



1995

Shell reverses decision to dump the Brent Spar

Following a high profile action by Greenpeace and public pressure, the global oil and gas company Shell reverses its decision to dump the Brent Spar oil platform in the Atlantic Ocean.

THE THREAT

When Shell decided in the 1990s that it had no longer any use for the Brent Spar – a 14,500 tonne oil platform it had been operating in the North Sea – the company applied to the UK government to be allowed to dump the entire installation in the Atlantic Ocean. The government had no objections; it announced its full support.

THE GREENPEACE WAY

Greenpeace decided to take action as part of its long-running campaign against ocean dumping. On 30 April 1995, activists occupied the Brent Spar. The tense and tumultuous weeks that followed saw Greenpeace pitted against the combined forces of the UK government and the world's then-largest oil company. Dramatic visual footage of activists being attacked with water cannons and relief teams being flown in by helicopter brought the stand-off to a massive audience. Spontaneous protests in support of Greenpeace and against Shell broke out across Europe. Some Shell stations in Germany reported a 50 per cent loss of sales. In the end, public pressure proved too much for Shell: in a dramatic win for Greenpeace and the ocean environment, the company reversed its decision and agreed to dismantle and recycle the platform on land.

THE OCEAN IS NOT A DUMPING GROUND

Greenpeace took action against Shell based on a simple principle: the ocean is not a dumping ground. It came as part of a campaign that had been running since the 1970s. Over the years, Greenpeace had again and again confronted industry and governments, challenging them to adopt a more responsible attitude towards the ocean environment. There were successes on the way: efforts to put an end to ocean dumping of radioactive and industrial waste for example, culminated in 1993 in a worldwide ban of these practices.

CUMILATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

The Brent Spar campaign set a precedent for a more open and responsible approach from the offshore oil and gas industry to the decommissioning of obsolete platforms. Before Greenpeace took action against Shell, a number of oil companies had been planning sea-dumping of obsolete installations, such as oil storage buoys and oil rigs. There would have been little, if any, international scrutiny of decommissioning operations – and there would have been a cumulative environmental impact way beyond that of the Brent Spar. Greenpeace's action and the support of people throughout Europe, ensured that no such structures have been dumped to this day.

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