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*Friends of the Earth are ten years old today. Here Walt Patterson puts their record straight.*

## **The disposable misconception**

Friends of the Earth, it goes without saying, are enemies of technology. It goes without saying; people just take it for granted. If they call themselves Friends of the Earth, those trouble-makers with the irritating name must – it follows – be opposed to anything that human beings have done to disturb the pristine purity of nature. It is a view of FoE widely and stubbornly held, in spite of 10 years of evidence to the contrary.

A decade of this is well and truly long enough. It is time to set the record straight. FoE are used to being called “neo-Luddites” and worse; but even a cursory survey of FoE's many campaigns over the past decade gives quite a different picture of FoE's attitude to science and technology.

The now legendary opening salvo in FoE's campaigning, in 1971, did not stop at the return of 1,500 non-returnable bottles to the headquarters of Cadbury Schweppes. It involved detailed research into packaging technology and its costs and benefits: and the objective of the campaign was – and remains – to keep industry from passing on to the community as a whole the cost of a technical change which ought to be borne by the industry itself and its immediate customers.

On the other side of the coin, FoE began shortly thereafter their long-running campaign to take advantage of technical opportunities for the re-use of paper – a technology subject to the vagaries of domestic and international circumstances, which regularly involve the UK importing waste paper, surely the depth of practical absurdity.

When FoE challenged the plans of Rio Tinto-Zinc to dig an open-pit copper mine in Snowdonia, FoE did not rely purely on appeals to aesthetics. They prepared extensive dossiers on the geological and ecological aspects of open-pit copper mining – not to mention analyses of the world copper market and the social and employment effects of such projects in a hard-pressed area like North Wales. No one doubts that when RTZ abruptly in 1973 abandoned plans to mine Snowdonia it did not back away for aesthetic reasons.

In 1973 FoE joined other groups to oppose plans by the then Department of Trade and Industry, the oil companies, and the construction companies to clear a site to build concrete oil production platforms at Drumbuie on Loch Carron, across from the Isle of Skye.

But FoE's evidence to the Drumbuie inquiry in 1974 said nothing whatever about the natural beauty of the West Highlands. The evidence discussed all the current and proposed offshore production technologies, pointed out that several were more promising than concrete platforms and predicted that the Government's policy would, within five years, lead to derelict platform sites around the Scottish coast. Drumbuie was saved; but the Government persisted in its policy, and within three years the derelict sites were all too evident.

FoE have been locking horns with the nuclear interests and the electricity boards since 1973, at the time of the CEGB's plan to order 32 1,300-megawatt pressurised-water reactors before 1984; but FoE's position has never been one of mere opposition.

At the Torness inquiry in 1974 FoE laid great stress on the comparative advantage of using the proposed investment instead for small combined heat-and-power stations, possibly incorporating fluidised-bed combustion. At the Windscale inquiry in 1977 FoE proposed alternative spent-fuel management technologies which would not entail such severe problems as those proposed by BNFL; and so it goes.

Meanwhile FoE groups all over the country have, since the mid-1970's, been carrying out insulation programmes for pensioners, demonstrating the virtues of an unglamorous but crucial technology.

Even the FoE campaign to save the great whales from extinction has had solid scientific and technical foundations. FoE's *Whale Manual* became essential reading not only for FoE groups but also for delegates to the International Whaling Commission. FoE also identified and publicised technically suitable substitutes for whale products.

In the transport field FoE have long opposed the relentless paving of the UK, and the demolition of existing structures by ever-heavier lorries; but FoE have also been a founder-member of Transport 2000, pressing for policies including more equitable support for the railways. For the past five years FoE have been engaged in a major campaign on behalf of what has been called the ideal marriage between technology, people, and the environment: the ingenious and elegant bicycle.

After 10 years it is thus long past time to lay decently to rest that curious myth about Friends of the Earth being enemies of technology. As an old FoE retainer once remarked, "Any technology that's a friend of the earth is a friend of mine."

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