



A concise history of European civil society for environment and nature

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In general one could say that the history of the environmental organizations throughout Europe developed from agenda setting citizens to professional campaign organizations. While nature protection organizations developed as early as the 19th century and the start of the 20th century, and some organizations concerned about the environment emerged at that time, the height of the development of organizations with a mission to work on environmental protection only started in the early seventies of the 20th century. At first, concerned citizens organized themselves on issues like pollution of air and soil from factories. Later this issue broadened to include energy, agriculture, consumerism, transport, water and many more issues.

One can distinguish three periods in the emergence of organizations for the environment. The first period (naturalism and nature protection) is from 1860 until the Second World War, the second period (environment under threat) is from 1960 until 1980, and the third (international networks for the environment) from 1980 until now.

Naturalism and nature protection

The effects of industrialization, developments in natural science and a changing attitude towards nature in the first half of the 19th century led to the emergence of biologists, artists, nobleman and industrialists wanting to preserve natural areas. A famous example is the action of the the painters who lived in Barbizon (France) who wanted to preserve the forest of Fontainebleau (1837) because of its beauty. The forest administration

wanted to cut the oldest trees in the forest to create an open space. The painters managed to save this area through a lobby. In 1853 the first European nature reserve was established by the French government. One decade later, on the other side of the world, President Lincoln signed the Park bill for the protection of Yosemite Park, followed by the establishment of the first National park in the US in 1872:

Yellowstone Park. In fact, this happened because of the lobbying and publicity work of entrepreneur James Mason Hutchings and artist Thomas Ayres. They ran a true publicity campaign in New York, with articles and exhibitions that attracted attention and even created tourism to the area. Through lobbying the Congress, they managed to pass the “Bill on Yosemite Grant”.

In the Netherlands in 1904, the authorities of Amsterdam decided to create a waste

dump in the "worthless, barren lakes of Naardermeer", which in fact was a beautiful wetland full of birdlife. It was thanks to a teacher from Amsterdam, Jac. P. Thijssse, that the area is still enjoyed as such. Thijssse managed to lobby with important people and raised the sum of 155.000 guilders, a considerable amount at the time, to buy the area. It led to the establishment of Natuurmonumenten, which, after World Wildlife Fund, is the biggest nature protection organization in the Netherlands, with 820.000 members in 2009, owning more than 100.000 hectares of land. The WWF was established in 1961 in Switzerland under the presidency of the Dutch Prince Bernhard.

Environment under threat

Although there were some organizations dealing with protection of the environment before the Second World War, only after 1960 was the issue raised on the political agenda and several organizations were established. In 1962 Rachel Carson impressed many readers with her book, "Silent Spring". Rachel Carson described the effects of pesticides on the environment, particularly on birds, causing thinner egg shells and resulting in reproductive problems and death. She criticized the use of DDT and the information provided by the industry. More publications followed, like "Limits to Growth" in 1968, describing the limitations of the use of commodities in connection to the fast growing world population, and "Blueprint for Survival" in 1972 that propagated a transition of modern society into small scale communities. In the supporters' view, this is the only way to survive as a planet. Critics say that these publications were also the start of the doom scenarios often predicted by environmentalists. Nevertheless, the

growing awareness provoked the establishment of several international organizations and networks for the environment, based on, roughly speaking, three paradigms.

The first were the radicals who wanted to change structures in society because it was the technocratic, large scale, capitalist structures that caused environmental problems. It was impossible to solve the environmental problems within these structures. Friends of the Earth (1971) can be regarded as an example of this school. FOE was also an example of an organization connecting the real grass roots movement with international activities. The Dutch FOE member, Milieudefensie, was established in 1972.

Second were the organizations that tried to create changes within the system, through lobbying and publicity. A Dutch example is Natuur en Milieu (1972), a real expert and lobby organization mainly focused on the national government.

The third kind of organization was those that developed and demonstrated examples of alternative ways of living in the form of biological agriculture, saving energy and water and reducing the level of consumption and waste. De Kleine Aarde (1972) is a Dutch example in this category. In 2010 De Kleine Aarde ended its activities after 38 years.

In 1971 a group of Canadian environmentalists, calling themselves the 'Don't make a wave committee', chartered a boat to sail into the nuclear testing zone of Amchitka near Alaska. They were stopped by the U.S. Navy but gained a lot of support and publicity for their heroic action. They had named their ship Greenpeace and

established an organization with that name in 1972. The combination of heroism and press coverage turned out to be very successful: Greenpeace now has organizations in 41 countries all over the world.

Towards international cooperation

The decade that followed, 1976 to 1986, can rightly be called the disaster decade for the environment. Big chemical disasters (Seveso 1976, Bhopal 1984) oil spills (Amoco Cadiz 1978 and at least 10 other oil disasters) and nuclear accidents (Three Mile Island 1979 and Chernobyl 1986) are all featured in the Environmental disaster top ten described by S.M. Enzier at www.lenntech.com/environmental-disasters.htm

These disasters, in combination with the development of mass media and the use of communication techniques by the professionalized environmental and nature protection organizations, created massive moral and financial support. Citizens became members and governments started to finance organizations that had proved to be right. At the height, in the Netherlands the organizations had a membership base of around 4 million members, 25 % of the entire population!

International networks for the environment

Although international organizations and networks, like International Union for Conservation of Nature (1960) and European Environmental Bureau (1974), were already established organizations in 1980, it was during the past three decades that the environmental movement developed into international networks. Civil society had become a respected partner in the dialogue with governments and the

environmental issue had climbed higher on the international agenda. The UN organized an historic meeting on sustainable development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It had a lot of media coverage and many NGOs were present. A year earlier (1991) in Prague the first conference for Environment in Europe took place. In this process European countries discussed mutual policy and cooperation on the environment. In 1997 World leaders got together in Kyoto to discuss climate change. These conferences grew bigger and bigger with a kind of apotheosis at the meeting on climate change in Copenhagen in 2009, with more than 40,000 participants from governments, civil society and media. This may have been one of the reasons for not reaching a satisfactory agreement there; decision making is quite difficult with so many participants and such broad media coverage.

Civil society organizations developed international networks like Transport and Environment (1990), Central and East European Working Group for the Enhancement of Biodiversity (CEEWeb, 1994), CEE Bankwatch (1995), Climate Action Network (1997) and Pesticides Action Network (2003).

Another form of international cooperation was between Western civil society and transition countries that opened up after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first contacts in this field from the Netherlands were between Polish dissident organizations and Dutch Civil Society. Friends of the Earth was very active in supporting newly developed organizations. After a (secret) visit to Polish dissidents, the Dutch minister of Environment Ed Nijpels started a support program that was

implemented by Milieukontakt Oost Europa (1988), established by, amongst others, Milieudéfensie, Friends of the Earth Europe and Natuur en Milieu. In the early eighties dissident organizations came to life in the slipstream of Solidarnosc, the famous Polish workers union. The first was the Polish Ecological Club (PKE) founded in Cracow in 1980, probably the first legally established independent, environmental non-governmental organization in the former socialist bloc countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This was followed by organizations like the ecologists' paper Green Brigades (1989), Green Federation (1993) and the network Polish Greenet (1995) based on the example of the Dutch network of Milieufederaties.

Similar developments were taking place in the Czech Republic and Hungary. With international support, civil society in former communist countries developed as rapidly as the societies changed themselves.

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