

Liz Peltz Celebrates 21 Years of Friends of the Earth

by Liz Peltz

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“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead, Social Anthropologist

Friends of the Earth was founded in Britain in 1971 by just such a group of people, who, alarmed by the evidence they saw of an emerging environmental crisis, committed themselves to doing something about it.

Ever since then, Friends of the Earth has been fighting to stop the waste, pollution and destruction of the planet’s resources, which not only affects our well-being today but ultimately threatens to undermine the vital ecological systems on which all life depends.

Our main aim is to achieve fundamental policy change to protect the environment. In pursuit of this we make use of every tactic within the law, from persistent lobbying of government and industry to peaceful occupation of threatened wildlife sites. From the beginning our approach has been to use well-researched facts to make a strong case, and to promote positive alternatives to the environmentally-harmful practices we oppose. We are strictly non-party political, willing to work with all parties but aligned to none. Friends of the Earth also seeks to educate people about the vital importance to everyone of a healthy and biologically diverse environment. Equally, we provide information on what people can do — how they can begin to ‘tread more lightly’ on the planet in their own lives, and how they can actively participate in building pressure for change, whether by joining one of our local groups or just taking the time to write a letter.

In the last twenty-one years Friends of the Earth has grown from a small dedicated group of campaigners into one of the UK’s most influential environmental organizations, with headquarters in London, over 300 active campaigning local groups, and nearly a quarter of a million supporters throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We are part of Friends of the Earth International, the largest network of national environmental groups in the world, working in more than 45 countries. We campaign on the widest range of issues of any environmental pressure group, from global issues like tropical deforestation, ozone depletion and climate change, to national and local issues like water pollution, waste, countryside protection and energy use.

It is interesting now to see how an organisation that sprang spontaneously from the concerns

of a few friends has endured to become a powerful, long term force for change. When we first got going, there was everything to do. The span of our first campaigns — stripmining in Snowdonia, recycling, energy, transport, whales and other endangered species — reflected the need (then as well as now) for Friends of the Earth to address a wide range of problems.

We hit the headlines for the first time in May 1971 for ‘returning’ 1500 non-returnable bottles to the doorstep of Schweppes’ London headquarters. This statement about the wastefulness of the throwaway society marked the beginning of our campaigning on recycling, reuse and waste reduction. This work has played a major part in increasing public awareness and the number of recycling facilities, and improving Government policy. Surveys now show overwhelming public support for recycling. Yet only a tiny proportion of UK household waste actually gets recycled. We are still pushing to remove the obstacles to recycling and reuse of materials, and for strategies to reduce waste overall.

The '70s saw concerns running high over endangered species, and Friends of the Earth soon launched a campaign to stop the trade in tiger, leopard and cheetah furs, leading to the 1976 import ban on their skins. We also fought to ‘Save the Whale’, a highly popular campaign which played a significant part in the European Community’s 1982 decision to ban imports of whale products. The power of consumer pressure, which played a crucial role in both campaigns, became a tool which Friends of the Earth would use many times in future.

In 1972, we also started to call for a balanced transport strategy to replace the UK’s single-minded ‘roads policy’, joining with local people to successfully block road schemes which threatened to carve through communities and the countryside, creating more traffic, pollution and congestion. We also lobbied for better cycling facilities and measures to calm traffic which are now increasingly being used in towns and cities.

And in 1973 Friends of the Earth’s energy campaign was established, in response to a Government plan to build 32 new nuclear power stations in the UK within a decade. Within a year, that plan had collapsed. The campaign continued to ensure that subsequent proposals suffered a similar fate, and to promote an energy future based on increased energy efficiency and developing renewable energy sources like wind power. In the last few years, this investment of effort has paid off enormously. The need to improve energy efficiency is no longer in any serious dispute, and the Government has at long last increased its support for renewable energy projects.

As Friends of the Earth entered the 1980s, its name was well and truly known. More and more people wanted to join or start local groups, help our campaigns, join as supporters. A few simple principles had been evolved to put the organisation on a stable base, and the range of work continued to rapidly expand.

The campaign on endangered species developed into campaigns for the protection of habitats and the countryside, as we exposed the failure of legislation to protect the UK’s key wildlife sites, and began to highlight the grave damage caused by modern intensive farming methods.

We sounded the alarm over pesticides, alerting people to the threat to rivers and drinking water from these substances, as well as from toxic substances discharged by industry, leaking rubbish tips and sewage. Over the years, we have won bans on certain pesticides, while a High Court action we brought against the Government forced it to agree to speed up the removal of pesticides in drinking water.

Reports of alarming forest death in Europe from acid rain also began to filter through in the early '80s. Research revealed the huge scale of the threat to plants and animals from this 'silent killer', and our acid rain campaign, launched in 1984, was important in persuading the UK Government to agree to international measures to reduce acid emissions from power stations. Yet the Government continues to drag its feet and we are still battling to protect the UK's most acid-sensitive areas from decades of further attack.

Catastrophic forest loss of an entirely different kind was highlighted in 1985, when Friends of the Earth launched the first international effort to save the world's tropical rainforests. Enlisting the support of consumers and retailers at home in boycotting tropical hardwood products from non-sustainable sources, we also joined forces with Friends of the Earth groups in other countries to stop highly destructive 'development' projects that threatened rainforests and tribal people in South East Asia, South America and Africa. The UK's imports of tropical timber have now fallen by a third. But we remain hard at work to achieve fundamental institutional reforms to stop the plunder of remaining forests.

Protecting the ozone layer had been high on our list of priorities as far back as the mid-seventies, but it wasn't until 1987, when the British Antarctic Survey discovered an ozone 'hole' above Antarctica, that politicians stopped calling us scare-mongers! The success of our 1988 consumer boycott against CFC-containing aerosols proved that change could happen quickly. But with the state of the ozone layer growing worse every year, we remain hard at work to persuade governments to end the use of all ozone-destroying chemicals. And, within the last five years, Friends of the Earth has taken on what may be the most challenging task yet. Our campaign to prevent a worldwide climate change is confronting a problem that is deeply rooted in the industrialised world's extravagant consumption of energy and resources. Our research and policy advice has provided decision-makers with guidance on ways of achieving the massive cuts in 'greenhouse gas' emissions that are now vital. We have also provided information for the public on how they can help to reduce emissions and enlisted their help in campaigning for improved energy-saving standards. However the burden of action remains on politicians, and our international network is pressing governments to make binding commitments to cut greenhouse gases.

As Friends of the Earth celebrates its 'coming of age', we are justly proud of all these achievements. But there is still a long way to go. The work of Friends of the Earth is as relevant today — and as desperately important — as it was in 1971. The sheer scale of the assault on the environment is undeniable. Rainforests are still getting the chop to meet the short-term cash needs of debt-stricken Third World countries. Ozone-destroying chemicals

are still produced and used, even though we know the ozone layer is suffering increasing levels of depletion. Cities around the world, choked with road traffic and industrial pollution, suffer from appalling air quality. Rivers and seas are still the convenient dumping ground for industry's waste. Our fight is still very much an uphill battle.

But there is no doubt that the last 21 years have seen major changes for the better. We have scored some real successes, proving time and again that people working together can make a difference, even against seemingly impossible odds. Due in no small part to our own efforts, we are also now operating in very different circumstances than in 1971. Public awareness has grown enormously and the environment is now high on the political agenda — even if, as the Earth Summit so starkly demonstrated, politicians are still better at talking than they are at taking action.

In short, although the problems and challenges remain daunting, the potential for doing something about the environment is much greater now than it was then. Backed by committed supporters and local activists, effective campaign tactics, and long experience, Friends of the Earth looks uniquely placed to bring pressure to bear where it has most influence in the next critical decades.

