



They came to save the rainforest... with T-shirts, baseball caps and 'mind bombs'. **Edward Fox** joins the warriors on the Good Ship Greenpeace

**Thursday October 6, 1994** My first day on the MV *Greenpeace* and I feel like I've stumbled into a floating island of unreconstructed hippiedom. Drums and gongs occupy a corner of the ship's lounge, and the walls are decorated with naive artwork by Greenpeace's friends and admirers, depicting rainbows, whales and dolphins. In the galley, there is every conceivable type of herbal tea. A sign over the sink reads, "One of society's biggest problems is incorrect management of waste." With a pang of anxiety I realize I won't be able to throw anything away for four weeks.

Greenpeace's tour of the Amazon started this evening at the Amazon River port of Belem. There was a gathering in the main sitting area of the ship at which everyone introduced themselves. Apart from Arne Sorenson, the captain, and José Augusto Padua, the leader of the campaign, the names and faces blurred.

The one exception to this was Paula, the helicopter pilot – a tough, dignified woman in her forties. The first thing you notice when you approach the ship is the sleek, fierce, cherry-red helicopter parked on a helipad on its rear deck. She gave a short speech, cautioning us not to touch it, although she hoped we would all get the chance to take a ride in it. Paula told me she used to work as a commercial helicopter pilot and once had to pick up Robert De Niro from Francis Coppola's California farm after a party. Apparently he was drunk, short, and kept looking at himself in the mirror.

**Friday October 7** This is what you call magical realism: an annual festival in honour of a local deity, the Virgin of Nazareth, is taking place. Large banners hanging over the street depict a sort of Brazilian holy trinity: the Virgin, St Peter, and, his head wreathed in light, the late Brazilian racing driver Ayrton Senna.

This evening, hundreds of thousands of people processed through the town, carrying paper fans imprinted with songs in praise of the deity, then converged at a point on the waterfront about 50 feet from where the MV was moored, for a firework display.

The fireworks were let off with little provision for safety, which made the display much more exciting. After exploding with a deafening racket in the air, they would land on the deck of the MV, aflame. Paula stood on the helipad with a hose, to defend the helicopter. Deckhands also had to make sure the rockets didn't land on the fuel drums that were stored on the deck. For the ship to be blown up by a firework would not be a good start to the tour.

**Saturday October 8** The ship is moored alongside the largest mahogany warehouse in Amazonia – in the world. Mahogany is the main point of the campaign, because of the acres of virgin forest that are cut down to obtain one mahogany tree. The presence of all this wood has caused great agitation among the campaigners – the ecological commissars sent from Greenpeace offices around the world to keep the plan of the tour on track. They have been prowling about



the docks all day, trying to establish how much wood is in the warehouse, what kind, and where it is going. Pam, the "forest campaigner" from San Francisco, wrote "We're watching you" on strips of paper imprinted with the Greenpeace letterhead and slipped them between the slabs of sawn wood, to give a fright to whoever they are being sent to in Europe.

This ship is a madhouse. After supper, the captain of a Chinese-style yacht came on board to invite everyone to come and listen to a blind reggae band later this evening, miles out of town. Anna, a Brazilian campaigner, said we'd think about it. She didn't look very enthusiastic. Kevin, a deckhand and the ship's "garbologist," sat on the floor with the yacht captain's ragamuffin toddler son, getting him to bang a brass gong as loud and as hard as he could. Meanwhile, I was having a conversation nearby with Arne about Antarctica. He was encouraging me to go, if I got the chance.

Actually, I have never been with a group of people among whom you could talk about Antarctica as if it were a place that really existed. The MV *Greenpeace* is a converted ocean-going tug, fitted with an ice-breaking hull for Antarctic waters. Arne piloted the ship on three expeditions to Antarctica where, from 1987 to 1992, Greenpeace had a base. In a sense, Antarctica was the high point of the organization's fortunes: mining there was banned in 1991. In effect, they managed to get a whole continent roped off. That leaves four to go, not counting Europe and the subcontinents.

**Sunday October 9** Night departure from Belem. As the ship pulled away from the dock, an unmarked police car made a noisy U-turn and sped off, its job of surveillance complete.

**Monday October 10** My first glimpse of the Amazon today; although literally we were on the Rio Para. The air was full of green aphids. Clumps of water hyacinth drifted by.

We also had our first glimpse of the opposition. The rumour that we were being followed by a navy ship went around before the ship itself came into view. By about 10am you could see its castellated form on the horizon. It was keeping a constant distance of three kilometres.

By noon, when we had reached a narrow point in the river, an encounter with the navy ship was inevitable. Paula went out in her helicopter to take a look at it, accompanied by photographers. At the same time, inflatables were launched carrying Greenpeace's secret weapon in its never-ending hearts-and-minds operation against evil: Greenpeace baseball caps and T-shirts. The encounter was turned into media fodder. A truculent press release was fired into space from the ship's formidable telecommunications array. They also sent a fax to the ministry of the navy, complaining of intimidation. Another day at the office.

**Tuesday October 11** This ship has been on a four-month "Forest Campaign" tour that began in eastern Siberia, continued down the Pacific coast of the United States, went through the Panama Canal and stopped at Guyana and Honduras. But this leg of the tour is the media circus. Three full-length documentaries are being made simultaneously on the theme of "Greenpeace goes to Brazil", two for Brazilian TV, one for the pushy and tabloidy Spiegel TV. There are reporters from three Brazilian newspapers.

This is, of course, the proven Greenpeace formula: perform imaginative "actions" against the ecological enemy – a variable combination of psychological warfare and eco-political theatre – and bring along a gallery of journalists to trumpet the results across the information networks of the world. In this way are created what Greenpeace co-founder Robert Hunter described as "media mind bombs – changing mass consciousness."

So I am considered a sort of on-board sub-contractor: the mind bomb delivery service. Sign here please, reader, I've got a delivery.

**Thursday October 13** Everyone on board the MV *Greenpeace* has to carry a share of the ship's housekeeping chores. A Greenpeace ship is like a kind of ashram, in which committed people (only some of whom would otherwise be mariners) live together, aiming to save the world, but first redeeming themselves through shared idealism and shared physical work. So tonight as I scrubbed the burnt food off a giant metal pot, I thought, I am shedding reincarnations. I should get the Duke of Edinburgh's Award for this.

Central to the rule (in the monastic sense) is the sorting of garbage. There are, I think, five different bins: one for organic waste, one for plastics, three for types of paper, as far as I can tell. The Brazilian "action team" has taken to this with the zeal of neophytes. The other day I was given a bollocking by one of them for throwing the wrong kind of waste paper in the waste-paper bin. I had to ask Kevin, the ship's "garbologist", for advice on what to do about it.

But here's what put me into an even worse mood. While I was clumsily sloshing a mop around the kitchen floor, the crew were having a meeting from which journalists were excluded. I'm on this ship for four weeks and they have closed meetings! I found out later that the gist of the meeting was that the crew wanted to "do an action" here at Santarem, where we are moored opposite a ship loading vast quantities of wood, while the Brazilians and campaigners insisted that we keep to the schedule.

**Friday October 14** The town of Santarem stands at the confluence of the Amazon and the Rio Tapajos, which branches off to the south, into gold-mining country. Gold miners come to Santarem to sell their grimy fistfuls of gold flecks. They come up from gold-rush dumps like Itaituba, places most notable for the social by-products of gold production – shootings, prostitution, disease.

Greenpeace did some publicity in Santarem against the use of mercury in gold mining (the action team unfurled a banner on the riverfront for the TV cameras). But social conditions like this make it impossible for Greenpeace to do the kind of actions they do in Europe and North America. This is leading to impatience among the crew, most of whom are scarred veterans of ecological warfare on the high seas, against Japanese whalers and toxic waste ships. They are champing at the bit to do something "harder", but they have to leave it to the Brazilians.

For people who depend on journalism for their success, they are awfully suspicious of journalists. I can hear the click of the safety catches on their thoughts whenever they speak in my presence. Any time a heated discussion flares up, one of the campaigners will fly towards me, insisting, "This is off the record!"

They are always telling me how anxious they are about what I am going to write. "We've been hurt too many times," they say, meaning, sniped at in print.

Greenpeace depend on people believing in them. The idea of saving the planet as a whole (through symbolic battles on many fronts) owes more to religion than science and their way of doing so lacks a rulebook (apart from an American Indian myth about Warriors of the Rainbow). Greenpeace are not a political organization, answering to a constituency.

They are not a charity or a government agency. To question, to penetrate, threatens to restrict Greenpeace's extraordinary freedom of action, its ultimate moral agency. In this, and in their practice of direct action, Greenpeace is perhaps the most successful anarchist organization in history.

**Greenpeace's veterans are champing at the bit to do something 'harder'**



**Saturday October 15** The campaign is being led by José Augusto Padua of Greenpeace Brazil, an owlish, humorous political scientist of 35. José Augusto is, in his own words, a “dissident member of the Brazilian elite”. His grandfather was a senator and his uncle was finance minister.

José Augusto’s view of environmentalism is distinctly Brazilian: to him, it is a social issue; he isn’t a mystic or a tree-hugger. The purpose of protecting the forest is to ensure the economic and cultural survival of the people who live in it. Through Greenpeace, José Augusto means to challenge the model of development Brazil has followed in the twentieth century, a boom-and-bust programme of crash industrialization. He knows that because of his position, he will never get shot for doing this, unlike the hundreds of union leaders in Brazil, who in their desperation have dared to rise up from the ranks of the poor to challenge the status quo.

The Brazilian chapter of Greenpeace is embryonic: three years old with only 2,500 members, compared with 290,000 members in the UK and 1.8 million in the United States. Yet this campaign is being led by them. The destruction of the rainforest is a Brazilian matter: it belongs to Brazil and the companies responsible for the despoliation are Brazilian.

**Sunday October 16** The MV *Greenpeace* has been joined by a second boat, to accommodate the Brazilian action team and anyone for whom there isn’t room on the ship. It is an old-fashioned Amazon river boat with open sides. Hammocks hang from hooks in the ceiling. The pilot’s wife cooks in a little kitchen below.

The food contrasts with the food on the MV *Greenpeace*. Jody, the cook, is vegetarian, and feeds us on surrealistic salads, veggie burgers and *tempe*, with meat a concession to human fallibility. On the other boat they scorn this sort of food, and eat rice and beans and stew and keep their beer to the near-frozen condition demanded in Brazil.

The navy now has a helicopter. When Paula goes up, it goes up too, although Paula does her best to confuse it by zooming above, below and around it.

**Monday October 17** I plan to compile a dossier on members of the MV *Greenpeace* crew, which I will submit to the recruiting department of the Secret Intelligence Service, in the hope of earning a commission. With their skills in military-style tactics and strategy, their loyalty to the organization and knack for psychological warfare and propaganda, they would be excellent spy material.

The first profile would be of Peter, the first mate. A Shetlander, he was once the first mate on Merchant Navy ships, and never lets you forget how much more money he would make if he didn’t work for Greenpeace. He is a mariner from another age: heroic, mystical, angry. He seems to be in perpetual combat with malevolent cosmic forces. For a holiday once, he went to Dharamsala, then the Tibetan capital in exile, to study Buddhism. Riots broke out while he was there and he ended up defending the barricades that protected the Tibetan community from an anti-Tibetan mob.

**Tuesday October 18** Everyone is vexed about something: Dennis, the engineer, because of having been told unnecessarily to install a metal plate in the air-conditioning unit; Mark, the engineer, because no one ever tells him what is going on; Paula because someone has swiped her socket wrench, and she suspects Tom has it (which he denies); Leticia, the reporter from the newspaper *O Globo*, because of injustices in the cleaning rota; Bill because his ideas are always being shot down, me because of everything, particularly the endless round of meetings and the availability of nothing but “soya milk beverage” to put in the coffee.

The engines (named Hermanina and Betty Blue by the engineers) fill the ship with the sound of an idiotic, repetitive argument. It is impossible to be alone. It is impossible to read.



The MV *Greenpeace* on the Amazon



Greenpeace helicopter ferrying a camera crew



Clearing the rainforest



Photo-opportunity action on a ship loaded with wood



Arne Sorenson, Lisé Sedrez and José Augusto Padua befriend the police



**Wednesday October 19** Whenever the ship stops at a port, federal police officers come on board to burden the ship's officers with red tape. They insist on a complete set of new papers every time: a list of passengers and crew, visa and passport details, customs declarations, a statement that no drugs or weapons are being carried, even a list of the ship's stores.

In the evening, in the garden of the Communist Bar, in the town of Parantins, where we drank endless bottles of Antarctica beer, Peter began to rant: it would be impossible for me to write an article about Greenpeace, I could never know the half of it. I could never know how hard it was, how they had risked their lives, their health, their relationships back home for this organization.

**Thursday October 20** Tomorrow there is to be an "action" at a giant deposit of logs near the sawmilling town of Itacoatiara. A newspaper quoted the deputy mayor of Itacoatiara saying, "If they come in peace, they will be received with flowers and dialogue. If they come in violence, we will bring out the big stick." He accused Greenpeace of "eco-hysterics".

**Friday October 21** We all rose at 4am for a rendezvous at 5:30 with the second boat. As the sun rose over the still water, everyone feared that the federal police would arrest or detain the boat, until it came into view, more or less on time. The operation began; the action team (in their white Greenpeace jumpsuits with the sleeves cut off, and Greenpeace baseball caps on backwards) motored out to the logs in inflatables and carried out the plan.

From my position on the ship, watching the action through binoculars, it seemed like hardly anything was happening, just some people in white jumpsuits holding hands in a circle around a big balloon with a banner hanging below it. No one was watching, except a small group of logging company officials who came up in a small motorboat when the thing was nearly over and talked to the activists for a few minutes and then left. Paula took camera crews in her helicopter to film the action from exciting angles. Some reporters were taken out to have a closer look. There was no point seeing it first-hand: it only took place in order to be represented electronically.

It was all over by 9:30am, and then everyone came back to the ship. This was a cue to drink beer and to dance for the next two and a half hours. At dinner, I asked Marta, of the Brazilian action team, what was the purpose behind holding hands in a circle.

"We were saving the earth," she said with a bashful smile.

"How?"

She gave me a look which said it was unkind or unnecessary to ask. "It was a beautiful act," she said.

Everyone was amazed by the fact that there had been no official reaction. The navy stood by at a distance and did nothing. In fact, scores of police officers were mustered at two different places in anticipation of Greenpeace's invasion: at Itacoatiara and at another logging site. When the actual location of the action became clear, there was no transport available to move the cops to the site quickly enough. Greenpeace had successfully wrong-footed them.

**Saturday October 22** We arrived at Manaus in the middle of the night. In a burst of extravagance, Paula decided to take a suite at the luxurious Hotel Tropical, and invited everyone from the ship over for a party. The party was rather hilarious. At one point I found myself lying in the huge bed in Paula's suite with Catherine, the campaigner, and Mark, the engineer, while Lizé, of Greenpeace Brazil, massaged our feet.

The crew from Spiegel TV was there. I had hoped they wouldn't be: it is impossible for anyone on the ship to have a conversa-

tion without their grey woolly thing descending like a malign puppet to record it. It is impossible to get away from them. They have acquired a team of researchers: three very young and voluptuous Brazilian women in little black dresses. Their job seems to be to drape themselves over the Spiegel TV crew. I feel rather envious. (Mem: fax Esquire about this, demanding a budget for researchers.)

**Sunday October 23** Tension has been building up below the surface – that is, tension that I am not supposed to know about – over the lack of coordination between the Brazilians and the crew. Diduche, the 58-year-old leader of the Brazilian action team, is about to quit and go home. Peter complains that there needs to be a meeting (as if there weren't already enough meetings).

So in the evening they all had a meeting, from which I was excluded. I'm so sick of these meetings! A BBC reporter and I walked into Manaus for a beer, and sat outside a cafe, waving off shoeshine boys and prostitutes. The night was very beautiful.

**Monday October 24** I am sharing a windowless cabin in the steel stomach of the ship with five other people. Paolo's snoring is remarkable. It has such variety, such timbre and depth! He could easily get a job in a Mongolian throat-singing choir.

**Tuesday October 25** A small group was formed to plan the next action, which was to be at the Jari paper-pulp factory and plantation, carved out of the forest by the late American billionaire Daniel K Ludwig, who sank half a billion dollars into the project before selling it at a loss to a Brazilian consortium. It is a supreme example of the sort of gigantist development, of triumph over nature, that Brazil seems throughout its history to have inspired.

We were at anchor about 100km up the Rio Negro, which branches north from the Amazon west of Manaus. This was the westward limit of the tour; from now on, we would be retracing the route we had come back to Belem. The big actions everyone had been hankering for were to take place in this half of the tour. Giant Amazonian insects swarmed around the light fittings as the plot was hatched.

The discussion was orchestrated by Helen, who is nominally a deckhand. Hierarchies are not what they seem at Greenpeace. She hardly seems to say a word most of the time, as she goes about her work of launching the inflatables, paying out the anchor, pulling in ropes, in her ragged cut-off jeans and faded T-shirt imprinted with the design of some long-past environmental crusade. Her father is a professor of French literature, yet she has an able seaman's ticket; her biceps bulge and her skin is weathered by the sun.

The idea is to confuse the enemy by carrying out a number of actions simultaneously. While a procession of activists march to the plant from the river, Paula is to drop a small group on the roof, where they will unfurl an enormous banner. Samples of polluted water, product of the plant's effluent pipes, will be ceremoniously handed back to the management, an act of public humiliation.

Roger, who had been action coordinator of Belgian Greenpeace, and is now working as a deckhand, and who usually never says anything, and hardly ever wears a shirt, was scornful of this plan. When he spoke, he did so in a lugubrious, Brando-ish mumble. "We could stay up there for five weeks. What difference does it make to them if we occupy the roof?" He wants to stop work at the plant. His economy of speech emphasized the firmness of his intentions.

**Wednesday October 26** In the morning we swam in the Rio Negro, jumping off the side of the ship into the tea-coloured water. The helicopter flew low over us as we lay dotted about in the water, floating on yellow inner tubes.

**I'm compiling a list of people to feed to the piranhas. The Spiegel TV crew is at the top**

**Thursday October 27** This morning the ship moored at Santarem for the second time. On the other side of the dock, a Ukrainian-flagged freighter, the *Captain Trubkin*, is loading vast quantities of wood. Unable to resist this provocation, the Brazilian action team decided to invade the ship.

Kick-off was to be 2pm. Once several cases of Antarctica beer that had been ordered earlier were safely loaded, the action began. The Greenpeacers swarmed onto the ship. Some climbed up the cranes on the ship's deck, immediately chaining themselves to the cranes with padlocks, the keys to which were taped to their bodies. Others leapt onto piles of wood, to prevent them being loaded.

Some of the dockers found it hilarious; others had TV cameras thrust in their faces. José Augusto engaged a crane operator in a debate on environmentalism. After this had been going on for about half an hour, the cavalry had appeared on the horizon: a battalion of schoolchildren led triumphantly by José Augusto's assistant Lizé, looking like Joan of Arc.

The crew of the *Captain Trubkin* were soon won over to the cause of environmentalism. They came over to the ship afterwards, drank a lot of Antarctica beer, and were delighted with the Greenpeace T-shirts the crew gave them. It was hard to get them to leave.

The police had been nowhere in sight during the action, but after the last schoolchild had left, a single federal policeman came to see the captain to advise him that the ship and its passengers and crew were to be officially notified that they had 48 hours to leave Brazil.

Half a dozen officers arrived to serve the documents of expulsion. The moment had an air of grave ceremony, like the signing of articles of capitulation in the tent of a defeated general. "This is the best thing that could have happened!" crowed a Brazilian journalist. "It cannot be enforced, and it will make the authorities look stupid!"

**Friday October 28**

Diduche told me that the reason he led yesterday's action was that ever since the ship had left ports where vast quantities of wood were being loaded without any form of action or protest, he had been pounced on by environmentalist friends. He even consulted the *I Ching*. He didn't take the expulsion order seriously, and he wasn't much disturbed by the cancellation of the Jari action.

I am travelling on the Brazilian boat tonight. The "action team" spent an hour arguing about whether a no-smoking zone should be established in the middle of the boat's open-sided upper deck, where I would have thought there was plenty of fresh air.

**Saturday October 29** Diduche was right. A judge in Belem has overturned the expulsion order, barely 48 hours after it was issued with such solemnity. Tonight there was a riotous evening of beer and Brazilian music. In the midst of the hilarity, Helen sat next to me and said in her quiet, deliberate way, "I'm really drunk, and I don't know what I said to the reporter from *Le Monde*. Is he OK?" I said I thought he was.

**Sunday October 30** The man from *Le Monde* told me that in May '68 he had tried to burn down the Paris stock exchange. Six months later he was covering it as a reporter for *Le Monde*. I told this to Helen and she seemed reassured by it.

**Monday October 31** I am compiling a list of people to feed to the piranhas. Top of the list is the Spiegel TV crew.

On the eve of the action at Belem, a meeting was held in the captain's cabin. I sat discreetly on the floor and began taking notes. They were discussing where to go if the ship were expelled from Brazil, and what to do if people were arrested. There was still no certainty that the ship moored behind the MV *Greenpeace*, the Maltese-registered *Canopus*, was loading mahogany. The informant had turned out to be illiterate. The next thing I knew, the Captain was signalling to me. The Spiegel man was standing at the

**BATTLESHIP TRUBKIN**  
Activists chain themselves to the cranes of a Ukrainian-flagged freighter



window above my head, looking down at the pages of my notebook. I had just written, "At the opposite window, the face of the Spiegel TV director has appeared..."

That was it. I went outside and confronted him. He was completely without shame. He said, "What were you writing about Spiegel TV?"

By 6pm, a plan had crystallized: the wood on the dock would be stencilled "forest destruction for export", and the port's entrance blocked.

There was a big meeting that night, of course. Kevin reopened the whole question of the purpose of the action. A mere deckhand in theory, he was the ship's institutional memory and had tremendous moral authority. "We risk everything when we do actions," Kevin said. He was ready to do that again, and suggested manoeuvring the ship so that it blocked the exit of any ship that had been loading mahogany. Greenpeace had done this numerous times in other places. "This ship has a kind of power when it is arrested. Unless the boat is seized you're not going to feel that. There is tremendous destructive power going out on that ship and we have the ability to stop it, so we should use it."

**Tuesday November 1** The plan to blockade the port was abandoned the night before when the lawyer announced that the minimum penalty for blockading a port was a year's imprisonment. The final defanging took place when the director of the port declined to summon the police, telling them instead that he had "invited" Greenpeace onto the site.

It was all over by about 4pm. The crew lay about the ship in dudgeon and silence, flopped over sofas, sulking in bunks.

**Wednesday November 2** The ship leaves Belem tomorrow morning, its campaign in Brazil effectively over. It is hard to judge its success. José Augusto pronounced himself satisfied, though he didn't look it. I checked into a hotel where I spent the day watching the soap operas on Brazilian TV. Back in the UK, where there were reports on BBC TV and radio, someone has probably had second thoughts about buying a mahogany toilet seat. In this lies the measure of victory. ☺