

Environmental activism This article is more than 14 years old

Survival tips from an undercover cop Chris Penhaligon

A covert role within a eco-activist group is highly stressful and often lonely. Here's what it takes to make it

Tue 11 Jan 2011 11.36 GMT



 Eco-activist groups such are suspicious of any newcomer – undercover cop or not – for quite some time. Photograph: Gareth Fuller/PA Wire

The first steps in any undercover operation is to place the right person in the right role at the right time. It would be most unsuitable to have a City gent take on the role of an activist who has a complacent attitude about being arrested for trespass, for instance. Once briefed and in role, the operator will be tested in various ways throughout his time in the role, sometimes deliberately, sometimes unintentionally, but either way he must be well-controlled emotionally, both on the inside and out, and show no signs of frustration.

As with any covert role, it is easy for the operator to become paranoid about any suspicions that he or she may think is developing against them, but these must be put into proportion as it is often not as bad as it seems. The ability to switch off from all emotions is difficult, and never more so than in green groups, as by their very nature they are friendly, open and welcoming types. By this virtue alone the operator must be guarded against developing a level of sympathy for the group that could weaken the object of the operation.

In general, green activist groups are suspicious of any newcomer for quite some time. Scrutiny is something you come to live with in this environment.

There are many times when you witness crimes that clearly go against the grain within green organisations, but you simply cannot act on them – that is not your objective, so you let them go.

Your exposure to areas that can make your position vulnerable are varied, such as alcohol at after work meetings and drugs. Your excuses have to be convincing, as you're faced with both of these regularly.

The mind of the covert officer is continually assessing, re-assessing and absorbing intelligence and one can only think of ways to retain large elements of intelligence like mental triggers without remembering everything at once but also without forgetting anything. The best advice is to live, sleep and breathe the group - forget your family, forget you have another life and fully commit to the cause. It really is the only way. The job is not glamorous it is damn hard and at times lonely.

What is unique to green groups is the sheer size of the organisations, and within that the individual hubs. It can easily take an operator a year to build relations.

The stress is high, as it can be days before you can make notes or debrief in a safe environment and in many ways, green groups are more difficult to work within, as it is not a quick two-day drugs buy and out again. It takes years to build the relationships and seconds to destroy them if you get it wrong.

In general terms the burnout rate for operators is very high because of the stress levels, and very few have survived long enough inside green groups to be very effective in terms of the long-term delivery of intelligence.

Green groups are vulnerable by virtue of their size and the fact that they rely on volunteers off the streets - and yes they get it wrong, often when it matters to them most.

- Chris Penhaligon is a former undercover operative for MI5 and special branch who infiltrated Greenpeace. He is the author of [One Blood](#), published by AuthorHouse

More on this story



[Calls for inquiry into conduct of undercover police officer](#)

11 Jan 2011 | ...



[Tricked, betrayed, violated: did police spy use sex to win activists' trust?](#)

11 Jan 2011



[Spying: undercover operatives' tales revealed](#)

11 Jan 2011

Most viewed