

# Are Environmental Charities Useful?

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For the past few years, 3% of charitable donations in the UK have been directed at environmental or 'green' charities [1]. This term covers charities with a wide range of mission statements, from Friends of the Earth's ambitions to 'ensure environmental and social justice, human dignity, and respect for human rights', to the Soil Association's more specific objective to 'raise awareness, and develop and safeguard the entire organic sector' [2-3]. Do these varying goals merit their classification as 'environmental'? And how do these organisations' actions compare with their mission statements?

The primary activity of most green charities is the organisation of a wide variety of campaigns in the hope of changing both government policy and individuals' lifestyles so that they are more in keeping with the goals of that organisation. The larger charities can have a significant influence on both of these targets, so it is important that their policies are carefully constructed to be as beneficial as possible for long-term sustainability. This requires that they are evidence-based and that they are able to change as the available evidence or context changes.

There is little doubt that one of the largest environmental threats facing the modern world is that of climate change [4], and this area has naturally been given a lot of attention by green charities. For example, Friends of the Earth were key players in the introduction of the 2008 Climate

Change Act in the UK, which aims to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050 [5-6]. More recently, in May 2010 Greenpeace campaigners played a key role in convincing the UK government to scrap its expansion of the Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted airports [7]. Airport expansion might well have been a bad move in the battle against climate change but it is not possible to know the true usefulness

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of Greenpeace's intervention – the UK aviation prevented by the lack of expansion could well be provided by other countries, if the market for it exists. Such measures may be excellent for raising awareness, but they do not have the long term impact promised by the legislative approach. Of course, we have yet to see whether the targets set out in the Climate Change Act will be met. In all cases, merely pointing out the problem is not sufficient – we need long-term, integrated solutions that are compatible with technological and social constraints. Accordingly, Greenpeace offers a number of suggestions for renewable energy generation (such as wind, wave and tidal power), in addition to their dramatic campaigning [8].

Unless we are prepared to return to a pre-industrial way of living, some method of energy production that does not involve the net emission of greenhouse gases is required. Depending on how much energy we are able to generate in this way, significant increases in energy efficiency may also be needed, generated both by technological advances and lifestyle changes. In the short term, this increase in efficiency will almost certainly be needed to reduce the emission of green house gases from the fossil fuels we still burn. The main role of the environmental movement here has been to put pressure on organisations and individuals to reduce their 'carbon footprint' through a variety of lifestyle and business changes. However, some potential short term solutions are not welcomed by everyone in the environmental movement. For example, Greenpeace is against all forms of nuclear power – including the development of nuclear fusion [9, 10]. Nuclear power has been responsible for some terrible tragedies and produces radioactive waste that is troublesome to dispose of. However, nuclear power does not directly produce greenhouse gases, and is therefore a promising candidate as a short term, and possibly long term, method of energy generation. There is certainly a debate to be had on nuclear power, but the opposing environmental movement does not recognise the complexity of the issue and does not acknowledge the possibility that technological advances could eliminate some of the current problems of nuclear power [11]. To date, the opposition from the environmental



Nuclear Power - what is the risk? Reproduced from [24]

movement has not stopped governments from continuing with their nuclear power programmes. For example, the UK energy secretary Chris Huhne has recently announced plans to open new nuclear power plants by 2018 [12]. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, backed by public opinion, plans to restart production of nuclear power in Italy, which was rejected after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 [13]. Perhaps in this case environmental charities provide a much needed opposing voice to remind politicians of safety concerns as they push for nuclear expansion.

One of Greenpeace's aims is to 'promote open, informed debate about society's environmental choices' – undoubtedly a worthy sentiment. But their actions do not always live up to this sentiment [14]. For example, Greenpeace is very openly against any form of genetic engineering (GE), despite the fact that the general scientific consensus is that, while some applications of GE could be harmful, there is nothing inherently dangerous about it [15]. In fact, there is research to suggest that various GE crops could be beneficial for the environment, for example by use in conjunction with 'no-till' farming, in which the soil is not ploughed or turned over [16]. With regard to both

nuclear power and GE, Greenpeace is not 'promoting open debate', but vehemently defending their chosen point of view. Furthermore, by taking such a one-sided stance, Greenpeace may be blocking environmentally beneficial technology.

Friends of the Earth advertises the seemingly admirable vision of a 'peaceful and sustainable world based on societies living in harmony with nature' [2]. One would be hard-pressed to argue with the desire for the future to be 'peaceful and sustainable', but 'living in harmony with nature' is more problematic. This idea, which is common to many supporters of the environmental movement, raises the question: 'Why are we protecting the environment?'. The obvious reason is to ensure the happiness – and perhaps even survival – of this and future generations. For example, climate change caused by human activity may cause, and could well already be causing, a host of major and potentially lethal problems such as 'natural' disasters and decreased



A well-meaning protest - but what about the science? Reproduced from [25]

crop yield in some areas [17]. Destruction of natural habitats can damage eco-systems that are useful to humanity, and it also prevents future generations from enjoying the world's natural beauty. This seems to be compelling reason enough for making environmental protection our highest priority.

However, there is also a tendency within the environmental movement, and elsewhere, to imply that 'Nature' as an actual entity is working for the good of humanity and is somehow hurt when we emit greenhouse gases, destroy rainforests, or pollute rivers. People are thus led to the conclusion that 'natural' things must be inherently better than 'artificial' things. This attitude is particularly prevalent in relation to food. For example, 'organic' farming is often praised as being more 'natural' than conventional farming [18]. This is surely true for certain definitions of 'natural'. However, whether 'natural' agriculture (an oxymoron in itself!) is desirable is questionable. Humans have spent

thousands of years breeding plants so that they deviate from their natural state as much as possible. This was necessary because plants that existed before the invention of agriculture generally needed to be poisonous or innutritious to ensure their survival.

It at first may appear logical to suppose that returning

## “ The blame tends to be placed on large organisations rather than individuals ”

to a ‘natural’ way of living would sort out our environmental problems – after all, wasn’t it non-natural human activity that got us into this mess? Indeed, if all humans were to instantly cease to exist, man-made green-house gas emissions and deforestation would plummet. It is also true that humans have lived ‘naturally’ for thousands of years, and throughout this time there have been no global man-made environmental crises. However, we should not forget that this ‘natural’ lifestyle led to high rates of disease and malnutrition, even within the relatively small global population at that time. Today’s population needs technological solutions if we are to continue to survive in a sustainable manner without widespread suffering.

Another issue is that of responsibility and blame. While green charities are good at encouraging the public to make small lifestyle changes to reduce their carbon footprint, they have also developed the theme that the main culprits are large organisations and governments. In fact, the ‘what you can do’ section of the Greenpeace website contains only suggestions of donations, fundraising and campaigning, outlining possible measures to directly reduce environmental impact elsewhere on the website. Some potentially effective personal choices, such as eating less meat and dairy, or having fewer children are very rarely mentioned by the mainstream environmental movement as a whole [19-21]. These measures may seem less appealing to the public than merely turning

off light switches and recycling, but they deserve a mention by any organisation committed to environmental protection. Similarly, public opinion cannot be logically used as a measure for assessing the usefulness or safety of an idea (as in “consumers have rejected GM [genetically modified] foods outright”) [22]. This is particularly fallacious when it is the campaigning of that same charity that has partially caused this trend in public opinion.

Looking through the websites of leading environmental charities, we can see that the blame for environmental problems tends to be placed on large organisations rather than the individuals consuming their products (“But still the aviation industry wants more”) [23]. It is, of course, important that all organisations are made to take responsibility for the environmental consequences of their activities. However, this can only happen if individuals stop living in a way that supports these activities – for example by frequently using aeroplanes. In fact, the opposition to GM mentioned above stems partly from the fact that it is seen to benefit large ‘biotech companies’ – this is despite Greenpeace’s claims to “have no permanent allies or adversaries” [22,14]. The environmental movement should also consider that a few large organisations have a greater potential for efficiency than many small organisations, and also have a greater incentive to develop environmentally sound policies, as they are always in the public eye.

For any organisation - and in particular any environmental charity - to be useful in the struggle to maintain a safe and sustainable environment, it must avoid the ‘you are wrong and we are right’ approach by forming policies based on relevant evidence, rather than popularity considerations. It is easy to become angry or sentimental about our environment and planet, but the threats we face must be understood and countered through scientific reasoning. ■

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