

Environmental protest groups

by Mike Rayner

*They took all the trees
And put them in a tree museum
And they charged all the people
A dollar and a half to see 'em
Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
'Till it's gone
They paved paradise
And they put up a parking lot*
(Joni Mitchell – Big Yellow Taxi)

Facts about the state of the global environment read like quotes on a poster for an epic Hollywood movie – expanding deserts in Africa, huge forest fires in Indonesia, serious shortages of fish in Europe, thousands of deaths from air pollution in Brazil, disappearing forests in the Amazon, melting ice-caps and increasing radiation levels in the polar regions. But just as there is no evil Lex Luther or Ernst Blofeld responsible for these disasters, there is no Superman or James Bond to save the world. The human race has caused these problems and we are going to have to work together to solve them.

However, many people feel that the governments of countries around the world are not taking environmental issues seriously enough. To allow the voices of concerned people to be heard, a large number of protest groups have been set up by ordinary people to raise awareness of the issues, and to put pressure on politicians to act before it is too late. A few of the organisations have become household names, particularly Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace. Two smaller groups, Surfers Against Sewage and Reclaim The Streets, are less well known, but take themselves just as seriously.

Surfers Against Sewage (SAS)

Surfers Against Sewage was founded in 1990 by water sports enthusiasts, who were becoming more and more concerned about the health risks they faced when using beaches in Cornwall in the UK. Human and toxic waste pumped into the sea was causing serious illnesses, and beach goers felt that they were “playing Russian Roulette with their health” every time they went into the water.

SAS alerted people to the problem by going to public events with their surfboards, where they handed out leaflets wearing wetsuits and gasmasks. They soon attracted the attention of the media and other concerned water users from around Britain and were able to put pressure on the government to ban dumping untreated waste in the sea, rivers and lakes. The group was so successful that in 1998, only 8 years after they started campaigning, the government agreed to spend 8.5 billion pounds on cleaning up Britain's aquatic environment.

Surfers Against Sewage has acquired a cool image over the years. In 1999 the director of *The Beach*, a Hollywood blockbuster starring Leonardo Di Caprio, wanted to use the SAS logo on actors' backpacks. SAS refused permission however, because they were concerned about the environmental damage that making the film had caused to the tiny tropical island of Phi Phi in Thailand.

Reclaim The Streets (RTS)

Reclaim The Streets was started in London in 1991 to campaign “FOR walking, cycling and cheap, or free, public transport, and AGAINST cars, roads and the system that pushes them.” RTS began by protesting against road building through unspoilt areas of the British countryside, and now have expanded their activities to draw attention to environmental, political, economic and social injustice around the world.

RTS campaigns by stopping traffic and turning roads and motorways into huge street parties. Members of the group dig up tarmac and plant trees, make beaches and paddling pools for children to play in, decorate the street with colourful banners, and give out free food and drink. A huge sound system is set up, bands, jugglers and clowns perform, and hundreds or even thousands of people dance and party. The carnival is usually broken up by the police after a few hours, and in the past some of the demonstrations have been marred by violence between police and protesters.

RTS doesn't have any clear aims, and says that it is a 'disorganisation' rather than an organisation, since there is no one in charge, but the methods that the group uses have caught on, and are now used worldwide. As the RTS website says, "The Reclaim The Streets idea has grown up and left home, street parties and suchlike often happen without anyone in RTS London hearing about them until afterwards."

Protest and the Internet

Both SAS and RTS have extensive websites providing information about their activities, and providing links to like-minded groups around the world. It seems that nowadays the Internet is helping more and more people express their dissatisfaction with the status quo, and work together to find solutions to the problems that the modern world faces.

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