



1974

France ends atmospheric nuclear tests in the South Pacific

After Greenpeace protests at the test site, France ends its atmospheric nuclear testing programme in the South Pacific.

THE THREAT

In the 1960s, France moved its nuclear testing programme to the remote South Pacific, where it started exploding nuclear devices on barges and at altitude. Little consideration was given to the tests' devastating environmental implications. In 1972 the French Government decided to go even further and announced plans to cordon off a vast swathe of international waters in order to advance the testing programme.

THE GREENPEACE WAY

There wasn't much preparation and little of the strategic coordination that assists today's Greenpeace campaigns, but there couldn't be a better example of the Greenpeace spirit and the organisation's international approach. In 1972 David McTaggart, a Canadian living in New Zealand, read in a newspaper about the planned French tests – and that a newly founded organisation called Greenpeace was looking for a boat and a skipper to sail into the zone to protest against them. McTaggart promptly renamed his own sailing boat 'Greenpeace III' and set sail. He observed international law in establishing his anchor position, but ignored the French Government's unilateral declaration of the area as a forbidden zone. The presence of his boat forced the French government to halt its test. A French Navy vessel eventually rammed the boat to end the embarrassing situation.

NOT GIVING UP

But the young Greenpeace – just like its present-day version – didn't give up that easily. McTaggart repaired his boat and returned a year later. This time, he was physically beaten by French military personnel, who denied the charge, claiming that McTaggart's ship had already left the area. One of McTaggart's crew had photographed the beating however and the film, which was smuggled out of French custody with the crewmember, proved the French had been lying. The photographs were widely published and the story drew further criticism of the French nuclear testing programme.

END OF THE TESTING PROGRAMME

McTaggart entered into lengthy litigation against the French. In 1974 he won part of his case, a landmark decision in which the French courts sided against the French government. That same year, the French announced that they would end their atmospheric nuclear testing programme: atmospheric testing had been driven from the entire Pacific Ocean.

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