

"Ecofemmes"

Young Women Activists

by Heather Benson

Cet article examine l'activisme de quatre jeunes femmes engagées dans le mouvement pour la protection de l'environnement. Chacune d'entre elles, à sa façon, est vouée à sauver la planète.

Driving through the razed mountains of rainforest on the west coast of this country, I stopped at a convenience store. Glaring down from a shelf were air fresheners in the shapes of nude women. The common theme of degradation and violence between the images of the mountains and the air fresheners connected in my mind.

In this society in which one in two people are sexually abused and the ancient, sacred forests are raped each day, women like the four whose stories follow share a strong commitment to working towards the Earth's recovery.

Sarah, age 17

Sarah knew at the age of four that she wanted to study gorillas in Africa. She was inspired at the age of twelve by meeting Jane Goodall. Sarah professes that everything she did at a young age was related to her love of animals; be it a public speaking contest, or reading or watching television. In high school, she helped formulate one of the most active environmental groups in Victoria: the Environmental Youth Alliance.

One event that cemented Sarah's commitment to environmental action was a trail-building expedition into the Walbran Valley when she was fifteen. "After driving for hours... through clearcuts, to come upon this enchanted ancient rainforest was a very emotional experience." She describes herself as having always been opinionated on issues such as animal rights and racism, so sympathy for the plight of the Walbran, one of the last remaining ancient rainforests of Vancouver Island, was natural.

Her action took the form of a forty-seven day fast to draw



Jessie, Nude Woman

attention to the need for the protection of the Walbran. She and nineteen other high school students from Victoria kept their vigil on the lawn of the Legislature Building during many of these days. In reward for her effort, the incoming NDP government promised to respect the youth voice when they came to power. Back in the Walbran a few weeks later, Sarah was arrested when she chained herself to the bottom of a logging truck in order to prevent a logging road from being constructed in the pristine wilderness. This was not the first time she was arrested while protecting of the forest. Earlier the same year, she and other young activists staged a sit-in at the Ministry of Forests demanding answers from the Minister on plans for the Walbran. They were arrested, but the charges were dropped. Sarah is an eighteen year old high school student, on the honour roll and in her school's Challenge program—not your stereotypical criminal with two arrests to date.

Jessica, age 18

Jessie is an artist. As a child in Victoria, she found inspiration in the forests and the magic beings of the underworld: the gnomes and fairies of her imagination. She attended an alternative school which stressed sharing, caring, respect, peace, and awareness. Her first environmental action was at the age of five when the willow tree field behind her yard was being developed. Jessie voiced her outrage by stealing marking pegs and the worker's lunches. This story of public protest and civil disobedience is repeated many times over in her youth. Indeed, ten years later when she became a protector of the Walbran Valley, her action was through fasting and blockading of logging roads.

Jessie uses her art to "contribute to a movement away from a patriarchal society whose motivation is for power-over and money, one whose vision is not long term and does not care for



Donna at the Vancouver Aquarium

Earth or the future.” Her paintings are strong environmental statements. Jessie explains; “I believe the ignorance...is soon to shatter and the power of nature, as the four elements symbolize, will overcome and heal from the wounds of our mistakes. I hope to show a shocking reality to the viewer and create a reaction that will spur environmental action.” One work of Jessie’s, “Nude Woman” portrays her feelings of a strong connection between we’moon (women) and Earth. Jessie describes the work, “This drawing is a statement of the divinity of Earth Mother, her power and balance. This can be seen by the glow around her head and the balanced meditation position she sits in on the grass. Her pure connection to Earth, which surrounds her fertile body, reflects this unity.”

The messages of her art, the blockading of a logging road, or a sit-in at the Ministry of Forests, Jessie says, come “...from my truth, what I see, hear and feel, and my loyalty to my heart, to my Earth Mother and to those lives yet to come.”

Donna, age 26

From Pollution Probe to Greenpeace to the Sierra Club, Donna has devoted herself over the past years to the non-profit sector. She was inspired by Helen Caldicott many years ago in Toronto, where for the first time she felt there was a forum for her activist energies. She was empowered. Much of this empowered energy was channeled into “direct action” with Greenpeace, an organization dedicated to speaking out. For Donna, direct action is “very important to my spirituality...in order to be healthy, I cannot be silent concerning things which I feel strongly about.” At Greenpeace, she learned the difference between a “hard” and a “soft” action. Donna describes a hard action as the more

aggressive or confrontational actions, like putting a zodiac boat in front of a whaling harpoon. According to Donna, it is the soft actions, the sit-ins or guerrilla theater on the streets, that are the most effective. In her experience these soft actions ask for understanding, and are therefore more likely to positively affect people. Donna cites the example of a hunger-fast in a cage for 36 hours which she participated in at the Vancouver aquarium. The purpose was to bear witness to the capture of two more Beluga whales. Donna did 24 media interviews in those 36 hours:

We wanted people to think about why we put other creatures in cages. Even if we say it is for educational reasons, is that the education we want to give our children—that it’s o.k. to take away the freedom of another creature, and that it’s o.k. to objectify another creature?

Donna has recently immersed herself in a governmental process on Vancouver Island: the Commission on Resources and Environment. The Commission has invited all concerned with land-use issues on Vancouver Island to a round table. Donna has spearheaded the involvement of the Youth sector. She began as a participant in the Conservation sector, but found that even though 80 percent of those being arrested for the environment were under thirty, these same people were disempowered by the older, more academic environmentalists within this sector. What formed was the Group Representing Youth for Future Interests Now or GRYFIN. The group’s mandate is to be nurturing, empowering, innovative, inclusive, and visionary. GRYFIN gives youth activists an alternative to barricades and fasts. According to Donna, “youth should not have to feel so desperate that their only option is to go to jail.”

Kirsten, age 21

Kirsten lives in Tofino, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, in the heart of Clayoquot Sound. Clayoquot Sound is a 200,000 hectare area, the largest expanse of ancient rainforest left on the island. It is the centre of a controversy over logging—multinationals' short term profit versus the loss of a stable community, biodiversity, and long-term jobs in forestry.

Kirsten is a witch. It was trips to the wilderness before the age of seventeen that intensified Kirsten's need to protect the Earth. She lives in a one room cabin with a wood stove and no plumbing, across the highway from a clearcut. "This vantage point allows me to relate to both the 'hippie' and 'redneck' points of view." This evening, she will perform a ritual. It will be a vision for the future and a prayer for friends facing sentencing for protecting Clayoquot Sound. For Kirsten, rituals are "a weaving of consciousness; changing my inner world and watching the world outside me change. This way of living is ancient and its history seems to have been forgotten in modern times."

Kirsten describes her mother as a strong feminist who brought her to her first protest at the age of twelve. It was a protest against pornography. For Kirsten, her mother was her mentor; "My mother is a courageous woman who chose to break the stereotypes for women in her time."

Kirsten says, "It is a challenge to remember your instincts as a human being when the mainstream media dictate the scripts and decide on the good guys and the bad guys. In the eyes of the media I'm an eco-terrorist, but I'm not an eco-terrorist. I am a woman who cares about my life and the survival on the planet."

In the summer of 1992, she was arrested for lying in the path of logging trucks in Clayoquot Sound. Kirsten describes her evolution towards action:

I watched for four days as people got arrested (for blockading a logging road), and all day long we'd watch as trucks loaded with huge trees drove out on that road. After a while that image got in pretty deep. My decision to get arrested came about one evening when it was suggested to do a youth action. The next morning a bridge was blockaded with logs, and I lay down in front of those logs to stop the trucks. I cried when the policeman carried me off the road and into the paddy wagon, and I noticed one of the loggers with watering eyes.

Women of action are being born each day. They can be found in rape relief centres, at protests, at negotiating tables—everywhere. Always, they are creating new ways to express the need to love each other and Earth.

Heather Benson is twenty one and has been politically active since the age of sixteen. Her work in the past two years has concentrated on direct action and public knowledge campaigning with Greenpeace and the Western Canada Wilderness Committee. Currently she is involved in the Commission on Resources and Environment, negotiating land-use on Vancouver Island with the Youth sector.

VALERIE FREE

the poet

the poet's standing on her bathmat
the sun's a shining fist
drawing the first blow,
the moon sinking,
sinking as deep as dreams
the poet's standing on her bathmat
the sun's just risen
while the moon's gone down

Valerie Free teaches ESL and Literacy at a college in Kelowna.

SISTERING

Sisters Pick You Up: Sistering's Outreach Program

A booklet about the development of a community support program for women who live on low incomes in isolation from their families and friends. The booklet includes details on how Sistering's Outreach Program was developed, how it operates, a list of potential funding sources, and an annotated list of resources. As well, stories about the women who come to the programs are included. A limited number of copies are available in English. There is a fee of \$10 to cover production and mailing costs.

Full of Hope and Power— Sistering's Women and Poverty Action Kit

An information and action tool for groups to confront the issue of women's poverty and to advocate for much needed change. The kit has five sections dealing with poverty, women's work, violence against women, health, and housing. Kits are \$15, including postage and handling.

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