



MIKE ALLIONIS

Greenpeace Student Activist

Age: 21

Born: USA

Current location

Long Island, New York, USA.

Why Greenpeace?

"Greenpeace creatively tackles some of the world's biggest issues, involving people all over the world – and it does it effectively," says Mike Allionis. During the Greenpeace Semester, an advanced organising training course for student activists, the American student didn't just see some of the world's most shocking environmental destruction first hand. He also learned how to fight back. Since then, Mike hasn't stopped. He's running Greenpeace student campaigns, trains fellow student activists and keeps bringing new people on board with a clear message: "You can fight back, too."

Hope for the future?

Mike hopes that we can all live on "a just planet, where we don't have to worry about big companies poisoning us every day."

Mike, you're a student activist. You're passionately fighting against environmental destruction – and you're not alone, are you?

Definitely not. You know, it's often said at student or activist gatherings that this is the civil rights issue of our generation. I think it's definitely the biggest issue facing youth today. We grew up in a world where there was lots of negligence in the past or even just misunderstandings about our impact on the world in which we live. Right now, we're growing up, young, just out of college and we're facing these huge problems on the horizon – like climate change. What are we going to do about it? I believe that lots of young people and students – the majority of young people and students – see it that way, and see this as the issue we need to confront. We have to figure out how to fix this. And people are definitely coming together. In history – in the US at least – students have always been a really powerful force within any kind of movement for social change. Right now, students from across the country are working together, trying to advance, to push this forward.

For you, this started kicking off properly when you took part in the Greenpeace Semester two years ago, a student activist training course. What happened?

My time there was really, really powerful for me. What's so great about the Greenpeace Semester is that you can effectively bring back what you've learned to your campus or to your community – and then start fighting back. One of the things that always happen during the Semester is that Greenpeace takes you on a campaign trip. During my semester we challenged Trader Joe's over their seafood policy – they're a higher-end food store; they keep their prices cheap, but try to provide good products. We went on a one-week road trip, from store to store. We had these mini actions, drumming up support, gathering petitions. At the end of that week we pushed the company to make a public statement that they were going to change their seafood policy. That was really powerful.

I started to recognise that grassroots organising is effective. The other major component of the Greenpeace Semester is that they take you on what they call an expedition. You really bear witness, first hand, to some of the really devastating impacts of environmental destruction. For my semester that was the Tar Sands in Northern Alberta. Hearing those people's stories was one of the most powerful things for me in shaping myself into an activist. Up there, indigenous people can't fish out of their own rivers anymore, because they are so heavily polluted with all this toxic material that's the result of us turning the Tar Sands into artificial oil. That really empowered me. It motivated me to make the difference I thought needed to be made.

And that's what you went on to do?

I came back to campus energised. I got in touch with the Greenpeace student network and started developing effective campaigns with them. Over the next summer, Greenpeace took me on another trip to see mountaintop removal first hand – one of the most destructive ways to get coal. I started seeing the bigger picture. I began to really understand some of the injustices that are going on. Right now, I'm with the Greenpeace Student Network Board, a team of students who are all volunteers. We have all different roles; we oversee different parts of the network, fill gaps that staff can't fill in, coordinating training courses, actions, Greenpeace Semester alumni. I provide key training on campuses on what's relevant, help student activists with their campaign work.



Greenpeace is 40 this year. What does the organisation mean to you today?

I really see Greenpeace as this global organisation that's standing up for people on every corner of the planet, whether it's the fight back against climate change, the fight back against whaling – it's really about having a planet that's safe and healthy for everyone. Greenpeace gives me the feeling that I'm not alone. Through Greenpeace, I met so many activists that are inspiring me. I know how much they care and how much effort they put into making the things we're fighting for possible.

What are you up to at the moment?

One of our recent actions was the 10:10:10 Global Work Party when thousands of people around the world got together to implement practical solutions to fight climate change. Right now, we're working towards Power Shift 2011, a gathering of young leaders and activists from all over the country that's happening in Washington DC later this year. The aim is to train students and give them tangible skills that they can bring back to their communities, so they can start fighting dirty energy on a local level, right where they live. We want people to take home actual skills. To get involved. I'm just back from a training course in Boston to be trainer there as well.

Speaking of dirty energy: one of the issues you have been very passionate about is the issue of coal, isn't it?

Yes. I'm very agitated about that one. It's the whole issue of it: from the extraction of coal, whether that's mountain top removal or the Tar Sands, to the actual burning of it. So many communities are affected where coal is being burnt, from the pollution or from the way coal ash is stored, for example often improperly, poorly. A few years back, in Eastern Kentucky, they were storing coal ash in dammed-up ponds. One of them actually burst and flooded a whole village, killing many people. And of course, coal is a main driver of climate change. I see that as one of the most important issues. Coal is not just poisoning people. It's also cooking the planet – more and more every day.

What keeps you going, personally?

When you get involved like this, you meet people – all the time. I'm quite well connected locally, but meeting people I didn't know before keeps me empowered. Hearing other people's stories of why they're involved and what they're passionate about – that's fantastic. At Greenpeace or at events like Power Shift, I meet all these people who care as much as I care and who really want to see these changes being made. That's the most powerful thing that keeps me going. And then the issues themselves, of course. I was mostly pulled into this by thinking about the impact climate change is going to have on people: food shortages, the potential spread of disease, national disasters becoming more frequent, extreme weather.

For me, it's really about thinking of humanity as a whole. People who live in communities close to a chemical plant or close to a coal plant or close to fossil fuel extraction. It's an injustice for these people not to have access to the clean air and the clean water they deserve as human beings. Thinking in the grand spectrum, it's about improving the lives of people. Wherever they live. Whoever they may be. When you think about a lot of environmental issues, basic human rights have been neglected. That's my perspective. I want a healthy and safe future for people and their families. That's what it's all about.

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