That Australians such as Gilding are now heading international environmental organisations reflects the fact that Australia has an unusually prominent position in the global environmental debate. Gilding is not the first well-known Australian conservationist to head off to Amsterdam; Bill Hare, formerly the Research and Policy Analyst of the Australian Conservation Foundation, departed some months ago to fill a similar position in Greenpeace's Atmosphere and Energy Campaign. Bob Burton of the Wilderness Society and ACF recently became the fourteenth Australian to be placed on the United Nations Environment Program's Global 500 honour roll, while yet another Australian, Ken Newcombe, works at the World Bank coordinating its participation in the Global Environment Facility, the current international aid fund for environmental projects.

Part of the reason for the new international interest in Australian environmentalists is that they are perceived to have more credibility in arguing for conservation of ecosystems and wilderness. Europeans, who have virtually completely transformed their own continent, find themselves in an uncomfortable position when they lecture the Third World on conservation. By contrast, Australians are seen to be talking about their own backyard as well as about global issues, because a greater proportion of our wilderness and ecosystems are intact. (Of course, resources industry cynics would respond that such city-based environmentalists are still talking about other people's backyards rather than their own.)

Paul Gilding is a microcosm of the contradictions that make up Greenpeace. He spent three years in the armed forces, but now heads an organisation which specialises in non-violent direct action. He has a trade union background too, having worked as an organiser for the Builders Labourers Federation, but Greenpeace has had at best an ambivalent relationship with trade unions, and union membership by its employees is not encouraged. The contradictions go on. The organisation which Paul will head from February next year claims five million members globally, and 90,000 members in Australia. Only 50 or so of that 90,000 have voting rights. It is uncompromising in refusing the entanglement of government grants, but is also uncompromising in not allowing any national branch to determine its own campaigns.

Greenpeace has undoubtedly been successful. In the first part of its 20-year existence it concentrated on ocean-based mammals—whales, dolphins, seals—and was clearly crucial in putting an end to unsustainable and sometimes cruel practices. In the process of doing so it developed an infrastructure that gives it unparalleled ability to act anywhere in the world.

Just as importantly, it has carefully nurtured a capacity to convey its message quickly, efficiently and graphically. While the rest of us have sometimes muddled over how to get the media to favourably cover a picket outside Parliament House, Greenpeace has been able to stage demonstrations against the French in Antarctica. It films its own activities and then, through state-of-the-art electronic communications, is able to feed footage and commentary direct to newsrooms around the globe. What happens at the bottom of the world at midday can be witnessed on evening television.

Such an ability does not come cheap. Greenpeace Australia has a budget of around $7.5 million, while internationally some $200 million flows through its coffers. Raising money for a cause was never easy and, in the pursuit of environmental goals, Greenpeace has employed fundraising tactics that others find questionable in a 'progressive' organisation. Among tens of thousands of others, I have been the target of Greenpeace education outreach workers tramping the streets for the cause and a percentage of the funds raised.

While I resisted their blandishments, I am now a member. After subscribing to the newsletter to find out more about its activities, I received a congratulatory letter welcoming me as a member. The organisation which runs a fleet of seven ships and operates an instantaneous global computer communications network informed me that the only way their computer could handle my subscription was to enter me as a member. I suspect that there are several hundred government departments, libraries and companies who are hapless Greenpeace 'members'.

This lack of squeamishness in building up its numbers, both in financial and membership terms, is reflected in Greenpeace's accounts. Over 60% of its expenditure is in the 'community action' division (activities such as recruitment, education and fundraising), while its core ecological strategies division, covering six campaign areas, spends just 19%. Greenpeace is not alone in this trend. Other environmental groups and overseas aid organisations often find that they have to spend more than half of each dollar raised just finding the next dollar. It seems that's what the market for alternative ideas and action demands. For others who seek to organise and fund alternative strategies there are difficult
lessons to be learnt here. Greenpeace plays the market and accepts the high transaction costs involved, while others, usually with much less success, seek to bypass or transcend it.

Greenpeace has been under fire recently, and is experiencing difficult times financially. In the United States its opposition to the Gulf war cost it much support, while the global recession is also having an impact. But this does not seem to have caused an about-face or a loss of morale. If anything, Greenpeace is undertaking even more difficult challenges. Paul Gilding’s input will further propel Greenpeace away from simple campaigns around picturesque animals and opposition to the horrible dangers of the nuclear industry to more long-term and less tangible goals. Gilding talks about targeting the phase-out of fossil fuels in 50 years—an heroic and improbable task. Yet Greenpeace recognises that achieving such a goal will require more than its famous ‘hit and run’ tactics. Although such actions are often deemed necessary to keep the faith with the donating public, Greenpeace employees have sometimes complained of being required to stage major actions in the same way that police complain of having to obtain quotas of traffic tickets.

Greenpeace is starting to argue its case and present alternatives; to work with others rather than only push its own position. Tackling the major parts of the framework of industrialised society rather than peripheral industries such as whaling and sealing is going to require working and negotiating with businesses, governments and communities of working people. It means encouraging business to seek new commercial opportunities rather than simply hanging onto traditional advantage. It means encouraging politicians and governments to seek long-term and sometimes painful solutions rather than focussing on isolated issues—encouraging green industries rather than simply stopping particular mining operations.

It is in dealing with organised labour that trends in Greenpeace strategy are most interesting. Whereas in the past there has often been a tendency simply to lecture trade unions, the appointment of a trade union liaison officer and other initiatives have seen a more co-operative approach. Around two-thirds of Greenpeace employees are union members even though the international leadership has often been less than enthusiastic. On the down side, Greenpeace’s heavy-handed efforts in the pulp and paper industry, often taking some liberty with the truth, have left relations with the relevant workers almost irretrievably soured.

The extent to which Greenpeace Australia is really able to work with trade unions and other social interests in Australia remains to be seen. The local branch is able to determine the particular nature of the major campaigns, but not what those campaigns should be. The limits to joint work and joint policies still need to be tested. An example of the obstacles to widening Greenpeace’s agenda would seem to be its non-participation in the recently-formed Green party; it’s simply not part of the international program.

On the other hand, joint work around chemicals in the workplace and around public transport has already occurred, and there seems no reason why employment and industry development initiatives in green export industries could not be jointly developed. How far such experiments can go will be determined by how far Greenpeace is prepared to let itself go in adapting to other people’s ideas and priorities rather than simply imposing its own.

The success of this strong international discipline on Greenpeace’s activities poses interesting questions for other groups with alternative social and economic agendas. Many profess internationalism but in practice have a national or local basis and operate internationally only at the level of rhetoric. Greenpeace is rare in being able to effectively challenge governments and transnational corporations wherever they may choose to operate.

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