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Rootes, Christopher (2013) The environmental movement in Great Britain. In: Environmental Movements around the world: Shades of Green in Politics and Culture. Praeger, Santa Barbara CA, Denver CO and Oxford. ISBN 9780313393532.

### DOI

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# The environmental movement in Great Britain<sup>1</sup>

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[Pre-publication (author accepted) version of chapter published in *Environmental Movements around the world: Shades of Green in Politics and Culture* (Edited by Timothy Doyle and Sherilyn MacGregor), Santa Barbara CA, Denver CO and Oxford: Praeger, Volume 2. Pp. 45-67. (2014). ISBN: 9780313393532]

## **Introduction**

Great Britain comprises the greater part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Stretching almost 1,000 km (600 miles) from south to north, and ranging in width from less than 100 km (60 miles) to some 400km (250 miles) at its widest point, Great Britain lies just north of France and extends through almost 10 degrees of latitude north from 50 degrees North. Once a peninsula attached to the European mainland, the island was created by the rising sea levels that followed the end of the last Ice Age. Topographically, it ranges from mountains of volcanic origin in the west to submergent coastlines in the plains of the east and chalk downlands in the south. Whilst Scotland in the North and Wales in the west are mountainous or hilly, most of England, to the south and east, consists of rolling hills and plains of low elevation. Despite its high latitude, Britain enjoys a cool temperate climate, with winter temperatures moderated and mostly held above freezing by the Gulf Stream, which carries warm water north from tropical latitudes. The result is that more than a quarter of the land area is arable.

With over 60 million people living in an area of 230,000 square km (89,000 square miles), Britain is one of the most densely populated countries in Europe, with population densities much greater in the south-east than in the north and west. Britain is the most urbanized major country in Europe, with over 90% of its population living in towns and cities. Yet London, with over 8 million people (and nearly 14 million in the greater London conurbation), is by far the largest city, and less than 10% of Britain's land area is urbanised.

Constitutionally, the United Kingdom is a hybrid state, with devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland enjoying variable but increasing degrees of legislative autonomy from the central state. There is, however, no devolved legislature for England, which has 84% of the UK population, compared with Scotland 8%, Wales 5% and Northern Ireland 3%. An historically large measure of devolution to local government in England has during the past 60 years been steadily eroded to the point where local government, with severely limited powers to raise revenues, is mainly responsible for the local implementation of decisions made by central government.

Britain was the birthplace of the industrial revolution, and both its demographics and its population's relationship with the natural environment have been shaped by industrialism. The first and most general effect of industrialization was rapid urbanization. Most markedly in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, small market centres such as Manchester and Sheffield grew rapidly into densely populated and seriously polluted industrial towns. London, until the 18<sup>th</sup> century a series of barely connected villages surrounding a small urban core, consolidated into a continuous urban settlement that pressed hard upon the still rural common land within and around it.

### **Origins and development of environmentalism**

It is not surprising, then, that Britain should have given rise to the first environmental conservation organizations or that they should have focused upon the conflicts between the pressures of urbanization, the interests of the increasingly urban population, and the customary rights of rural people. From the final decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Romantic poets, appalled by the visible impact of coalmines and factories upon the environment, celebrated natural landscapes. Soon concerns about pollution of air and water excited protests, reformers lobbied for protective legislation, civic initiatives created urban parks, and, in what was to become a hallmark of British attitudes to the environment, the countryside was idealized as a counterpoint to the squalor of the new industrial towns.

Also beginning in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, great voyages of exploration embraced scientific investigation and enhanced interest in understanding the natural world. Even before the development of professionalized science, amateurs formed nature study groups and, later, influential conservation organizations. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century what might, in retrospect, be called a conservation movement existed, but it was an elite rather than a mass movement that saw legislation as the means by which nature might be protected and whose successes were principally due to the influence of its socially privileged supporters.<sup>2</sup>

For centuries, local people had been struggling against landowners to keep open public footpaths and customary rights of way threatened by the increasing enclosure of what had been common land. Most of these campaigns remained local, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century urban elites began to be interested. Among the first environmental NGOs (ENGOS) to emerge in England was the Commons Preservation Society (1865), created to guarantee protection of public access to open land, and chiefly responsible for the preservation of the great London commons that survive to this day.

Campaigns to protect wildlife began early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and extended before the end of the century to efforts to preserve beautiful landscapes. The three largest ENGOS today all date from the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) (1889) grew out of the campaign against the trade in feathers for ladies' fashion. The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty (NT) (1895) grew out of the Lake District

Defence Society and the Commons Preservation Society. A 1907 act of parliament empowered it to declare its property inalienable and, by giving it protection from compulsory purchase, encouraged landowners to donate property to it. The forerunner of the present Royal Society for Wildlife Trusts, the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves (1912), listed areas deserving protection and raised money to purchase sites of special interest. Soon the RSPB and the newly formed regional wildlife trusts were acquiring land and managing nature reserves.<sup>3</sup>

The great social changes precipitated in Britain by the 1914-18 war were reflected in the character and social bases of environmental concern. Pre-war ENGOs were mainly started by resourceful, socially and politically well-connected individuals who sought royal or aristocratic patronage. After the war, new groups were formed upon different social bases. The Ramblers' Association demanded the restoration of the ancient rights of the public to roam the countryside, combined it with radical politics, and recruited many of its members from the working class.

While the Ramblers supported the demands of an increasingly urbanized population for access to the countryside, another new organization, the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE), aimed to protect the countryside from unplanned urbanization resulting from the massive increase in house building, extension of urban railways, and proliferation of automobiles. Perhaps the most influential of all English ENGOs during the 20th century, with sister organizations in Scotland and Wales, CPRE was established as an umbrella organization representing 40 NGOs including the National Trust, the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Royal Automobile Club, the County Council Association, the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings and the Central Landowners Association. Funded by architects and planners, it lobbied decisionmakers for the extension of land-use planning to the countryside, and the designation of protected areas, including national parks. Its leaders were middle class professionals and 'pillars of society'<sup>4</sup>, and CPRE's pressure for comprehensive landuse planning quickly resulted in the first of a series of Town and Country Planning Acts (1932). The 1939-1945 war marked a hiatus in the development of environmental protection, but CPRE's initial goals were fully achieved when the post-war Labour government passed the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949).

The 1950s in Britain were years of continuing economic austerity, but gradually interests in natural history were revived and popularized by BBC television nature documentaries and the attractive guidebooks made possible by the coming of cheap, high-quality colour reproduction. New, specialized nature protection organizations were established, along with the Conservation Corps (now the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers – BTCV), which aimed to engage young people in practical conservation work.

The development that both marks the culmination of this period of development and foreshadows later innovations was the formation in 1961 of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). Like the early nature conservation organizations, WWF

was an elite initiative designed to raise funds for wildlife conservation, enjoyed royal patronage, and relied on wealthy sponsors for initial funding. But, like the new ENGOs that were to emerge a decade later, it appealed to the public through the mass media. WWF-UK was launched by an appeal for funds through the pages of a mass-market newspaper (the *Daily Mirror*) and it was, if only nominally, a mass membership organization from the beginning.

Another important development was the increasingly formalized networking between environmental NGOs. Cooperation and division of labour, rather than competition, had always characterized British environmental organizations<sup>5</sup>, but their increasing number and recognition of the needs to integrate their various concerns stimulated the formation of a Committee (later Council) for Environmental Conservation (CoEnCo) in 1969.

By the end of the 1960s, Britain had a well-developed conservation movement that satisfied most of the criteria of a social movement<sup>6</sup>: there was a network of actors, including individuals and informal groups as well as organizations, and it was engaged in collective action in pursuit of shared concerns. However, unlike the archetypical social movement, it was rarely overtly in conflict with government. On the contrary, as the elite connections and patronage of many ENGOs suggest, its collective action almost always took the form not of public protest but of polite lobbying of generally sympathetic and accessible civil servants and government ministers.

When environmental concerns in Britain first began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to take organizational form, concerns to defend human interests and promote human wellbeing were often combined with the protection of the natural environment. Perhaps because the 20<sup>th</sup> century development of the welfare state had successfully addressed the former, by the 1960s the conservation movement had become more strictly focused upon the protection of nature. But change was in the air.

### **The rise of the modern environmental movement**

Awareness of the environmental impacts of industrialism increased gradually from the 1950s onward. The great London smog of 1952, which killed thousands, led to the passage of legislation to protect urban air quality, and the wreck of the oil tanker, *Torrey Canyon*, in the English Channel in 1967 highlighted the risks to the marine and coastal environments. Other concerns were imported. Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, which spotlighted the threat that indiscriminate use of insecticides posed to birdlife in the US, was published in a UK edition and chimed with the increasing concerns of the RSPB about non-natural bird deaths in Britain.

Britain was not immune from the stirrings of environmental concern elsewhere, nor from the social, intellectual and political ferment of a period in which the constraints of post-war austerity were challenged and in which anti-war activism and student protests popularized a more participatory alternative to representative democratic politics.<sup>7</sup> At first, environmental politics was only

lightly touched by the ferment, but it provided fertile ground for another transatlantic import – Friends of the Earth (FoE).

FoE was established in 1969 by Bill Brower, the former director of the leading US nature preservation organization, the Sierra Club. Brower believed that to meet emerging environmental challenges, an environmental organization needed to embrace a broader spectrum of environmental issues than nature protection, and to be transnational in order to address environmental problems that overflowed national borders. After establishing FoE in the US, Brower travelled to Europe to encourage the formation of affiliated organizations, and in London was introduced to student activists who had previously failed to interest the National Union of Students in environmental issues. Although Brower envisaged FoE as an international organization with subordinate national branches, he was persuaded to accept the formation in 1970 of an autonomous FoE organization in Britain.

FoE attracted little attention until 1971 when it organized a ‘bottle drop’ on the pavement outside Schweppes’ London headquarters to protest the drinks manufacturer’s decision to switch to non-returnable bottles.<sup>8</sup> This ‘media stunt’ provided impressive photographs for the Sunday papers and FoE was deluged with calls from people wanting to become involved. To accommodate them, local FoE groups were set up, and by 1973 there were over 70. Meanwhile, the national office prepared briefings for the 1972 Stockholm UN Conference on the Human Environment. Even at this early stage, FoE was associated with concerns about global environmental justice and inequalities.

Determined to be free to take politically controversial positions, and to avoid the restrictions upon political action by registered charities, its founders incorporated FoE in England as a limited company. But in 1976, because charities enjoyed tax privileges, FoE set up a parallel fund-raising and research organization registered as a charity.

FoE was generally considered the vanguard of the new environmentalism, sharply distinct from the nature conservation organizations that preceded it, but there were important continuities. FoE insisted on the scientific basis of its claims, and several of its national activists were science graduates. Thematically, there were continuities: FoE was the first ENGO in the UK to campaign for whales, endangered species and tropical rainforests, and against acid rain, ozone depletion and climate change.<sup>9</sup> In fact, FoE was more novel in the *style* of its actions than in the substance of its concerns. Much of FoE’s activity was assembling, printing and distributing information, but it also deliberately exploited the media attention attracted by its occasional public direct action. The conservation establishment disapproved of such ‘improper’ publicity-seeking<sup>10</sup>, but FoE was committed to action that was not only non-violent but also legal, and so campaigned within the system. Thus FoE expended much energy in making representations at the inquiry into the Windscale nuclear reprocessing plant. Critics considered this to be naïve, and when the 1978 inquiry report dismissed FoE’s arguments, and FoE’s long campaign against nuclear energy appeared to have failed, many supporters were disillusioned.<sup>11</sup>

By then, however, some frustrated FoE members and supporters, who wanted to be more directly active, had been inspired by the actions of Greenpeace in North America. In 1977 they set up a British branch of Greenpeace and immediately embraced the strategy of media-friendly calculated law-breaking that FoE had avoided. Thus as FoE patiently made an evidence-based case against nuclear reprocessing, Greenpeace activists blocked the pipes through which the nuclear power station discharged wastewater into the Irish Sea.

Thus it was Greenpeace, with its commitment to 'bearing witness' and non-violent direct action (NVDA) that, more than FoE, marked a step change in the development of environmental activism in Britain. Greenpeace's successes in exploiting media coverage of its actions to arouse public opinion and to put pressure on governments and, especially, corporations encouraged others to rethink their attitudes to mass media and inspired a subsequent generation of activists to adopt direct action. Its path in the UK was not all plain sailing, however. FoE was concerned with 'getting the science right', but Greenpeace prioritized action, sometimes recklessly made claims it could not back up with scientific evidence, and so was several times forced to admit embarrassing mistakes. When Greenpeace UK encountered financial problems due to mismanagement, Greenpeace International, concerned about the brand image, intervened and restructured the organization. By 1984, the leadership, which was not accountable to Greenpeace's rapidly growing numbers of supporters, closely managed and coordinated all campaigns. As a result, Greenpeace became more cautious and attentive to detail in its use of evidence in its campaigns and public statements, and Greenpeace, which, like FoE, was incorporated as a limited company, established a parallel charitable trust to support scientific research and education.

In less than a decade, Greenpeace had developed from a small group of risk-taking direct activists into a formal, bureaucratically organized NGO. In fact, despite the rhetoric of political participation so much associated with new social movement politics from the late 1960s, the founders of neither FoE nor Greenpeace envisaged them as democratically accountable mass membership organizations. Instead, they saw them as vehicles for uninhibited campaigning by committed environmental activists, and they privileged campaigning effectiveness over democratic participation. But whereas Greenpeace was structured to ensure the autonomy of its leadership and was never a mass membership organization, FoE established a national membership system and became a relatively decentralized organization in which grassroots activists have a constitutionally recognized role.

FoE became a grassroots, membership organization by accident. In 1980 its 250 local groups demanded greater say in management and campaign strategy, and in 1981, against a background of financial difficulties, an alliance of national office staff and local groups successfully challenged the national leadership.<sup>12</sup> The result was that, even as it grew in size and was organized into specialized campaign departments, FoE became more decentralized and participatory.

While FoE and Greenpeace were becoming the public face of environmentalism, other new and quite different organizations were being formed. The Woodland Trust was a conventional organization both in its form of organization and in the way it raised funds. Neither the Woodland Trust nor another 1970s newcomer, Sustrans, best known for its promotion of cycle paths, was troubled by accountability to its supporters.

If the 1970s was the decade of new beginnings, for ENGOs the 1980s was a decade of rapid growth. Membership of the largest and longest established organizations, the National Trust and RSPB, grew fourfold between 1971 and 1981, and doubled again between 1981 and 1991. But the most spectacular growth was in the new campaigning organizations, FoE and Greenpeace; although they remained small by comparison with older conservation organizations, from the 1980s, when they began to use direct mailing techniques, the numbers of their supporters surged.

Both FoE and Greenpeace campaigned for protection of the natural environment, but conservation organizations were wary of alienating socially and politically conservative supporters. Nevertheless, impressed by the rise of FoE and Greenpeace, they also learned the value of high profile public campaigns. So, despite conservation organizations' lingering reservations about their campaign methods, both FoE and Greenpeace were included in new attempt to coordinate the activities of environmental NGOs. Thus in 1980 ENGOs as diverse as RSPB, RSNC, WWF, FoE and Greenpeace joined to form Wildlife Link, which, with direct access to civil servants and regular meetings with ministers, greatly increased the political influence of ENGOs.

### **The 1990s: consolidation and challenge**

The 1980s was a decade of remarkable organizational innovation: more than one-third of the ENGOs that existed in 2000 were established in the 1980s.<sup>13</sup> After 1989, the rates of growth of existing ENGOs slowed, and relatively fewer new ones were formed. FoE and Greenpeace grew little if at all in numbers of supporters or income, but several more strictly conservation-oriented ENGOs grew strongly. At first glance, it appeared that the public's growing concern with the environment was being channelled into politically uncontroversial conservation organizations rather than outspoken campaigners.

However, beginning in 1991, a new generation of radical environmental campaigners emerged, and the most remarkable decade of environmental protest in Britain had begun. But while Greenpeace and, especially, FoE never disappeared from dispatches, most of the reported protest was the work of others.<sup>14</sup> Many protests were mounted by local groups, and some by the likes of Earth First! and its urban offshoot, Reclaim the Streets. These were not formal organizations so much as banners under which younger activists, to whom FoE and Greenpeace appeared timid and bureaucratic, took direct action commensurate with what they believed to be the urgency of environmental issues. They were just as concerned as established ENGOs with protecting



nature, but were more radically critical of capitalism and consumerism. Earth First!'s early actions targeted a nuclear power station and the importers of rainforest timber, but soon settled to a focus upon protests against the Thatcher government's massive roadbuilding programme.<sup>15</sup>

Committed to grassroots participation in direct action, these 'disorganizations' deliberately avoided establishing formal organizations that might sap the energies of activists and be exposed to legal sanctions. Thus they learned from the experiences of FoE and Greenpeace, which, as they became ENGOs rather than simply activist groups, became vulnerable to litigation. FoE played an important role in the campaign to obstruct the construction of the M3 motorway through the ancient and highly valued Twyford Down but, to the great irritation of direct activists, FoE was forced to withdraw when it was served with a legal injunction. Similarly, threats of legal action to seize its assets later forced Greenpeace to cease disruption of BP's oil exploration in the North Sea.

It is tempting to see the rise of the new radical environmentalism as a reaction against the institutionalization of the previous generation of new environmental activists. Certainly, to the new activists of the 1990s, FoE and Greenpeace appeared to be bureaucratic organizations governed and largely staffed by an older generation made cautious by experience and by having something to lose. Just as the first Greenpeace activists in Britain had been frustrated by FoE's preoccupation with representations within established institutionalized processes, Earth First! activists insisted on prioritizing the direct action for which their youth better suited them than the lobbying and science-based campaigning for which they were ill-qualified. But more important than any frustration they might have endured in FoE and Greenpeace, of which few can have had first-hand experience, was the fact that these younger activists were the products of their own more activist times.

The new informal networks formed at a time when perceptions of activism and themes of protest were strongly influenced by the campaign against another deeply unpopular policy of the Thatcher government – the poll tax. The poll tax (officially, 'community charge') was a flat rate per capita tax introduced in Scotland in 1989 and in England in 1990 to replace property-based local taxation. The introduction of the poll tax provoked the most widespread outbreak of civil disobedience in Britain during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and before the end of 1990 the proponents of the tax, including Prime Minister Thatcher, had been forced from office, and the tax was abandoned. The apparent success of the campaign against the poll tax was widely interpreted as evidence of the efficacy of direct action, served as an example to activists, and influenced the movements and campaigns that came after it.<sup>16</sup>

Even anti-roads protesters, some of who were radically anti-capitalist, did not act in complete isolation from other environmental groups. ALARM UK, a coalition orchestrated by Transport 2000, a lobby group that originated in the railworkers' unions and had links with environmental NGOs, provided a national support network for anti-roads protesters. Moreover, even after it was forced to

retreat from Twyford Down, FoE, along with other environmental NGOs such as WWF, gave advice and material support to anti-roads protesters.

The wave of environmental protest that began to rise in 1991 reached a crescendo in 1995 when protests against road-building overlapped with others against the export of live animals, hunting with dogs, and Greenpeace-organized protests against French nuclear weapons tests in the South Pacific and the Shell oil company's operations in Nigeria and the North Sea. Protest subsided in 1996 when the Conservative government finally abandoned a road-building programme made unpopular and more expensive by the direct action campaign against it, ebbed in 1997 when the election of a more environment-friendly Labour government was widely expected, and briefly rose again in 1998, when protesters against field trials of genetically modified crops and against building on greenfield sites tested the Labour government's commitment to its declared green principles.

Although the new environmental radicals have sometimes been represented as marking a shift from a merely reformist environmentalism to a more fundamentally principled ecologism, the differences between them were less those of principle, which Earth First! gatherings debated at length but which were perhaps inevitably compromised in practice, than of the forms of action that each adopted. Their actions were, in practice, less competitive than complementary. Just as the popularity and campaigning successes of FoE and Greenpeace had enhanced older ENGOs' ability to lobby successfully, so the rise of the new environmental radicals provided ENGOs with increased political leverage.<sup>17</sup> In a clear demonstration of the 'radical flank' effect, the polite representations of 'reasonable' ENGOs became more visible and audible in the corridors of power when there were radical activists outside, loudly demanding action.

By the mid-1990s, British ENGOs were responding to the new international agenda that emerged at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (UNCED). To improve coordination in the UNCED process, ENGOs increased cooperation with aid, trade and humanitarian organizations such as Oxfam. After Rio, a broadly inclusive Real World Coalition attempted to promote sustainable development with an agenda focused on social justice. This, however, was a step too far (or too soon) for ENGOs such as RSPB, CPRE, the Wildlife Trusts and Greenpeace and they withdrew before its formal launch in 1996.<sup>18</sup> Thus while WWF and FoE became increasingly concerned with social justice issues<sup>19</sup>, others such as RSPB and CPRE, fearing they were getting too far ahead of their supporters, reverted to narrower nature protection agendas.

### **The environmental movement at the turn of the millennium**

Already in 1991 it was claimed that Britain had 'the oldest, strongest, best-organized and most widely supported environmental lobby in the world'.<sup>20</sup> By 1999, almost 20 per cent of Britons claimed to be members of one or more environmental organizations<sup>21</sup>, and in 2000 the combined membership of the eleven major ENGOs listed in the official statistical digest, *Social Trends*, was 5.5

million. Most – and all the largest of them – were conservation organizations; the campaigning organizations, FoE and Greenpeace, had fewer members or supporting donors than at the beginning of the decade.<sup>22</sup> Although it in no way diminishes their significance as campaigners, it is noteworthy that neither then nor later was FoE or Greenpeace ranked among the top ten ENGOs in terms of income, staff numbers, or grant income from private foundations and trusts.<sup>23</sup>

Few countries boast a higher per capita density of membership of ENGOs, and the organizational complexity and diversity of British environmentalism is remarkable.<sup>24</sup> Considering only a dozen of the most prominent and / or best-funded ENGOs, some (notably the NT and RSPB) devote most of their resources to the acquisition and preservation of properties and reserves, and only rarely campaign. Some (notably WWF) raise funds and promote environmental education in Britain but conduct most of their practical work abroad. Others (such as FoE, Greenpeace and CPRE) are principally campaigning organizations. Some are affiliates of transnational ENGOs, others are not. Some (including FoE and CPRE) have hundreds of largely autonomous local groups, others (notably Greenpeace) have local groups restricted to activities approved by the national organization; others have no local groups at all. Some actively encourage local groups to campaign, others restrict them to providing volunteer labour for practical conservation work. Some are membership organizations in which members can hold officers to account, some have members but allow them no effective role in governance, and others have no formal mass membership at all. Some employ many staff and organize volunteers for practical conservation, others employ only core professional staff and intermittently mobilize supporters in public campaigns. Some (including WWF and BTCV) depend considerably upon government grants or corporate donations; others (notably Greenpeace) refuse them altogether. Some are registered charities; others have charitable status only for subsidiary activities.

If environmental movements are networks of actors, including organizations of varying degrees of formality<sup>25</sup>, they cannot simply be reduced to those organizations. Nevertheless, because organizations are generally the most visible and stable constituents of movements, the nature and frequency of the network links between them give us important insights into the character of the movement.

The only systematic survey of British ENGOs in the 1980s concluded that organizations tended to have network links either with a few 'core' organizations, or with others in their own thematic sector.<sup>26</sup> That, however, was before the new campaigning organizations became established and influential. When in 1999-2000, we conducted a survey of 144 national ENGOs identified from the database, *Who's Who in the Environment? (WWE?)*<sup>27</sup>, it was FoE that appeared most central to the network, followed by WWF, Greenpeace, Wildlife and Countryside Link, CPRE and RSPB, with secondary networks linking ENGOs specializing in 'organic' and 'transport' issues.<sup>28</sup> Of the six organizations that Lowe and Goyder identified as the core of the movement – CPRE, FoE, RSPB, the National Trust, CoEnCo and the Civic Trust – only the first three appeared to be at or near the core of the network in 2000; the National Trust appeared marginal,

and the latter two did not appear at all. Greenpeace, which appeared marginal in the early 1980s, and WWF, which was then identified as a non-core species protection organization, have become more central to the network than RSPB and CPRE.

Nature protection is still the predominant concern of most ENGOs, most of which remain niche players with specialized functions and narrow thematic concerns. Whilst there are specialized networks of conservation NGOs, there are links between them and the larger conservation NGOs and, through them, with the campaigning ENGO, FoE. Large ENGOs such as the National Trust and the Wildlife Trusts appear marginal to the network, perhaps because so much of their work is focused on the management of their properties. The umbrella group, Wildlife and Countryside Link, has grown to embrace 38 ENGOs (including both FoE and Greenpeace as well as the National Trust and the Wildlife Trusts), and informal, ad hoc and bilateral cooperation has increased. Collaborative campaigns are common, and increasingly extend beyond nature protection to issues of human wellbeing. It is significant that FoE, despite being relatively small, should appear central to an environmental network in which most NGOs are primarily concerned with nature conservation, because FoE not only has an exceptionally broad agenda, a grassroots base and strong international links, but has also gone furthest to incorporate social justice as a core concern.

### **The decline of protest?**

In his campaign to rehabilitate the Labour Party after its shock defeat in 1992, Tony Blair deliberately reached out to environmental NGOs in order to appeal to a section of the electorate to which previous Labour leaders had been indifferent or even outright hostile. Thus in 1997 Labour assumed office promising to put the environment at the centre of government. It created, in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) what the outgoing Conservative Environment minister conceded was the world's most powerful environment department, and it placed the Deputy Prime Minister in charge. Thereafter, although the Blair Labour government often disappointed environmentalists, it determinedly avoided antagonizing them, and this was a major factor leading to the lower profile of environmental protest after 1998. Another, however, was the exhaustion of the activists whose intense commitment had sustained the most radical forms of ecological direct action during the 1990s. This was especially so for the very small numbers who engaged in covert actions sabotaging property ('ecotage'); obliged to form secretive cells for their own protection, when burnout and economic necessity forced their retirement from action, they had not recruited or trained successors.<sup>29</sup>

A decline in highly visible environmental protest should not, however, be interpreted as evidence of any decline in the vigour of the British environmental movement. In the absence of any database that might facilitate systematic time-series analysis of their incidence, it is not possible to determine authoritatively whether the numbers of local environmental protests have declined or, indeed,

increased. Nevertheless, local environmental protests against a wide variety of proposed changes in land use continued under the Labour government and into the period of protracted economic depression that has followed it. Insofar as many of these local protests are not well networked either with ENGOs or with environmental protests in other localities, they are only potentially part of the environmental movement, but some are clearly networked.<sup>30</sup> Local campaigns against airport expansion, which began in isolation, have since 2000 been networked by the umbrella organization, Airport Watch, whose members include several of the more important ENGOs. A national network of anti-incinerator campaign groups, UKWIN, was established in 2007 with assistance from FoE<sup>31</sup>, and claims more than 80 active campaign groups among its members.<sup>32</sup> Both of these networks, as well as the Campaign for Better Transport's assistance to local groups opposing new road schemes, have received funding from a private philanthropic foundation, the Manuka Club, which explicitly 'supports networks seeking to build grass roots concern into a fully fledged social movement'.<sup>33</sup> Thus local environmental protests not only persist but are increasingly effectively networked.

The networking of local environmental activism has not been at the expense of national ENGOs, which, during the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, mostly experienced continued if generally modest growth. New ENGOs continued to be formed, but the rate of organizational innovation slowed. Indeed, since 2000, the more striking changes have been in the character of ENGOs than in their numbers or the numbers of their members and supporters. Most notably, the tactical repertoires and issue agendas of even some of the oldest and most institutionalized ENGOs have broadened. Thus CPRE, often considered the most 'establishment' of the major ENGOs, in 2003 changed its name – from the 'Council for the Protection of Rural England' to the 'Campaign to Protect Rural England' – and thereby signaled a shift in its tactics from discreet lobbying to more active public campaigning.

Even RSPB, whose main activity remains practical measures to protect wild birds and their habitat, has broadened both its agenda – to campaign for reform of agriculture and even for solar power<sup>34</sup> – and its repertoire of tactics. From the late 1970s onward, RSPB, concerned about the increasing loss of wildlife habitat, not only in Britain but along birds' migration routes through Europe and Africa, began to address governments more actively and to transform itself from a national bird protection organization into one concerned with global environmental change, albeit still with a sharp focus upon birds. It strengthened its links with other ENGOs, nationally and internationally, especially after 1992 when it played a key role in forming Birdlife International. Increasingly willing to mobilize its members, RSPB raised over 300,000 objections against a proposed airport adjoining wetlands at Cliffe in Kent in 2002, bussed 1,500 members to the 2006 Stop Climate Chaos rally in London, and was a prominent contributor to the 2009 climate march (see below).

Even more remarkable changes occurred over the same period at WWF, which, from being a small, science-led fundraising organization focused on endangered

iconic species and habitat destruction, became a policy-oriented and politically engaged internationalist ENGO consciously attempting to balance the protection of threatened ecosystems with meeting the economic needs of the people who live in and around them. Overcoming its leaders' nervousness about alienating supporters whom it feared (wrongly) to be only narrowly interested in nature protection, after Rio WWF worked to form a common sustainable development agenda with aid and development and environment NGOs. As WWF came to identify poverty, overconsumption and climate change as the greatest threats to the environment, its spending grew on education, information and regeneration projects to benefit people as well as the environment, while species protection shrank to account for less than one-sixth of its budget.<sup>35</sup> This brought WWF closer to FoE. Always international in its understanding of environmental issues, FoE, influenced by its partners in FoE International, became increasingly involved in campaigns to promote human rights and economic development in the global South, and grew its links with aid and development charities and organized labour.

These are simply the most striking examples of the continuing trend among Britain's ENGOs toward the adoption of a transnational agenda in which the environment cannot be isolated from a wider range of human concerns.<sup>36</sup> ENGOs, including WWF, RSPB, FoE and Greenpeace, signed up to Make Poverty History and/or the Trade Justice Movement<sup>37</sup> and when the Stop Climate Chaos (SCC) coalition was launched in 2005 it included the major aid and development charities as well as most larger ENGOs.

It has been suggested that conservation organizations are not part of the 'green movement'.<sup>38</sup> However, as we have seen, the distinction between them and other environmental groups and NGOs is often less one of principles or interests than of forms of action, and even these have been more complementary than in conflict one with another. Given the variety of ways in which many conservation NGOs and their more activist successors are linked by ties of information sharing, common membership of umbrella organizations, and, increasingly, participation in joint campaigns, it makes more sense to draw the boundaries of the environmental movement widely rather than narrowly.

### **Climate change, climate justice**

During the first decade of the new century, climate change emerged as the leading, unifying issue for the British environmental movement. Although both FoE and Greenpeace commissioned reports on climate change in the late 1980s, neither made it a campaign priority. Indeed, climate change was an issue raised by concerned scientists rather than ENGOs, and it was one to which UK government agencies were already responding. Thus, when ENGOs did address climate change, they rode a wave that was already swelling. For the most part, even FoE and Greenpeace left campaigning on climate change to the umbrella organization, Climate Action Network, and there were no reports in the national print media of the relatively few, generally small climate protests that were mounted in Britain before 2000.<sup>39</sup>

That changed after the 2000 UN climate conference (COP6), at which the US, after failing to secure EU acceptance of the principle that forests could be treated as carbon sinks to offset greenhouse gas emissions, withdrew from the Kyoto process. FoE and Greenpeace, having protested at COP6, realized the need to campaign more directly on climate change, but new, more activist initiatives were the most immediately visible result.

Rising Tide, a grassroots network committed to building a movement against climate change, was formed out of the ad hoc coalition that protested at COP6. It drew on the activist milieu associated with Earth First! and was soon reproduced in the US and Australia, but in England it never grew to more than 15 local groups. Much more visibly, the Campaign against Climate Change (CCC) was formed and from 2001 began organizing demonstrations. These were small at first, but in 2005 attracted 10,000 people in London and 400 in Edinburgh, and were repeated at least annually. Although CCC kept the flag of climate protest flying, its collaboration with the Stop Climate Chaos (SCC) coalition attracted much larger numbers.

SCC was formed in an attempt to raise the profile of climate change in the way that Make Poverty History had done for fair trade and poverty reduction in the global South. Its I-Count campaign persuaded 200,000 people to pledge to reduce their carbon emissions, and ended after a march of 30,000 people in a rally in London's Trafalgar Square in November 2006. Although a majority of participants in the march recognized climate change as a key issue of global justice, they were more often affiliated with ENGOs than with aid, trade and development NGOs (Saunders 2008). This was the biggest environmental demonstration in Britain to that date, but it was small compared with the pro-hunting Countryside marches of 2002 and 2004, and the protest against the Iraq war in February 2003, or even the 2005 Make Poverty History march in Edinburgh.

SCC's I-Count campaign supported FoE 'Big Ask' for the adoption by parliament of a Climate Change Act legally obliging the government to secure an 80% reduction in the UK's greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. FoE's draft Bill was introduced with cross-party support, quickly endorsed by a majority of MPs, adopted by the Labour government, and finally strengthened to include annual targets and aviation and shipping emissions. The campaign was a remarkable success, but it was achieved almost wholly by conventional means, some 200,000 people contacting MPs in person, by letter or via an on-line petition. Thus the campaign was a striking example of orchestrated conventional lobbying that persuaded MPs to pressure government to take effective action in pursuit of its own declared policy ambitions. Neither in its tactics nor in its aims did it much resemble past social movement mobilizations.<sup>40</sup>

It did not, however, mark the end of protest on climate change. After 2006, CCC continued to organize marches and rallies but they attracted smaller numbers until in December 2009, in the build-up to the Copenhagen COP15 summit, SCC and CCC together marshalled more than 40,000 people through the streets of

London. This was not only Britain's largest ever environmental demonstration, but it was also inclusive, attracting members and supporters of the major aid charities and ENGOs as well as a wide variety of local groups and initiatives and even such strangers to protest as the Wildlife Trusts.<sup>41</sup>

In the meantime, a remarkable new mode of action emerged in the shape of the Camp for Climate Action. A mixture of information exchange, education, training, practical example, prefigurative utopia and protest, the Climate Camps were designed to facilitate direct action against climate change, 'but also to be an exemplar of sustainable living and a site for alternative education'.<sup>42</sup> They were deliberately temporary, did not attempt to establish a permanent organization, and were notable for their openness and tolerance of difference.<sup>43</sup> Visitors were welcomed, and attempts were made to involve neighboring communities; many who participated in discussions at the Camps did not participate in the associated protests, and only a minority was involved in direct action.

The first Climate Camp, in 2006 at Drax, the largest coal-burning power station in Europe, was followed in 2007 by a second at London's Heathrow airport, and in 2008 by a third at Kingsnorth in Kent, where it was proposed to build a new coal-fired power station on the site of an existing one. The Climate Camps gathered only a few hundred participants in 2006, and probably no more than 2,000 in 2007 and 2008, but they attracted substantial media attention to coal-burning and aviation, and highlighted contradictions between the government's rhetorical commitments and its failure to act on the largest and fastest rising contributors to carbon emissions. They were assisted in this by characteristically spectacular protests, at power stations, at airports and even on the roof of the Houses of Parliament, by Greenpeace and the campaign group, Plane Stupid. The distinctively new forms of action were thus supported by the leading professionalized protest organization<sup>44</sup> of the previous two decades.

At local level, the rise of climate change as the most prominent environmental issue made many local campaigns against airport expansion, roadbuilding and landuse changes easier to network, integrated them into the new dominant environmental discourse, and stimulated the development of new groups and networks, of which Transition Towns and the Greening Campaign are the most widespread.<sup>45</sup> The latter, however, are not closely linked to ENGOs or other environmental networks. Indeed, in their orientation toward practical action rather than contentious politics, they are not so much new forms of environmental activism as community-based alternatives to political action.

In some ways, climate change has presented the environmental movement with more challenges than opportunities. The public focus on climate change has overshadowed issues such as biodiversity or ground-level air pollution that are no less important to many ENGOs. Although climate change has concentrated attention on energy issues and put the burning of coal to generate electricity in question as never before, the search for alternatives has exposed divisions within the environmental movement. Greenpeace and FoE oppose new nuclear power stations but some prominent environmentalists argue that low-carbon nuclear electricity is preferable to burning fossil fuels. FoE advocates



constructing wind turbines to exploit Britain's abundant wind resources but CPRE, wildlife groups and locals, concerned about their impact on the landscape, birds and people, have opposed many proposed windfarms. Similarly, ENGOs and local campaigners, fearing its impact on birds and the landscape, have opposed construction of a tidal barrage across the Bristol Channel.

More generally, because climate change is universal, its causes are deeply embedded in the taken-for-granted structures and practices of modern societies, and its particular local impacts cannot be unambiguously attributed to climate change, it is an issue that presents few promising targets for protest. As a result, local action on climate change often takes the form of support for the campaigns of national ENGOs, lobbying to get local councils and businesses to adopt climate-friendly policies, or practical energy-saving projects.

This leaves ENGOs in a difficult position. The rise to prominence of climate change and energy policy has drawn into the policy process pressure groups and vested interests that are more highly organized and vastly better resourced than ENGOs. Sympathetic governments and nervous corporations may invite ENGOs to advise or even collaborate, but are often frustrated when ENGOs are unable or unwilling to respond to their invitations. As a result, ENGOs often find themselves marginalized and may question whether continued dialogue makes best use of their limited resources, especially when governments and corporations profess good intentions but seem insufficiently willing to take the action necessary to reduce carbon emissions quickly, drastically and permanently.

## **Conclusion**

The long saga of the environmental movement in Britain has not been one of brave outsiders struggling to secure a place in policy-making circles. For most of its history, access to the powerful was relatively easily and quickly achieved, and even when fringe groups and newcomers staked new claims in less decorous ways, their input has generally been absorbed and has contributed to the renovation of the established environmental movement. Now, however, a mature environmental movement is confronted by the limits of its power. Governments, at best, expect the environmental movement to mobilize the public to support policies that ministers favour but are too nervous to introduce in the absence of evidence that the public is ready to accept them, but those same governments characteristically fail to appreciate the limitations that ENGOs' relatively slender resources impose.

It is possible that their frustrations may lead ENGOs that are unable or unwilling to act as handmaidens to governments and corporations to choose outsider strategies that leave them free to ask the radical questions that governments and corporations are unwilling to consider. That, of course, is the strategy that Greenpeace has, with brief exceptions, followed all along. FoE, focused upon climate change as an issue of social justice, is increasingly critical of the power of capitalist corporations. That bridges the gap between FoE and more radical environmental groupings and raises the possibility that grassroots direct action

may be increasingly networked nationally and internationally. The conservation-oriented ENGOs are unlikely to follow, but the likes of Greenpeace, FoE and even radical environmental campaign networks are no longer seen as the cuckoos in the nest but as respected partners in the complex division of labour that now characterizes the British environmental movement.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Some parts of this chapter are adapted from Rootes "Environmental NGOs".

<sup>2</sup> Evans *History of Nature Conservation in Britain*, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Evans *History of Nature Conservation in Britain*.

<sup>4</sup> Lowe and Goyder *Environmental Groups in British Politics*, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Lowe and Goyder *Environmental Groups in British Politics*.

<sup>6</sup> Diani "The concept of social movement"; Rootes "Environmental movements".

<sup>7</sup> Marwick *The Sixties*.

<sup>8</sup> Lamb *Promising the Earth*, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Lamb *Promising the Earth*, ch.7.

<sup>10</sup> Evans *History of Nature Conservation in Britain*, 104.

<sup>11</sup> Lamb *Promising the Earth*, 87.

<sup>12</sup> Lamb *Promising the Earth*, 97-9.

<sup>13</sup> Rootes and Miller "British environmental movement; Rootes "Environmental NGOs".

<sup>14</sup> Rootes "Britain".

<sup>15</sup> Doherty "Paving the way"; Wall *Earth First!*

<sup>16</sup> Rootes "The resurgence of protest".

<sup>17</sup> Rawcliffe *Environmental Pressure Groups*.

<sup>18</sup> Rawcliffe *Environmental Pressure Groups*, 212-214.

<sup>19</sup> Rootes "Facing South".

<sup>20</sup> McCormick *British Politics and the Environment*, 34.

<sup>21</sup> Johnston and Jowell "Social capital", 183.

<sup>22</sup> Rootes "Environmental NGOs".

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- <sup>23</sup> Cracknell et al. *Where the Green Grants Went*.
- <sup>24</sup> Rootes "Environmental NGOs".
- <sup>25</sup> Rootes "Environmental movements".
- <sup>26</sup> Lowe and Goyder *Environmental Groups in British Politics*.
- <sup>27</sup> Environment Council *Who's who*.
- <sup>28</sup> Rootes and Miller "British environmental movement".
- <sup>29</sup> Plows, Wall and Doherty "Covert repertoires".
- <sup>30</sup> Rootes "From Local Conflict to National Issue".
- <sup>31</sup> Rootes "More Acted upon than Acting".
- <sup>32</sup> <http://ukwin.org.uk>, accessed 2 September 2012.
- <sup>33</sup> <http://www.manukaclub.org/strategicgrants.php>, accessed 2 September 2012.
- <sup>34</sup> Rootes "Nature Protection Organizations".
- <sup>35</sup> Rootes "Nature Protection Organizations", 48-9.
- <sup>36</sup> Rootes "*Facing South*".
- <sup>37</sup> Rootes and Saunders "The global justice movement in Britain".
- <sup>38</sup> Doherty *Ideas and Actions in the Green Movement*.
- <sup>39</sup> Price *How the environmental movement influenced climate change*.
- <sup>40</sup> Rootes "New issues, new forms of action", 61.
- <sup>41</sup> Rootes "New issues, new forms of action".
- <sup>42</sup> Saunders and Price "One person's eu-topia, 117.
- <sup>43</sup> Saunders "Reformism and radicalism in Climate Camp"; Schlembach. Lear and Bowman "Science and ethics".
- <sup>44</sup> Diani and Donati "Organisational change.
- <sup>45</sup> Rootes "New issues, new forms of action".