



1993

Dumping of radioactive waste at sea gets banned

The London Dumping Convention permanently bans the dumping at sea of radioactive and industrial waste world-wide. It's the high point of a Greenpeace campaign that started in 1978.

THE THREAT

The waste that is produced at every stage of the nuclear fuel cycle remains hazardous for hundreds of thousands of years. Yet every year, millions of litres of radioactive waste used to be dumped into the sea – either routinely, from nuclear facilities such as reprocessing plants, or from ships at sea. For years national governments allowed this practice – a major threat to the environment and a potential health risk to millions of citizens.

THE GREENPEACE WAY

Greenpeace had been campaigning against the ocean disposal of radioactive waste since 1978. For years non-violent direct action, hard research and political lobbying were combined to get corporations and governments to change their attitudes towards the ocean environment. The work reached a climax when in 1993 a Greenpeace ship documented a Russian navy vessel as it pumped liquid waste directly into the Sea of Japan. Greenpeace had repeatedly warned that Russia was using the region as a dumping ground for radioactive waste from its submarines and icebreakers – with potentially disastrous implications.

THE EVIDENCE AND THE CONSEQUENCES

Now, the world was seeing it first hand: the Greenpeace crew sent the evidence to international media outlets in real time. Japanese television stations rushed to the scene and started beaming footage that was quickly picked up by outlets around the world. The media interest sparked by Greenpeace had consequences: Japan, the United States and other countries were outraged by the Russian behaviour and demanded a stop to the practice with immediate effect. Eventually a reluctant Russia gave in to the mounting pressure: the government of President Boris Yeltsin agreed to suspend the dumping.

THE LONDON DUMPING CONVENTION

But not just that. Following the Greenpeace action at sea, the evidence was now so strong, the argument so clear, the outrage so visible, that countries around the world came together to agree to the London Dumping Convention. The legally binding document – a considerable strengthening of the existing London Convention – was immediately approved by 37 countries. It effectively banned the dumping at sea of radioactive and industrial waste worldwide. Greenpeace's long-running campaign for healthy oceans had won an extremely powerful new tool.

For more information contact:
enquiries@greenpeace.org

Greenpeace International

Ottho Heldringstraat 5
1066 AZ Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Tel: +31 20 7182000
Fax: +31 20 5148151

greenpeace.org

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