

PEOPLE

Saving the planet while ma

By ANGELA JEFFS

When recently retired Dr. Lyle Thurston passed through Japan on his way back from Myanmar and Bali to his native Vancouver, his only priority was to call the Yoyogi-based offices of Greenpeace Japan. As soon as he said his name staff members knew who he was. For Thurston has a place in Greenpeace history.

It was at 4 p.m. on Sept. 15, 1971, that an old halibut fishing boat, the Phyllis Cormack, hoisted a green sail painted with peace and ecology symbols and the word Greenpeace, and left Vancouver port on a mission that was the first of many famous ventures. It headed for the U.S. nuclear test island of Amchitka in the far Aleutians. Thur-

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ston was one of the 20 crew members.

In a radio broadcast the next day, they described themselves as conservatives, meaning they insisted on conserving the environment for their children and future generations. They also described their goal as simple, clear and direct: To bring about a confrontation between the people of death and the people of life.

“Why did it take nearly 20 years to open a Greenpeace office in Japan? Good question,” said cofounder Michi Mathias, recently arrived

come from the Japanese themselves, which took rather longer. For some time, however, Greenpeace’s direct actions, though nonviolent, were perceived here as too radical, and its concerns did not match local concerns. The status of NGOs was low, and fundraising difficult in a society which has no tradition of donations.

“There were several attempts to start up. I tried working with NGOs and public educational outreach programs, learning about society and the importance of ‘having a go.’ From 1988 on, Greenpeace realized the necessity of having a presence in Japan. The office finally opened in 1989, though we had been active from the year before,” Mathias explained.

Naoki Ohara is the executive director of Greenpeace Japan, heading a salaried staff of 10. Like Mathias, he can remember being worried about the state of the world since a small child. While studying law and international politics in Kyoto, he staged a 22-day hunger strike against the deployment of the Tomahawk missile in the northwest Pacific and nuclear strategies in general. He sat on a corner in front of Takashimaya department store, losing 20 kg, but attracting enormous attention.

He describes it as the most intense experience imaginable.

“As the days melded into one I ran through a mental list of everything wrong with the world. I realized that the problems were larger than just nuclear alone. Being opposed wasn’t enough.”

But first he finished his degree and then he went out into the business community for three years to understand how society functioned and how people thought, although



MICHI MATHIAS and Naoki Ohara, of Greenpeace Japan, are busily preparing for an international conference on the whaling issue to be held May 10 to 14 in Kyoto.

are interviewing to fill four positions, three due to vacancies — accountant, media person and nuclear campaigner — and one new, to handle forests.

“When we advertised in 1991, we had 20 replies. When we ran an ad in The Japan Times again in February, we received more than 100. I think that indicates greater interest and concern as well as a better understanding of our objectives and aims,” Ohara said. “Most Japanese who applied had lived or studied abroad. Most spoke English. As for the foreigners, nearly all spoke very good Japanese.”

Until the office opened, the Japanese media gave Greenpeace a very hard time, putting out misinformation from the prowhaling lobby and providing a bad image for public consumption. This, Ohara says, has also changed a lot.

trying to do.

The issues given priority by the media are the destruction of the ozone layer and nuclear issues, probably because Japanese journalists grasp these the best. There are also a number of Diet members who are sympathetic, but since the organization’s policy remains strongly politically neutral, Ohara would not name them.

“The Environmental Agency?” he considered. “Very weak compared to the Ministry of Trade and Industry. We would like to encourage it to become stronger but we have to walk a delicate line.”

People were beginning to drift into the office, many looking as if they had come straight from the airport, which they had. That evening Greenpeace Japan staffers would begin a week of cross-cultural exchange with 14 ac-

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