



## PAUL JOHNSTON

**Principal Scientist at  
Greenpeace Research  
Laboratories,  
the Science Unit of  
Greenpeace International**

**Age:** 55

**Born:** United Kingdom

### **Current location**

Exeter, United Kingdom

### **Why Greenpeace?**

For Paul, Greenpeace remains the best organisation in the world to promote environmental change and sustainability. Returning from a rather spontaneous tour with the Toxics campaign in 1987 (his first work for Greenpeace), the marine scientist with a PhD in freshwater toxicity went on to set up the Greenpeace Research Laboratories. It has grown to become one of Greenpeace's most important units.

### **Hopes for the future**

Paul hopes that sustainability will become an operational concept - not merely an abstract idea.

**Paul, Greenpeace is a campaigning organisation – what is so important about having science on board?**

There's no point in campaigning on anything at all unless you've got your facts straight. These days, so many of the issues we're working on are interweaved with scientific and technical issues. That's why we don't just have the Greenpeace International Science Unit, but an awful lot of scientists that are working within our campaigns as well. There's a large pool of very competent people out there. That level of technical expertise is vital to make sure we get the story straight, and target our efforts well. We all work to make sure that we do what we do on the basis of truth, rather than hypothesis.

### **How have things changed in recent years?**

There has always been an appreciation within the organisation that scientific and technical information and support are important, but it's become more formally recognised in recent years. People are seeing just how important the science is. Many of the issues we're working on now are much more technically challenging today than they used to be – look at the science of climate change, for example. It's very difficult to make sure that you have the facts right and communicate them clearly. As the complexities have increased, so has the level of scientific support needed. What we're trying to do is make sure everybody's reading off the same page. People are very open to fact, science and truth. The biggest challenge we're facing is to try to cram so much into so little time.

**The Greenpeace science unit is based at the University in Exeter, where it moved from its initial London base in 1992. What's it like working there?**

We're lucky – we're in the middle of one of the most beautiful parts of England. The city and the university both have a very high reputation. We're very privileged to have great academic connections and access to all the university's facilities. There are seven people on full-time-staff, a couple of volunteers, and a couple of consultants. One of the really helpful things we have achieved here is years and years of personal experience working within Greenpeace. If we add it all up, we're probably pushing at about a 100 years between us. That kind of experience – and that kind of continuity – really helps us to provide useful and appropriate input to the campaign. We're able to hold a much longer-term view of what's been going on.

### **Speaking of the past, what's your first memory of Greenpeace?**

That was quite some time before I joined the organisation. It was the day the *Rainbow Warrior* was sunk. I was aware of the organisation beforehand, obviously, but that was the defining moment – not just for me, but I think for many other people as well. That's my enduring first memory of Greenpeace. At the time, I was thinking: Is there anything I can do to help? Is there anything I can do to get involved? Which then, of course, happened, some time later.



## 40 years after it was founded, what does Greenpeace mean to you today?

Greenpeace is still the best organisation operating on a global level to promote meaningful change, environmental regulation and control. We seem to be able to address some of these quite outrageous environmental situations – be it over-fishing, whaling, nuclear – and actually put pressure on people in authority to get things changed. I've been very impressed with the amount of change Greenpeace has managed to promote, on a number of levels. It's of course disappointing that we haven't managed to achieve more, but I think what we have achieved is pretty remarkable. I think this organisation has radically redefined the nature of public participation in making things move forward.

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## How did you end up with the organisation?

Quite accidentally. I was finishing off the tail end of some post-doctoral research projects at the University of London and someone called up looking for a scientist to take part in a 'Toxics Tour' round the UK for 10 weeks. And I said, "Well, shall I do it?" I phoned them up – and I got the job. It was as simple as that. It probably wouldn't happen like that today. I have a degree in marine biology and did my PhD in freshwater toxicology, so I was going down the environmental road with my studies already. Marine issues, pollution issues – they were the topics of conversation of the day when I was going through the tertiary education system. But everything's only gone the way it's gone for me because I ended up working for Greenpeace. Otherwise, I would probably have ended up working for an environmental regulator, or something similar, truth be told.

## There are many environmental NGOs out there today. What makes Greenpeace Greenpeace?

The fact that people get out there and put their money where their mouth is, so to speak. People at Greenpeace have done - and continue to do - things that draw people's attention to the problems we're facing in a very direct way. And the fact that they have managed to translate the idea of bearing witness to such a huge diversity of cultures, globally – I think that's one of the most impressive things about Greenpeace. As an organisation, we have managed to achieve a huge international buy-in. It doesn't matter if you come from China, Japan, India, the US, the UK, Germany, Argentina – Greenpeace has managed to work within these cultures. Inevitably, to a degree, national offices are microcosms of the society that they're operating in; they have to be in order to be effective at a national level. But for the Greenpeace values to translate themselves so widely across all these cultural domains is a pretty impressive achievement.

## You own a small patch of land at your home not far from the university in Exeter and – so we're told – a tractor as well. Tell us more!

That's right, I own a very small patch of land I use to grow vegetables – and then, yes, I have a totally inappropriately sized vintage tractor, which has nothing to do with growing vegetables at all, really. It's just that I like antique pieces of machinery. The land is great, though. We get a regular supply of salads and vegetables out of it all year round. It's been a bit of a hard winter here in the UK, so some of the stuff that's in there didn't perform as well as it should have, but that's part of the joy of growing your own vegetables, of course: Nothing's ever the same two years running.

## And that tractor?

It's a simple story, really. I had just built a small garage to act as a workshop and one of my relatives said, "What you really need to distract yourself from normal life is a tractor." I really didn't need a tractor at all. But, well, I kind of always wanted one. So, this thing turned up on the back of a trailer and it looked as if it had spent several hundred years being fossilised. It was a case of taking it all apart – and putting it all back together again with a lot of new parts. It's a really nice piece of machinery. It comes from a different era, built in 1947. It's nice to be playing with something that old with a view to getting it to work again. It's a long-term engineering project, though. It's still not finished. But, well, it will be soon...