



1991

International Treaty saves the Antarctic from deadly threat

In a groundbreaking deal, governments agree to protect the Antarctic from mineral exploration. The Treaty, which in effect preserves the continent for peaceful, scientific purposes, follows seven years of relentless Greenpeace campaigning, including the establishment of a permanent base in the region.

THE THREAT

The Antarctic is a unique place in the modern world: it's the only continent that remains relatively untouched by human interference; it's arguably the only pristine wilderness left on Earth. Yet in the early 1980s, the threat of commercial exploitation of this delicate eco-system loomed large. There was strong evidence for the existence of oil and mineral deposits under the rock and ice, and governments and companies seemed to be lining up to start prospecting.

THE GREENPEACE WAY

The prospects of stopping them looked slim: the Greenpeace campaign to protect the Antarctic started with little hope of success. Yet the campaign turned into a prime example of what can happen when daring action, solid science and political pressure meet another key ingredient – perseverance. The idea to plough resources into a campaign to make Antarctica a 'World Park' was first suggested by Greenpeace in 1979. As more research was done, it became apparent that the organisation would have to set up a permanent base on the ice if it was to have a voice at the Antarctica Treaty table where the continent's fate would ultimately be decided. Only a base would allow Greenpeace to challenge national territorial claims with an argument that Antarctica should be preserved as a global commons – belonging to none.

WORLD PARK BASE

In 1987 the MV Greenpeace moored in the Antarctic (after the weather had halted the first attempt) and a few weeks later the 'World Park Base' was operational. Greenpeace stayed from 1987 to 1991. The team monitored pollution from the neighbouring bases run by the US (theirs was the size of a small town) and New Zealand and exposed scandals such as construction work that involved dynamiting the habitats of nesting penguins. The professionalism of the Greenpeace operation gradually earned the respect of other Antarctica Treaty Nations.

NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE

In the seven years of the campaign Greenpeace went from being perceived as an outsider, to a respected player in negotiations for the future of the continent. Greenpeace offices worldwide lobbied their governments to take a responsible position on protecting the Antarctic, joining forces with other non-governmental organisations and eliciting support from global personalities including Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, Jacques Cousteau and Ted Turner. International negotiations on the issue were routinely accompanied by Greenpeace demonstrations. The campaign made it clear to politicians that they would be congratulated as heroes if they did the right thing – and they did. Antarctica became a powerful symbol for the responsible treatment of the planet and for successful international cooperation and it boldly underlined an old Greenpeace belief: nothing is impossible.

For more information contact:
enquiries@greenpeace.org

Greenpeace International

Otto Helderlingstraat 5
1066 AZ Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Tel: +31 20 7182000
Fax: +31 20 5148151

greenpeace.org

Picture © Greenpeace / Robin Culley

GREENPEACE