

## Former leader of UK Greenpeace considers anti-GMO campaigning “morally unacceptable”

Torri Myler 2015-07-03 08:00The former leader of UK division of Greenpeace, Stephen Tindale, has recently given an interview, where he condemned anti-GMO activism of this and other green organizations as “morally unacceptable”. He suggested that such agencies put ideology before humanitarian action and fail to recognize the deep changes in GMO industry since the 1990's. Britain is traditionally an outspoken critic of GMO production and import. In the historical context of the issue, with a recent introduction of alterations in EU legislation regulating the growth of GMOs, Tindale's words are of particular importance for the British public opinion.

A few weeks ago, the former chief of UK Greenpeace division, Stephen Tindale, openly accused groups such as Greenpeace of “putting ideology before the need for humanitarian action” by continuously targeting the development of GM crops market in the UK.

Coming from someone who during his leadership of Greenpeace from 2001 to 2005 acted as a major critic of the GM industry, such words naturally generate many questions. Why would Tindale suddenly change his stance on GMOs? What are his reasons for trusting the opinion of “the overwhelming majority of scientists”?

### GMO in Europe – a brief overview

One glance at the history of the regulation of health, safety and environmental risks is enough to see that the critical moment in the European consumer and environmental regulations, including those regulating GMOs, came in the mid 1980s.

During this time, European regulatory policies acquired a new, highly politicized nature, characterized by a general suspicion of science and mistrust of government and industry. It's interesting to see that the reception of GMOs in the American legislation developed along a completely different line – regulators would cooperate with industry and exhibit a range of supportive attitudes towards technological innovation.

How did this turn happen in Europe? Long story short, in 1984 the EU established a Biotechnology Steering Committee, which created a new group that would serve as the main agent in developing biotechnology regulations within the member states.

The first directive was adopted in 1990 – it allowed member states to “provisionally restrict or prohibit” the introduction of GMOs to the market under a “justifiable reason that an approved product poses a risk to human health or the environment”. (<http://gmo.kormany.hu/download/e/55/40000/EU%20Legislation%20Overview%20JRC%20Report.pdf>)

The directive was tested on the British ground when in 1994, a British company applied to market GM canola. While the UK Department of the Environment gave the canola variety an EU-wide approval, countries like Denmark, Austria and Norway opposed it, afraid of contaminating local crops.

### British reactions to GMOs

During the 1990s, the British public would experience as increase of public concern about the supposed dangers of genetically-modified foods and crops. The UK press characteristically dramatized GMOs as “Franken-foods” and depicted Monsanto, the American based company and the leading supplier of genetically modified seeds, as “Frankenstein food giant” and the “biotech bully boy”.

Even Prince Charles spoke out against GMOs in a famous essay published online, where he questioned humanity's rights “to experiment with, and commercialize, the building blocks of life”. ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special\\_report/1999/02/99/food\\_under\\_the\\_microscope/285408.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special_report/1999/02/99/food_under_the_microscope/285408.stm))

Richard Dawkins, a noted evolutionary biologist and outspoken science populariser, replied to Prince Charles in an open letter. “Playing God? We've been playing God for centuries!”, he wrote to account for the long tradition of genetic modification in our farming practices. (<http://www.skepticalraptor.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Dawkins-letter-Prince-Charles.pdf>)

### Anti-GMO movement today

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At the beginning of this year, the European Union introduced a new law that allows member states to ban the growth of GMOs in their respective agriculture industries. The anti-GMO movement is still powerful in Europe – Hungary, for instance, just introduced a host of brand new regulations that restrict the cultivation of genetically modified crops in the country.

GM seeds, created by altering their genetic material, are attractive to modern farming because they can increase yields by introducing resistance to certain pest and diseases, as well as reduce the input of chemical pesticides.

Right now, the only GM crop grown commercially in the EU is a type of maize called MON 810. Its biggest European grower is Spain, but fields planted with this variety of account for a mere 1.56% of the EU's total maize-growing area. Moreover, this type of maize is banned in many European countries such as Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary and Luxembourg.

Tindale in context

Greenpeace International is considered the leading opponent of GM crops. “I worry for Greenpeace and the other green groups because they could, by taking such a hard line on GM, they could be seen to be putting ideology before the need for humanitarian action,” said Tindale in the interview.

He suggested that Greenpeace stopped attacking GM products and instead focused on examining the complexity of the matter. “The reason I’ve decided to speak out on GM now is because I think it is necessary for people like me who’ve opposed it to say things have changed.”

Anne Glover, who until last year served as chief scientific adviser to the European President, pointed out a concern that the European suspicion about GM crops poses many lives in developing countries at risk. At the same time, Greenpeace denied that it was being too “ideological” when opposing GM crops.

Tindale's criticism clearly opens up a new space for re-evaluating GMOs in British legislation and public life. Perhaps thanks to Tindale's words, the public will now think twice about the words green organizations continue to publicly speak out against the growth and import of GMOs, considering how the seemingly local scale of the problem in fact affects the global growth and distribution of various food crops.

<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2015/07/520944.shtml>