

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

The greenline between nations

FOR planetary protection, you need planetary communication, according to Greenpeace International. Like other campaign and pressure groups, Greenpeace uses an international computer network, GreenNet, to coordinate action by its members.

Set up in 1985, GreenNet's main objective is "to provide the environment, peace and human rights movements with a communications capability as good as that as available to the government, military and multinationals". Four full-time staff and volunteers work from Friends of the Earth's office, in an old industrial building on the edge of London's East End.

They use a Plexus mini-computer which runs Unix and an IBM compatible 386-based computer and three British Telecom diallines. But for the first year, GreenNet was a one-man operation, ambitious but practical. Its founder is a man in his late twenties, who prefers to be known by his adoptive name, Mitra.

After leaving Cambridge with a degree in computer science, Mitra worked for British Telecom and then wrote systems programs for a software consultancy company. This, together with his involvement with peace and human

Bernardine Coverley on the worldwide communications system which enables pressure groups to keep in touch with each other

rights groups, gave him the ideal background for bringing together activists, experts and technology.

The obstacles were cost and a lack of awareness about computers and communications among potential subscribers. Gifts of software from two pioneer alternative networks, PeaceNet and EcoNet in the US, solved immediate problems and the three networks collaborate as APC (Association of Progressive Communications). More than 3,000 subscribers in 44 countries are linked by Post Office lines, radio and satellite connections.

Mitra thinks the attraction of the system is that it "puts people in immediate touch with each other and with up-to-date information. A message to Malaysia can get an informed reply within a day, something that cannot be done by post and that would cost a fortune by phone". There are obvious advantages for groups such as Greenpeace, Friends of

the Earth and Amnesty, which need to respond to urgent situations, but small local projects also use the network because it is cheap and user friendly.

The list of subscribers includes Amnesty, the International Foundation for the Survival and Development of Humanity (Soviet human rights activist Andrey Sakharov is on the board; because of a delay in granting an export licence, he is still waiting for the gift of an Apple computer to arrive from the US), Glasgow Homeopathic Library, and the Survival/International Movement.

Survival/International, founded to support tribal people and give them a voice against powerful economic forces, has used GreenNet from its inception. ST's director, Steve Cory, explained how it works for them. "We were looking for an electronic mail service to link our offices in France, Britain and the States as we need to have daily contact. Information

from mail can be filed directly in the computer and we can send fax and telex without needing a separate machine." Sending news to relevant groups such as Friends of the Earth is easy because many of them are "on line", too.

Extensive use of several mailboxes costs \$1 approximately \$1,000 a year. Electronic mail can sound a little formal when it might be a chatty, personal message to watch out for a programme on Channel 4 about environmental changes in Vietnam.

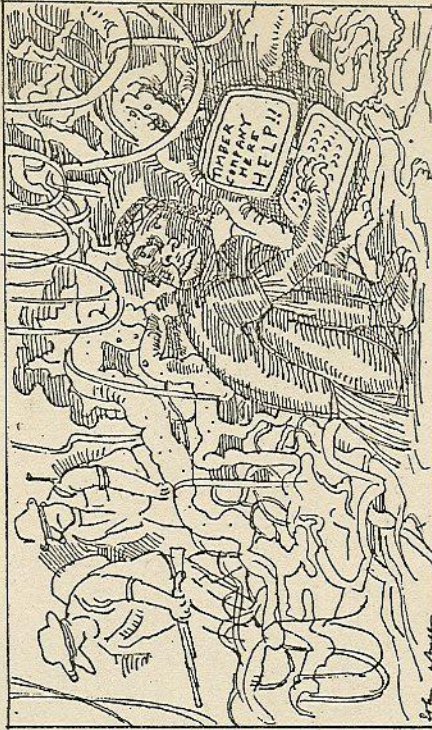
Although SI members are kept informed by telephone and newsletter, it is not unusual for someone to have access to a computer and modem and, if so, protests can be sent simply and cheaply at the touch of a keyboard. A password gives entry to the appropriate mailbox, a bulletin shows details of the current Philippines alert. A directory gives the appropriate code name and a telex goes direct to President Cory Aquino

to protest against the bombing of the Bagobo and Higaonon peoples by government forces.

Mitra emphasises that GreenNet is a tool that can be used to improve the effectiveness and resourcefulness of its users. Surprisingly, aid agencies have been slow to subscribe. There is great potential for researching development projects through the conference facilities where users file appropriate news, comments and requests for specific information, and a scientist from the African Academy of Sciences in Kenya, for example, can comment on papers from the University of East Anglia's Climate Research Unit.

Public conferences include such comprehensive topics as Disaster Assistance, Technical Aid to Developing Countries and Antarctic News. Another conference provides a weekly newsletter in English and Spanish from Central American journalists on events in the area.

GreenNet plans for early next year include database provision and completing work with new networks for Canada, Sweden, Brazil and Kenya. Donating expertise is very much part of the GreenNet ethos, and when subscribers in Brazil wanted help to set up a network, APC sent tech-



nical advice and fund-raising contacts. Each network will be run independently on its own computers and international links will use high speed modems and packet switching.

Only grants from charitable trusts and foundations make this expansion possible, as Mitra explains. "If we were just content to run the service and handle new subscriptions, we wouldn't need funding. But there are areas where we could not possibly recover costs — development work and going to events that will affect

organisations who use the network". GreenNet monitored the recent World Bank conference in Berlin, making it possible for those on the receiving end of decisions to put out press releases with their point of view.

This may appear a small change in the balance of power, but GreenNet believes it is a channel for the voices that speak out against torture, against the destruction of rainforests — voices that want to communicate across boundaries about a safer, smarter world. Cheap and quick, the obvi-

ous benefits are best described by the user who said: "You get a totally different picture of the Soviet Union when you're actually talking to someone there. What was that message again? 'Peace and goodwill...'"

New subscribers pay a £30 deposit, there is a minimum charge of £5 a month, connect time costs 5p a minute and UK mail is free with a 200-word message to the US costing 50p.

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COMPUTERLINK

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