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Greenpeace USA & Ozone Action Attempt A Merger

by John H. Cushman Sr.

WASHINGTON -- It's not so odd that a graduate of the 80's with a master's degree in economics and some supply-side credentials should now find himself negotiating a big merger.

But in this case, the merger would combine Ozone Action and Greenpeace U.S.A., one of the more obscure and one of the more famous of environmental organizations. The buzzwords might be the same as in the world of corporate combinations -- "synergy" comes to mind -- but the objectives could not be more different.

Whether or not the merger succeeds (the two groups' boards are still thinking it over), John Passacantando, co-founder and executive director of Ozone Action, has agreed to move to Greenpeace U.S.A. as its executive director. At age 38, he will take charge of one of the best-known franchises in environmentalism after years of upheaval in the group. Greenpeace U.S.A.'s entire board resigned several months ago amid disputes over the group's internal organization, staffing and overall direction.

Greenpeace U.S.A.'s membership is about 300,000, down from the million members it reported several years ago. It has a budget of about \$20 million a year, raised mostly by costly direct mail. Its staff numbers about five dozen, after reductions under its former director, Kristen Engberg.

Ozone Action is built quite differently. It has no members, but a network of a few thousand volunteers; its budget of \$1.3 million comes mostly from family foundations, and its staff numbers about a dozen.

Both groups are based in Washington, but Greenpeace U.S.A. reports to Greenpeace International in Amsterdam. Ozone Action focuses narrowly on pollution that causes global warming or thins the earth's protective ozone layer. Greenpeace's agenda is much broader, taking in everything, including saving whales and opposing genetically modified crops.

But the groups share something important, Mr. Passacantando said: an appreciation for attention-grabbing theatrics, on the streets or on the high seas, in support of their policy objectives.

And for this sincere son of the suburbs, the trip to the helm of Greenpeace U.S.A.'s ship meant getting used to the ruckus-raising tactics known in the trade as "direct action."

Usually, Ozone Action's events are moderate in tone, like bringing ambassadors from small island states to seashore town meetings on rising ocean levels from global warming, or building Web pages that use government data to illustrate increases in heat waves. But a few months ago, Mr. Passacantando, the president of Friends of the Earth and a few others were arrested at the headquarters of the World Bank in Washington during protests of the April meetings of the international monetary organizations. They tried to hang a banner denouncing energy development and to disrupt traffic with a disabled truck.

"Somehow you can find a way that is outrageous and fun, but still fair and ethical, to speak the truth to power," he says of such tactics. "That's a fun job to go to every morning."

He was not always like this. Growing up in Whippany, N.J., the son of a father who sold insurance and a mother who left a research job to rear him and his younger brother and sister, Mr. Passacantando liked to camp, hike and fish with his dad but was not preoccupied by the environment.

"I was under the false conviction, well conveyed to me during the Reagan years, that the era of movements was over," he said. "I had missed the civil rights movement, and I thought, 'What a shame.' "

He sold computer systems, then was hired by Jude Wanniski's Polyconomics Inc. to sell economic research to Wall Street. "In fact, very conservative research, supply-side research," he recalled. "It was pro-development,

without any regard for sustainability."

Meanwhile he got a master's degree in economics at New York University. But his world view was starting to change.

He was reading John Muir and Rachel Carson, the farmer-philosopher Wendell Berry and the eco-spiritualist Thomas Berry. And he became involved "as a minor player" in a local development dispute in Morristown, N.J.

Then Bill Moyers, the head of the Florence and John Schumann Foundation in Montclair, N.J., who is the father of Mr. Passacantando's first wife, took him aboard with the assignment of encouraging "a grass-roots renewal of democracy."

(His current wife works on environmental policy in the Clinton administration.)

The work brought him into contact with environmental advocates, people like Michael Clark, who was building a coalition to protect the Yellowstone ecosystem, and Jeff DeBonis, who was organizing green-leaning professionals in the Forest Service.

"I saw that there was, after all, a movement of activists all over the country; it just did not get through the veil," he says. "There was a wonderful buzz in our democracy, which I had not been seeing, which I did not see in college. This is my generation's great battle, and I wanted to be in the trenches."

In July 1993, he co-founded Ozone Action, taking the name from the crisis over the ozone hole caused by emissions of chlorofluorocarbons. His co-founder was Karen Lohr, a Greenpeace veteran.

The two groups' styles still differ considerably. Ozone Action has been training 200 students to report on corporate efforts to influence the global warming negotiations in The Hague.

Greenpeace, meanwhile, has been driving its boats obstreperously into the path of a test of a missile defense system.

But there is no real culture gap, says Mr. Passacantando, who hopes his team will fit right in after a merger.

"Greenpeace took what the American colonists did at the Tea Party and really did develop it to an art form," he said. "And what you have now is an organization that is stabilized, that came out of a steep fall for the last decade, and really wants its leadership to get its creative work going again."