

David McTaggart

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David McTaggart, who has died in a car crash aged 68, was the man who built Greenpeace into a worldwide organisation. He was seen by many in the environment movement as a tenacious hero, and a pioneer of non-violent direct action. Others, notably the French government, treated him at times like a terrorist.

Despite his extraordinary flair in gaining publicity for the causes he believed in, McTaggart was an intensely private man. He rarely talked about himself and when he did some of the stories were so surprising it was hard to believe them, yet he had amazing contacts, astonishing adventures and successes - notably stopping the French continuing atmospheric testing on nuclear weapons in the 1970s, and a seven-year campaign, ending in 1991, to save Antarctica from mining.

He was born in Vancouver, British Columbia, and nothing about his early life gave a hint of what was to follow. He said his family had a long history of Scottish Calvinism, although apart from a strong work ethic and an absolute belief in non-violence the rest of the family ideals seem to have passed him by. He smoked heavily, often drank a lot, and his language was peppered with expletives even when mixing with senior diplomats and politicians. He had at least two wives and a number of daughters, finally fathering a much wanted son when in his early 60s.

McTaggart's teens were spent skiing, playing tennis, squash and golf. He particularly excelled at badminton, becoming three times Canadian national champion, the first time while still a junior. He had left school at 17, went into the construction business and for 20 years built up a very large business, first in Canada and then in the United States. All this came to an abrupt end when an explosion wrecked a ski lodge he was building in Bear Mountain, east of San Francisco. Several workers were hurt in the accident and he blamed himself - paying out a considerable part of the fortune he had amassed in compensation.

This accident changed his life. He abandoned his wife and children, bought a yacht, the Vega, and set off on a trip round the Pacific to find out about himself - as he put it.

Three years later he was still travelling rather aimlessly when he answered an advertisement asking for volunteers to sail to Mururoa to protest at the French government still doing atmospheric nuclear tests, when the rest of the world had

already agreed to go underground.

The advertisement was placed by Greenpeace, a fledgling organisation that, using Quaker techniques, had originally protested against US tests in the Canadian Pacific but had no volunteers in the southern hemisphere.

The next bit of the story, told in McTaggart's long out of print book *Greenpeace III, Journey into the Bomb*, reads like a Boys Own adventure. By his own account he was more annoyed by the French government's unilateral decision to close part of the Pacific to all shipping than about the issue of nuclear testing, but his encounters with the French changed all that.

Despite every effort of the New Zealand government to stop him leaving, and a cat and mouse game with the French navy, he succeeded in holding up the tests by sailing within a few miles of the about to be detonated bomb, daring them to kill him. His tiny yacht was eventually rammed and taken in tow by a minesweeper, an action the French tried to pass off as a rescue.

It was a lesson in propaganda he was not to forget. The yacht was boarded again and he was badly beaten by French commandos, nearly losing the sight of an eye. The French tried to claim he had an accident, but the graphic photographs on a film taken by a fellow crew member and smuggled out in her vagina showed the French lied and gave McTaggart worldwide publicity. The French abandoned atmospheric testing.

Although in his mid-40s, McTaggart set about creating a Greenpeace in Europe, finding like-minded people and setting up national organisations. The British branch started in 1978 and was run by Peter Wilkinson, a former Friends of the Earth campaigner. By 1979 Greenpeace was unified across the Atlantic and McTaggart was running it - remaining chairman until 1991.

The swashbuckling David and Goliath image of Greenpeace, with idealistic campaigners in tiny rubber boats placing themselves between whaling boats and the whales, or ships dumping nuclear waste and the ocean, appealed to the public. McTaggart made sure that where his boats went film crews went too.

The most astonishing miscalculation by the French in 1985, when they sent two secret service agents to sink the Greenpeace flagship in New Zealand on the eve of a new trip to Mururoa, transformed Greenpeace into a huge organisation. Money poured in from all over the world and it was able to run a fleet of ships and dozens of campaigns at once.

McTaggart held on to the reins of power for another five years but the organisation became too big and too bureaucratic for his rough and ready style of management. Although he remained immensely influential, Greenpeace pushed him aside.

Despite these changed circumstances he continued to campaign and attended every International Whaling Commission meeting. His job as he saw it was to lobby behind the scenes with the people he knew, and until his death he ran an organisation called the Third Millennium Foundation. Its latest project was a Caribbean-wide convention to protect the marine environment.

McTaggart lived at Paciano in Italy, where he grew olives, but still travelled to campaign. In 1995 he sailed with three others back into the Mururoa test zone and went into hiding on the atoll to frustrate the underground tests. When discovered, he spent three weeks as part of a protest peace flotilla outside the exclusion zone, long after Greenpeace's two big ships, the Rainbow Warrior and the Greenpeace, had been boarded and captured by French marines. His reward, bobbing about in the Pacific once more, was to see the French finally abandon all testing in the Pacific - a victory that took 22 years to achieve.

David McTaggart, environment campaigner, born June 23 1932; died March 23 2001

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