

# Environment Group

## *Older Women's Network*

by Rivka Phillips

*L'auteure brosse un tableau de l'initiative de lobbying pour protéger l'environnement prise par des femmes du troisième âge membres du Groupe sur l'environnement, un sous-groupe de Older Women's Network.*

The Environment Group (EG) started in 1989 as part of the Older Women's Network (OWN) which was formed in 1986. OWN as a whole concerns itself with the societal-economic needs of women, with an inevitable overlap on some issues with the needs of men as well. The EG is the only part of OWN which intentionally goes beyond the needs of women to address concerns for our earth and its air, water, and soil, for the health of all living creatures and the need to realize that these are inextricably linked. We feel that environmentalism must determine economics and politics rather than the reverse, and that environmentalists have the uphill task of persuading politicians to understand this, and to act in accordance with it. This is a tall order, though one that is slowly gaining momentum.

We are a small group made up entirely of volunteers, as OWN as a whole is. We discussed at the outset whether another environmental group was really needed in view of the many existing ones. However, as individual women we were already active, some of us more than others, in environmental activities. As a small group of women, we already had some cohesion, so we decided to proceed. Perhaps we would only increase our own awareness, but that would be worthwhile. Perhaps we would only influence a few people, but that too would be worthwhile. And perhaps we would have some influence on governments and industry. We do feel that we, in conjunction with many others, have even achieved the latter, to some extent. There have been no mass conversions, but there have been some individual ones. And through our constant stream of letters to governments, we communicate our point of view, which must surely affect the thinking of some who have not yet openly acknowledged the truth and urgency of these views.

We network with other groups on specific issues and activities, and we utilize the research materials of various organizations, such as Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Pollution Probe, Pesticide Action League, and others.

The issues we select to work on are those that seem urgent and timely—although all environmental issues are—rather than issues specifically related to women and the environment. Inevitably, some of our concerns do pertain more to women than to men,

but that has not been the basis of our mandate. Our group is made up of all women simply because it is a component of a women's organization.

Our environmental concerns have led us to action on issues such as the following: clear cutting of forests, improved railway transportation to fill a need in Canada and to reduce the use of automobiles with their carbon dioxide emissions and ozone damage, abolition of the James Bay II Power Project in Quebec, energy conservation, extended public transportation especially in Toronto, increased research and production of alternate, safe, renewable energy sources such as solar energy and photovoltaics, Canadian withdrawal from NAFTA, initially for environmental concerns but also in relation to Canada's economy, reduction of the use of pesticides both in agriculture and in public parks where municipal governments have complete control, more stringent government legislation and monitoring of dumping by industry of poisonous substances, population control, and more.

These concerns have led us to communicate with various governments. Federally we deal with the Ministries of Energy, Mines and Resources, Environment, Agriculture, Indian Affairs, International Trade, and Foreign Affairs. We dealt with the Prime Minister on the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit and its follow-up at home. Copies of our letters go to the leaders of members of the NDP and the Liberal Party. Provincially we have written regarding energy, waste disposal, and other issues. Municipally we have been active regarding the abolition of pesticides, improved public transportation, and improved facilities for cyclists.

Until the present, our major strategy has been advocacy and lobbying via letter writing to the three levels of government. In future, we hope to target industry directly by appealing either to their cash flow or their conscience—or both—as other groups have effectively done in the past. We hope to put pressure on government and industry indirectly using methods such as pickets, boycotts, sit ins, adverse publicity, etc. At the same time we will, of course, continue our letter-writing.

As our correspondence, especially with the federal government, goes on, we are increasingly critical, not of the lack of response, but of its unsatisfactory, closed-mind nature. Initially, the responses were slow. But as time went on and the volume of our letters increased, we may have created an awareness that we are here for the long haul, and we now receive lengthy and more or less prompt replies. But what has been the nature of those replies? Without exception they are an extensive—sometimes

four pages single-spaced—explanation and defence of the policy we are criticizing. Never once has there been a whisper of a suggestion that a particular government policy might be ill-advised or harmful, or that proposals we make seem reasonable and might be considered, let alone acted upon. When the trade disagreement arose between Canada and the United States over the interpretation of United States content in Nissan cars assembled or manufactured in Canada, Simon Reisman, Canada's chief negotiator of the Free Trade Agreement, referred to the Americans as "thugs." Brian Mulroney used the term "tin pot dictator," presumably referring to his friend George Bush. These two references appeared publicly in the newspapers at the time. Yet in a four-page letter to our Environment Group at that time from the Minister of Trade and Industry, the Free Trade Agreement and the proposed NAFTA which he was then negotiating are spoken of as unadulterated blessings for Canada—no reference to thugs or tin pot dictators. The four page letter does contain a brief ten-word statement—"of course Canada-U.S trade is not without its friction," but on the whole everything is for the best.

We have spoken to other environmental workers who have met with similar unsatisfactory replies, which either totally defend government policy, or hedge when a direct answer might be detrimental to the government.

As mentioned earlier, we network with other environmental organizations. In Toronto in October 1992, two of our members were delegates to a two day pre-conference of women who were here to attend a full scale international Eco-Environmental conference in the city. We heard from a wonderful woman who was Chief of her tribe in Nigeria and who talked about the initiatives of women (who make up at least 90 per cent of Nigeria's agricultural workers) and their attempts to be an active part of the decision making of their country. We heard a woman, originally from Peru, tell of the tragedy of structural adjustment with its resulting crushing poverty and reduced health and education provisions. We heard that in Central and South America there are 40 million homeless street children, 14 million of them in Brazil. We heard from a western Canadian farm woman of the terrible struggle for farmers to retain their farms. We heard repeatedly that the wealth of the rich countries is predicated on the poverty of the poor or developing countries. To be at such a conference is saddening, but it creates warm bonds, necessary bonds, with women all over the world, and increases our energy and resolve.

In our own Environmental Group, we work well together. As we exchange ideas at our meetings, and action is planned, we renew our energy and enthusiasm. This is not to say that we do not have ongoing feelings of anger, frustration, fear, and fluctuating confidence. But we know there is no alternative but to keep working. And we hope that the efforts of the small groups and the large, and the networking at local, national, and international levels will be in time.

*Rivka Phillips is the founder of the Environment Group, and has been a member of the Older Women's Network from its beginning. She is also active as a member of a seven woman Board of Directors overseeing OWN's subsidized, cooperative apartment building project for women of age 45 and older. She was a high school teacher of French and English until her retirement in 1977.*

## NATHALIE STEPHENS

un nuage noir traverse ton ciel  
femme  
en toi rage déferle  
femme

tu portes dans ton coeur  
un miroir habité de fissures  
reflétant les mensonges  
d'un passé dévorant

femme

femme qui pleure un passé  
ne t'appartenant pas  
femme qui parle un langage  
étranger  
femme qui crie l'injustice  
réalité dont on t'a tant  
gavée

femme en lambeaux

moi  
tié de femme

tente de rassembler les morceaux  
d'une histoire inconsistante

femme  
habitée par ciel mer et terre  
femme  
dont les yeux disent la lune  
enveloppée par la nuit

silence  
femme

femme  
emmurée par l'oubli

*Nathalie Stephens a déjà publié de la poésie dans LittéRéalité et elle attend la parution d'un travail de recherche aux Éditions du GREF au sujet des femmes antillaises.*