequence of global warming, which will likely be mostly positive. Cooling is what we should fear.

- Poverty is the worst environmental problem. Wealth and urbanization will stabilize the human population. Agriculture should be mechanized throughout the developing world. Disease and malnutrition can be largely eliminated by the application of modern technology. Health care, sanitation, literacy and electrification should be provided to everyone.

- No whale or dolphin should be killed or captured anywhere, ever. This is one of my few religious beliefs. They are the only species on earth whose brains are larger than ours and it is impossible to kill or capture them humanely.

Dr. Patrick Moore is a co-founder and former leader of Greenpeace and chair and chief scientist of Greenspirit Strategies Ltd. in Vancouver. His new book, Confessions of a Greenpeace Dropout: The Making of a Sensible Environmentalist, is available at www.beattystreetpublishing.com

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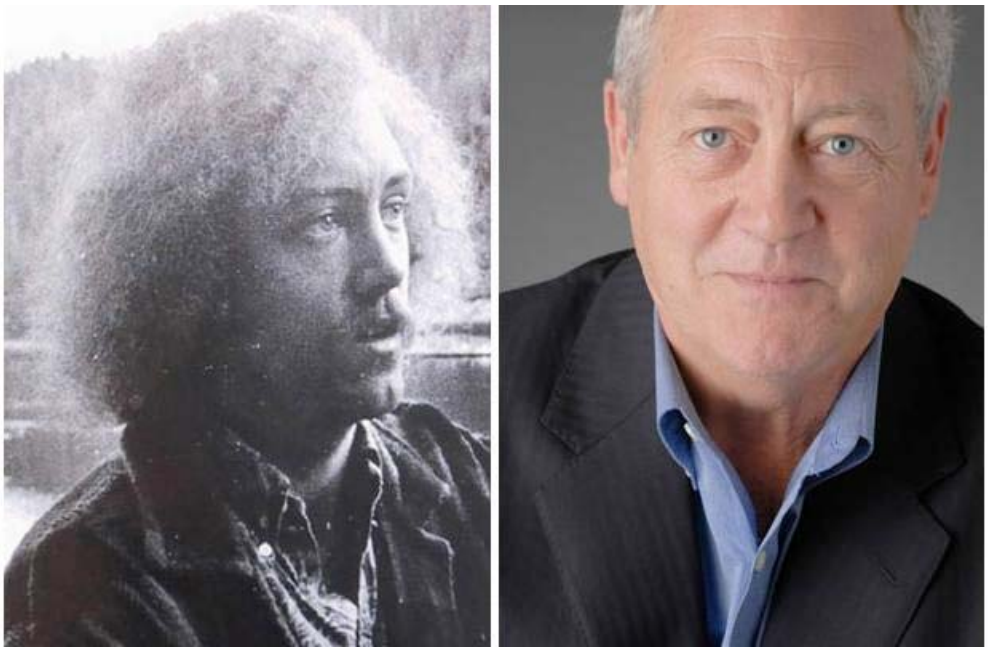

Left, an undated photo of Patrick Moore, one of the founding members of Greenpeace. Right, Patrick Moore, today, is a lobbyist for nuclear power.

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