

**GREENPEACE'S  
CAMPAIGN AGAINST  
OCEAN DUMPING OF  
RADIOACTIVE WASTE  
1978-1998**

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**GREENPEACE**

**Introduction**

Greenpeace has been campaigning against the disposal of radioactive waste into the oceans since 1978, when it drew the world's attention to the routine practice of dumping radioactive waste from ships into the sea. Fifteen years later, in 1993, the international community finally moved to ban sea dumping of radioactive waste from ships. However, the campaign to protect the world's seas and coastal communities from radioactive contamination continues.

Every year millions of litres of radioactive waste are being routinely pumped into the sea from nuclear reprocessing plants. Each year, the total amount of radioactivity discharged into the environment from Europe's giant reprocessing plants at Sellafield, in the United Kingdom, and La Hague, in France, exceeds that dumped in many of the world's 80 known ocean dump sites.

National governments, which finally recognised the danger of dumping radioactive waste into the sea from ships, continue to allow the same waste to be pumped directly into the ocean. This practice poses a health risk to millions of European citizens and a threat to the environment. It must be stopped.

Discharges of radioactive waste into the north-east Atlantic are regulated by the OSPAR Commission which consists of: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the European Union.

In 1998 at Sintra in Portugal a 'ministerial' meeting of the OSPAR Commission adopted a new "Strategy on Radioactive Substances" intended to prevent and eliminate radioactive discharges to the marine environment - the principal sources of which arise from operations at the Sellafield and La Hague reprocessing plants. The OSPAR members' Environment Ministers committed to "substantial reductions or elimination" of radioactive discharges by 2000, in order to ensure close to zero concentrations of artificial radionuclides in the environment by 2020.

However, in direct contravention of this commitment and stated policy, the French and British governments are considering substantially increasing the radioactive discharges from their reprocessing plants. As a result, the Danish government has tabled a motion to the upcoming annual meeting of OSPAR calling for an immediate cessation of reprocessing at the two plants. The OSPAR members have an historic opportunity in Copenhagen from June 26-30 to finally stop the north-east Atlantic from being used as a sewer for radioactive waste.

## **Radioactive Waste Dumping**

Greenpeace first encountered a vessel routinely and deliberately dumping radioactive waste at sea, approximately 400 miles South West of Cornwall in July 1978. The area had been specified by the Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA), an off-shoot of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), as the designated dumpsite of the western European nuclear industry. The Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* found the *Gem*, a vessel chartered annually by the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) to dump so-called *low-* and *intermediate-level* radioactive wastes from medical and military establishments and nuclear power plants.

Since its early days, in the late 1940s, the nuclear industry had chosen the oceans as a convenient place to dispose of its inconvenient wastes. The USA, the then USSR, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden and other states used the sea as a radioactive dump, both in the Pacific and the Atlantic, and they were determined to continue.

The Oslo Convention was the first regional treaty to regulate the dumping of wastes at sea - it was negotiated in 1972 by the countries bordering the North-East Atlantic. The nuclear industry successfully blocked efforts to include radioactive wastes within the auspices of the convention. Consequently, while the Convention regulated the dumping of sewage sludge, dredging spoils, and organohalogen compounds (amongst others) for almost twenty five years, the signatory nations had no right to even comment on the dumping of radioactive wastes. Yet, paradoxically, the OECD/NEA designated dumpsite for radioactive wastes was inside the area covered by the Convention.

A few months later in 1972 the negotiations on the *London Dumping Convention* were concluded. This was the first global treaty to regulate the dumping of wastes at sea. This time the negotiations were less dominated by the Western European nuclear states, and, as a result, the dumping of so-called *high-level* radioactive wastes was banned.

However, the *London Convention* did not provide adequate protection for the public or the environment because the classification of radioactive wastes as high, medium, or low-level had been drawn-up under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) primarily for "handling purposes" (i.e. for the protection of nuclear workers). It had little to do with the radiotoxicity and the isotopic composition of radioactive waste and their possible impacts on the health of the general population or the protection of the environment. Even today, there is no internationally accepted definition of what constitutes high-, medium- or low-level radioactive waste. Hence, among so-called *low-level* radioactive wastes, can also be found extremely radiotoxic and persistent isotopes such as plutonium and strontium.

Dumping at sea was taking place out of sight and out of mind. Apart from those involved in the narrow circles in which ocean dumping operations were planned and executed, no-one had any real knowledge of what was going on out in the open ocean. It was virtually impossible to question operations of which no one had any real knowledge. But, from 1978 onwards Greenpeace campaigned to make sure that ocean dumping became increasingly visible, thus making it more and more difficult for the nuclear industry to portray itself as a responsible industry searching for the best all-round solutions for radioactive waste management, its number one problem.

## **Greenpeace Enters the Political Arena**

Every summer, the *Gem* and other vessels continued to dump increasing quantities of radioactive wastes from the United Kingdom, Belgium, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Every summer, more Greenpeace ships were joining them - the two sides played "cat and mouse". As the confrontations intensified, the tactics changed. The "dumpers" used fire hoses to fill the environmentalists dinghies with water and jam their engines; so Greenpeace found pilots who could out-maneuvre the power-hoses. The following year, there were "cages" around the dumping platforms - Greenpeace used these cages to climb aboard the dumping vessels and occupy the ramps used to release the barrels of waste into the sea. The governments under whose flag the ships were registered claimed that they were acting within the law, and that their operations were authorised by the *London Dumping Convention*. Their claim encouraged Greenpeace to look closer at the *London Dumping Convention*. Was dumping really given a seal of approval by the United Nations? If this was the case, was the decision based on sound science and transparency? Were the dumpers reporting adequately on their activities?

In 1981, Greenpeace applied for "observer status" at the meetings of the Contracting Parties to the *London Dumping Convention*, held annually in the headquarters of the UN's International Maritime Organisation (IMO) in London. The aim was to question the self-proclaimed rights of a few countries to use the *global commons* as their radioactive junkyard. At the time, the *London Dumping Convention* was doing little more than keeping a record of whatever information its signatory countries saw fit to give it about the quantities and sorts of wastes that were being dumped at sea. There was no thought of further restrictions on the *rights of states* to dump, and certainly none given to the notion

of banning the dumping of radioactive wastes at sea or verifying the information received.

### **Political Action to Ban Dumping**

The *London Dumping Convention* began to evolve. This evolution was exemplified by the adoption of resolutions calling for a phase out of the incineration at sea of noxious liquid wastes (1988), and the phasing out of the dumping of industrial wastes at sea (1990). In 1992, in the light of this evolution and in anticipation of the outcome of the work by the intergovernmental panel of experts on radioactive wastes, Greenpeace was able to propose to the signatory countries that the “shorthand” name of the Convention, usually referred to as the *London Dumping Convention*, should be changed in recognition of the shift away from ocean dumping. The proposal was agreed unanimously, and the word “*Dumping*” was dropped from the title.

Finally, in 1993, after nearly a decade of work, the intergovernmental panel of experts on radioactive wastes disposal at sea highlighted: “*the diffusibility of the waste radionuclides in sea water which could result in transboundary transfer of these radioactive materials*” as well as the “*comparative difficulty of monitoring radioactive waste packages dumped at sea.*” For the experts, “*the consideration of these characteristics, together with the relative difficulty of retrieval, [was] a necessary part of any assessment of the sea disposal option*”.

Like Greenpeace, the overwhelming majority of signatory countries, concluded that this statement (arising from the most detailed international assessment ever made of any radioactive waste disposal option) provided a very strong basis on which to ban the sea dumping of radioactive wastes. In November of 1993, the Contracting Parties to the *London Convention* agreed to ban the dumping of radioactive wastes at sea from ships - a decision which is effectively global with the entry into force of the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention.

It is now up to the OSPAR countries to take the next step, one which is long overdue, namely to ban direct discharges of radioactivity into the sea from reprocessing plants.