

Green NGOs riding high

Robert Blood, head of German think-tank SIGWatch, which works with the Business Communication Forum in London, says environmental groups are on the crest of a wave created by a GM scandal in the late-1990s

The GM crop scare of 1999 may have been a disaster for seed producer Monsanto, but for Britain's environmental groups it was a PR gift. By linking the environment to food safety, a subject that had come to obsess the media in the wake of the BSE crisis, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth (FoTE) were able to project themselves as fearless defenders of public safety against the 'untested' technologies of 'arrogant' global corporations.

The transformation was most dramatic in the tabloids. High-brow newspapers had often given environmental groups a fair crack of the editorial whip, but papers such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* were inclined to view ecologists as politically suspect or odd. But in GM firms, the right-wing press believed they had discovered Mad Cow Disease MkII, which this time could be blamed on the Blair government (in fact, GM food first went on sale under the Conservatives).

Greens become heroes

Activists' assertions of hypothetical risks were printed across front pages to the detriment of scientific plausibility. Food retailers complained of phone calls from journalists so ignorant they were incapable of asking meaningful questions, let alone able to understand the answers. Undeterred, the *Mail* and *Express* tried to outdo each other's hyperbolic headlines. The *Express's* 'Mutant crops could kill you' (18 February, 1999) was, perhaps, the winner.

The effects are still being felt. Middle England has begun to find 'going green' appealing – reflected in its enthusiasm for organic food – although it has yet to wholly reject conveniences such as cheap flights, or luxuries such as 4x4s. And environmental groups have been accepted by media as forces to be reckoned with.

The credibility of environmentalists continues to increase as journalists who grew up with Greenpeace, FoTE and other post-1968 protest groups move into high editorial positions (the same is happening in business, but more slowly



because senior managers tend to be older than senior journalists).

There is also the Islington Effect. It is well known that during the 1990s, the London borough of Islington, N1 replaced Hampstead as the fashionable residential district for journalists, politicians and opinion formers. What is less appreciated is that during this time, many environmental and other NGOs moved their offices there, too.

Of Britain's largest 24 environmental and humanitarian groups headquartered in the capital, Islington is now home to 11, including Greenpeace and FoTE. Two thirds of them share three adjoining postcodes: N1, N7 (Holloway) and N19 (Upper Holloway); London has 119 postal districts.

London's new political, media and

activist groups, who already share similar educational and social backgrounds, now live and/or work close to each other. Mixing socially, it is plausible that they are acquiring each other's sensibilities. Indeed, a Monsanto employee confided to me recently that he gave up dinner parties in north London because of lynchings from fellow guests.

In the last Greater London Assembly election, the Green Party achieved its best result, 13.8 per cent of the vote, in the constituency that includes Islington. And much of London's media are rooting for the 'green' David Cameron.

It all goes to show how environmental NGOs have successfully repackaged campaigns as consumer issues.

A full transcript of this article can be accessed at www.PRWeek.com. ■

THE GREEN SCENE



Greenpeace: eye-catching actions

Greenpeace

The 800-pound gorilla of the environmental circle is run like a multinational company with campaigns and money directed from its HQ to achieve maximum impact. Usually successful in achieving headlines.



WWF: influential with governments

WWF

On paper appears much bigger than Greenpeace (in terms of funds), but most money goes on practical conservation work. Has a reputation for objectivity rather than hystericism, and is influential with governments.



FoTE: a more thoughtful approach

Friends of the Earth

Effectively the activist wing of the Green Party in the UK. Controlled by its members, it is well organised at local level, and less 'in your face' than Greenpeace. Sometimes its idealism gets in the way of tangible success.