

# Zealot Profile

## Siegfried Woldhek

**World Wide Fund for Nature, The Netherlands**  
Director, Action Network

*Formerly the head of the Netherlands organization of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Siegfried Woldhek was the co-organizer of the WWF's Action Network, a bold effort to save 12 of the most ecologically significant regions on the planet. Mr. Woldhek is also a cartoonist; his caricatures appear weekly in several Dutch periodicals. His Web site is [www.woldhek.nl](http://www.woldhek.nl).*

**“At WWF, we don’t use the word zealots, but we** have begun to recognize the importance of powerful local leaders who set out to achieve extraordinary results.

“The stakes are high for conservation organizations today. Endangered species almost never exist entirely in the wild. People live there, too. If we want to protect plants and animals from extinction, we must develop different management skills and more empathetic leadership.

“Like many organizations with a strong fiduciary responsibility (in this case to donors), WWF had a long-standing practice of managing through committee oversight. But in the new conservation environment, we are learning that it is more effective to appoint a program manager and give him or her a budget and a relatively free hand. This person is responsible for the ‘heart, head, and belly’ of a project: the vision, the strategy, the day-to-day management, and the development of people. He or she goes to bed with the project each night, and gets up with it in the morning.

“In 1995, we started operating this new way, with three experimental groups called Target-Driven Activities (TDA) focused on challenging problems in the areas of climate change, forests, and ocean, respectively. Each group had a budget of \$5 million, and permission to select their people and goals. The results are impressive. For example, in three years, the Forestry TDA almost

doubled the amount of old-growth forest lands protected from development, from 6 percent of all old-growth forests worldwide to 10 percent.

“We develop these ‘zealot-like’ skills into the whole organization. In 1996, a group of WWF scientists identified 238 high-leverage, mostly large ecological regions (known as the Global 200), which together represent a huge share of the earth’s biological wealth. Some of these areas were unpopulated; others, like China’s Yangtze River watershed, had millions of people living in them.

“Developing such a large-scale conservation operation is completely different from an ordinary project; it means collaborating with many constituencies, including local and regional politicians, businesspeople, and community leaders. In September 1997, our group in WWF Netherlands announced that it would allot \$2 million to \$3 million each for three-year projects aimed at Global 200 regions; any local WWF office could apply. We soon had six new Action Network projects (as we called them) under way, and another six the following year. Again, all have made remarkable progress.

“For example, the Forests for Water, Water for Life campaign to protect Malaysia’s mountain forests, at first, seemed to have everything going against it. The industrial development of the region was based on an unstable, labyrinthine web of bribes, caste-system relationships, business links, and political liaisons. And most of the influential people, including many government officials, opposed the project.

“Yet only three years later, the government has declared prevention of the illegal clearing of the highlands a major security concern. The morale and effectiveness of the Malaysian national office of WWF has also been thoroughly transformed. I heard that the head of the office told his staff recently, ‘You know, guys, our goal has always seemed ludicrously impossible. But here it is, in today’s headlines.’

“Today, the entire WWF is reorganizing itself to focus on the Global 200, using TDA-style management approaches. Personally, I have learned a great deal from seeing what motivated people can accomplish in the context of a complex, large-scale, and multi-constituent change initiative. Furthermore, no one can argue that the WWF’s Action Network environmentalists imposed a program from outside on Malaysia. This was a passionate, collaborative endeavor shared with the people who live in these watersheds, coastlands, and mountain regions, day after day and year after year.”

— **Interviewed by Art Kleiner**