Nongovernmental Organization Encyclopedia Article

Nongovernmental Organization

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Nongovernmental Organization

A nongovernmental organization (NGO) is any group outside of government whose purpose is the protection of the **environment**. The term encompasses a broad range of indigenous groups, private charities, advisory committees, and professional organizations; it includes mainstream environmental groups such as the **Sierra Club** and **Defenders of Wildlife**, and more radical groups such as **Greenpeace** and **Earth First!**

In the United States, NGOs have played a pivotal role in the creation of **environmental policy**, directing lobbying efforts and mobilizing the kind of popular support which have made such changes possible. They have been involved in the protection of many **endangered species** and threatened habitats, including the **northern spotted owl** and the old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest. Organizations such as **Earthwatch**, **Earth Island Institute**, and **Sea Shepherd Conservation Society** raised international awareness about the environmental dangers of using drift nets in the **commercial fishing** industry. Their campaign included drift-net monitoring, public education, and direct action, and their efforts led to an international ban on this method. NGOs are extensively involved in the current debate about the future of environmental protection and issues such as **sustainable development** and **zero population growth**.

The number of NGOs worldwide is estimated at over 12,000. They have grown rapidly in number and influence during the last 20 years. In 1972, NGOs had little representation at the **United Nations Conference on the Human Environment** in Stockholm, which was called by industrialized nations primarily to discuss **air pollution**. But these groups had become a much more significant international presence by 1992, and over 9,000 NGOs sent delegates to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The political pressure NGOs were able to bring to bear had an important, if indirect, effect on the long and complicated preparations for the summit. During the summit itself, NGOs organized a "shadow assembly" or **Global Forum** in a park near Guanabara Bay, where they monitored official negotiations and held conferences of their own.

See Also

Animal Rights; Bioregionalism; Environmental Education; Environmental Ethics; Environmental Monitoring; Environmentalism; Green Politics; Greens; United Nations Earth Summit