

Greenpeace against Royal Dutch Shell: the 1995 Brent Spar disposal plan

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This project was executed for the purposes of a research master's thesis at Utrecht University in 2021-2022. The project focused on the tensions between science and activism in the environmental movement, specifically investigating Greenpeace International's Science Unit in the 1980s and 1990s.

As environmental science became increasingly important in debates surrounding global environmental problems in the 1970s and 1980s, activist organizations made efforts towards adopting a scientific approach to the causes they were campaigning for. For Greenpeace, this was embodied by the founding of multiple science laboratories in Europe and the USA, followed by an overarching structure aptly named the "Science Unit". However, the reactive nature of Greenpeace and similar organizations gives rise to the question which place there was for the nuanced, deliberate, and often-times slow process that is at the core of science. Practicing science takes a certain amount of time that is not always available when it comes to acute environmental threats. The question that this research aimed to answer, then, is how Greenpeace's Science Unit was able to operate within the campaign-led organization. And more generally speaking, how does an activist organization stay true to its goals, strategies, and overall identity, in light of the growing relevance of environmental science?

The Brent Spar campaign of 1995 is used as a lens through which to analyze Greenpeace's efforts at adopting a scientific approach, and the challenges and opportunities that came with it. The Brent Spar was a Royal Dutch Shell-operated oil buoy in the North Sea that in 1995 became the focal point of an international dispute between the oil magnate and Greenpeace. Shell's plan to sink the decommissioned buoy at sea was met with resistance at the hands of the environmental group, that managed to mobilize both people and politicians against this decision. Shell, on the other hand, was not able to convince the public of their rationale behind this plan, and eventually changed its course of action in light of the growing international pressure. Greenpeace's initial success, however, was short-lived, as the activists had made a scientific mistake in their campaign that sparked international outrage. This time, Greenpeace was on the receiving end – and the question rose if Shell had not been right after all.

This campaign, the narratives, Greenpeace's ability and Shell's inability to effectively respond to public pressure will be discussed in my presentation during the seminar *Dutch businesses and the challenges of sustainability*. I will reflect on the ways in which businesses may be challenged to change their practices and whether this can be effective, using the example of the Dutch oil magnate and its infamous oil buoy.

Bio

Claudia Hacke is a PhD candidate at Utrecht University. She has previously worked on science and activism in the environmental movement. For her PhD project, she specializes in the history of gender in the labour market, focusing on women's opportunities in Dutch family firms.