

Generation Green

Young rebels with a cause are taking to the streets, the parks,
and the treetops to fight for the planet.

Heather Millar

December 2000

Contents

Activist Profiles 12

My liaison has told me to yell, "Hello, trees!" to announce my arrival at the Fall Creek tree-sit, about 40 miles southeast of Eugene, Oregon, in the Willamette National Forest. As I hike into the site along fire roads and trails, I wonder if I'm going to feel too silly to shout the prescribed greeting. Luckily, when I finally reach the clearing, a few people are squatting on the ground, beating on bongo drums. "Hi, sorry I'm late," I wheeze, letting my backpack slip to the ground. "I'm ..."

"We know who you are," says a young man, his electric-blue eyes framed by dreadlocks and his septum pierced with cherry wood. "You wouldn't have gotten this far if we didn't want you to. Ground security saw you hiking in."

"Lots of Freddie's around lately," says a second bongo player, his orange hair tipped with blond, like flames. "Gotta be careful." ("Freddie's," I learn later, is tree-sit lingo for the U.S. Forest Service. The tree-sitters believe they're under constant surveillance by the authorities.)

In the center of the clearing, river rocks have been arranged to form the Celtic sign for the sun. A Maypole strung with ribbon stands at the north end; a compost pile and refuse pit lie far to the south. Two hundred feet above, out of reach of Forest Service cherry pickers, a cluster of "nests" made from rope, wood, and blue tarps—home for a revolving crew of roughly half a dozen tree-sitters—has been lashed to a few monumental Douglas firs. A huge cloth banner flutters between two trees, proclaiming the group's name: Red Cloud Thunder.

"Hey ... Lorax?!" a female voice calls down from the tree village to the young man with the pierced nose. She identifies herself as Sprite, but the platform's height and the glare of the afternoon sun make it impossible to see her face. "Why don't you show our visitor around the forest for a while?" she asks. "Give her an idea of what we're fighting for?"

Sprite and Lorax are one branch of a large and diverse group of young activists fighting for the environment. While the tree-sitters employ direct-action tactics, their peers lead hands-on restoration projects, campaign for green political candidates, organize protests, and recruit new members for established groups like the Sierra Club. Their efforts burst into the public consciousness in December 1999, when young demonstrators helped shut down a meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle. In April, protesters next rattled the Washington, D.C., meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

After the demonstrations in Seattle and D.C., the mainstream press largely focused on the gladiatorial thrust-and-parry between protesters and police. How many were arrested? Was pepper spray used? Did the meetings go on despite the protests? Less emphasized was the way in which these events gave young people from dozens of organizations an opportunity to work together and a chance to flex their political muscle.

The youthful crowds at the WTO and World Bank demonstrations were conversant not only in the social repercussions of globalization, like the staggering debt amassed by developing nations, but also in the ways that the corporate system is rapidly depleting

our natural resources. While some campaign against sweatshops or the death penalty, huge numbers of youth activists are tackling the big environmental issues: logging in our national forests, habitat destruction from the Amazon to Siberia, industrial pollution, damage done by non-native species. And they approach these issues with all the energy and optimism of, well, youth.

In New York City, students clamor to be admitted to the newly renovated High School for Environmental Studies. In 1990, about one in every ten high schools had an environmental club; now, approximately nine in ten do. Green student organizations are proliferating around the world, with 19 nationwide groups in North America alone.

"I think the environment is vital to, you know, everything else," says Ingrid Chapman, a 20-year-old University of Washington student and a member of Free the Planet!, a national network of student environmental groups. "I care about human rights, and I care about the economic takeover of the planet, but I think the environment is the basic issue underlying everything."

Out in the Oregon forest, Sprite and Lorax (tree-sitters tend not to use their given, or "Babylon," names) depend on this growing awareness and action. While the young activists in Cascadia Forest Defenders (also known as Red Cloud Thunder) take a stand in the trees, dozens of loosely associated members of Earth First! and other organizations support the effort, soliciting donations of money and organic food, delivering supplies and mail to the forest, providing security, and gathering information about Forest Service plans. In shifts, the tree-sitters have managed to occupy these trees since April 1998, ever since the U.S. Forest Service auctioned off 96 acres of old-growth forest to the unfortunately named Zip-O Log Company based in Eugene.

As recently as five or six years ago, tree-sits like the one at Fall Creek—which began with two trees and has since expanded to six—were disorganized, emotional responses to planned timber harvests. Protesters literally chained themselves to tree limbs. Today, tree-sits are sophisticated efforts employing cell phones, walkie-talkies, Web sites, mountaineering gear, and savvy public relations. At least eight established tree-sits continue in California, Oregon, and Washington; most have sprung up since 1997, when Julia Butterfly Hill scaled Luna, the now-famous Humboldt County, California, redwood where she lived for two years. While loggers have cut the forests around Luna, and around an Oregon tree called Madre Loca, the other tree-sits have managed to keep the chainsaws at bay.

Lorax leads me into his forest world. Once a high school jock in upstate New York, he passed through the Oregon woods en route to Hawaii one summer. "I just knew this was where I needed to be. Hawaii will be there later," Lorax says. "I've changed a lot." The 25-year-old has spent a total of 13 months in the trees. In a simple ceremony, he even "married" a big tree they've named Grandma.

I feel disoriented almost as soon as we leave the clearing, but Lorax hikes with confidence. Like most old-growth forests, this stand of ancient Douglas firs has a spacious, luxuriant quality to it. The branches above our heads are festooned with witches' hair moss. Large ferns and giant skunk cabbage spring like green fountains from the dark

soil. On the ground, mushrooms curl in strange shapes, and bright green and yellow centipedes inch along amid brown salamanders with pumpkin-orange bellies.

After about an hour, Lorax brings me to the fallen body of Joy, a tree once protected by a tree-sitter. Lorax becomes solemn, almost funereal. "For some reason, the sitter came down, and the Forest Service got wind of it. They came out and cut the tree down. They didn't even take it. What a waste," he says. "Remembering what happened to Joy keeps us going. If it comes to the tree's life or my life, I'll sacrifice mine."

Back at the tree village in late afternoon, Sprite, 19, climbs barefoot down a tree, then uses a rope to descend the last 15 branchless yards. It's time for me to go up. Sprite shows me how to buckle into a mountaineering harness and how to slide the triple-slipknots up the main rope until I put weight on them. To ascend, I step into a foot-loop of webbing, wrench my body toward the main rope, and stand straight up in the loop. Then I slide the hand knot up as far as it will go, sit back in the harness, and begin again.

"Try to enjoy the climb," says Sprite, who trained as a dancer before her experience as a WTO demonstrator led her to the tree-sit. "You'll do fine."

I start my clumsy inchworm dance up the rope. At 30 feet up, I begin to sweat and rue my decision to wear a fleece pullover. About 75 feet up, my hands blister, then tear. No wonder most everyone in this tree-sit brigade is (unlike me) under 30. But despite the difficulty and the fear, the climb becomes enjoyable. With each slide and heave, I see more clearly that a forest is not just a loamy floor and a cool canopy above, but a vertical, three-dimensional universe, like the ocean. Tree voles skitter up the trunks. Flying squirrels and gray jays flit from branch to branch. Insects whirl and buzz everywhere.

After 45 heart-pumping minutes, I crawl over the edge of a plywood platform with the help of a 20-year-old named Spring. The riggers constructed their tree houses with a medieval-castle mentality. No climber can enter without the help of the sitters: The climber has to push out from the trunk, and then be pulled over the edge of the platform. This done, I collapse in Kali-Ma, the Grand Central of the tree village. Two large trees, Grandma and Yggdrasil, hold us up; plywood donut platforms encircle each tree and a large, two-tiered platform hangs between them. "You made it!" says Spring. He gives me a big hug.

While I recover from the climb, Spring squats at an L-shaped shelf that serves as a kitchen. A rocket stove, fueled by a propane tank hanging under the platform, hisses as he stir-fries a vegan dinner of brown rice, vegetables, soy sauce, and sesame seeds. Sealed boxes of spices, grains, and amino acids are stacked nearby. A Plexiglas bread box keeps flying squirrels out of cookies and crackers.

Across the platform, another shelf serves as a library and staging area. On one side lie a radio, a walkie-talkie, a yogurt container filled with wildflowers, an empty government-issue prune can full of tools, a video camera donated by University of Oregon students who want to film a documentary on the tree-sit. Since there's not a lot to do in a tree, the rest of the shelf groans with books: McLibel: Burger Culture

on Trial; The SAS Escape, Evasion, and Survival Manual; a Forest Service Draft—"Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement"; In the Absence of the Sacred; the writings of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski; and Baking in a Box, Cooking on a Can.

Sure, Spring says as he chops and seasons the vegetables, tree-sitting is tough. The northwest storms blow wet and cold. Though it's May, it snowed just last week. Exercise becomes a distant memory; joints begin to stiffen. It's almost impossible to stay clean. Everyone fights the psychological tension, the fear that at any moment the lumberjacks and the Forest Service might burst into the clearing, burn or confiscate the gear on the ground, take down the village, or cut all the trees around it. Spring was at the Umpqua (a.k.a. "Right View") tree-sit near Roseburg, Oregon, when crews clearcut the forest all around Madre Loca, the tree where he was living. "The forest screamed as they killed it," he says.

Dusk begins to fall, and the sitters in the other trees start to hoot and call in the deep-throated code they've created. They're coming over to Kali-Ma for dinner, gliding in on harnesses along ropes strung between the trees. All took very different paths to what they call the "Ewok Village."

Spring hit the road after high school. "I was dissatisfied and I went to seek," he says. "Here, I can take a real stand against injustice." His parents didn't understand at first, but now they're supportive, he says. Spring's younger brother, who's almost 17, has become politicized by his older sibling's actions, and will join him in the trees soon.

The tree-sitters are acutely aware that their radical stand will not be enough to save the remaining old-growth forests. They see themselves as witnesses, whose extreme actions will spur others to file lawsuits, speak at Forest Service review meetings, organize environmental groups, or simply write checks to support those efforts. "I lived two long, cold winters in the trees, where all I ever heard of civilization was chainsaws," Spring says. "What I did was only symbolic. But we need our Rosa Parks and our Gandhis for the environment, people who will do what it takes to get things right."

Indigo, 19, left family problems in Ohio and has found that tree-sitting gives her new strength. "I get so much energy from the trees, and from these people," she says. "People are cheering you on." She admits that it's impossible to completely separate from mainstream culture. "We drive cars out here. There's lots of plastic. I like hot showers. I like a roof overhead. But if we don't do this, who will?"

Some 400 miles south, and very much on the ground, the young members of the California Conservation Corps recognize that changing the world often begins with less dramatic actions—as humble, sometimes, as pulling weeds. The crews look like tiny dots down the beach, completely dwarfed by the jaw-dropping drama of the Mendocino coastline. Ahead, the Ten Mile Dunes shiver and undulate toward the mountains and redwoods in the distance. The Pacific Ocean crashes onto the sand, creating a salty, almost imperceptible mist. Grass sways in the steady spring wind. It's a perfect day, except for one thing: The grass shouldn't be there.

In the late 1800s, gardeners at San Francisco's Golden Gate Park introduced European beach grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) to the West Coast. They thought the smooth,

graceful plant was an ideal way to stabilize the dunes that edged the Pacific, but they didn't anticipate the consequences: Beach grass diminished the open pockets of sand that the endangered western snowy plover needs to build its nests. It also turned out to be highly invasive, not just accenting the landscape, but conquering it.

Howell's spineflower (a delicate, low-growing, endangered flower unique to the area), the endangered Menzies' wallflower, and round-headed Chinese houses, their blooms like tiny, purple pagodas, all disappeared under the relentlessly advancing phalanxes of grass. "The dunes should look like a beautiful garden," sighs Renee Pasquinelli, the California State Parks ecologist who planned the corps' project at Ten Mile Dunes. "But with beach grass, all you get is beach grass."

The plant is tough to stamp out because it develops a system of roots and rhizomes, horizontal underground stems that descend as far as six feet into the sand. All along the coast, different agencies have tried several methods of removing the grass: ripping it out with bulldozers in Oregon, dosing it with herbicides like Roundup and Rodeo in California. But the most effective and least ecologically damaging method may be the most difficult: pulling the grass out by hand. That's where the Conservation Corps crews come in.

The California Conservation Corps, the oldest and largest of the dozens of youth corps in the nation, was formed in 1976 by then-governor Jerry Brown, who modeled it after the Civilian Conservation Corps created by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1933. Roosevelt's corps provided work and vocational training for almost 3.5 million young men during the Depression. It also resulted in thousands of conservation and public-works projects. In modern California, nearly two thousand young people aged 18 to 23 join the state's corps each year. They receive training in ecology and trades such as carpentry and heavy-equipment operation, then work for minimum wage building trails, restoring habitat, and fighting fires. The corps' motto: "Hard work, low pay, miserable conditions ... and more!"

"We have roll call at 8 a.m.," says Joseph Martin, 32, who leads a crew at Ten Mile Dunes. "Then we check our gear, drive out to the site, unload the tools." Joseph started as a corps member in 1985 and returned after attending college. "I signed on for six months and that turned into three years," he says. "The CCC developed an interest I had in science and the environment. I enjoy the outdoors, the restoration of endangered species."

I hunker down in the beach grass with Joseph's crew, sitting on my heels. "Here," says Brandi Parker, a young woman from Sacramento wearing her regulation helmet and khakis. "You can borrow my gloves. I don't like to use them. I think it's easier to get ahold of the grass with bare hands." I gratefully accept the gloves, then watch as the youth around me twist bunches of stems around their hands and pull. I try to do the same. The grass does not move. I pull again. The grass does not move. They weren't kidding about those rhizomes and root systems.

A year ago, Brandi says, she was in trouble. She was doing all sorts of drugs-alcohol, crank, coke, ecstasy, mushrooms, pot. She dropped out of school, and was taught at

home for a while. When she stopped showing up for her home-school appointments, her mother, exasperated and ill with cancer, kicked her out of the house. Looking for a job and a place to live, Brandi came across a CCC ad in the paper.

“Believe me, the environment was not on my radar; I used to eat in the car and throw the trash out the window,” she laughs. “Now I know a lot more. Some of my old friends laugh at me, ‘Miss CCC girl thinks she knows it all now.’ It’s hard, but I know that one day, they will wake up and realize that it’s not a joke.”

The grass I’m trying to pull still isn’t moving. “Here,” says Mike Grindell, a 23-year-old with a hint of blond stubble. “It’s easier if someone gets the roots first.” Mike thrusts a shovel blade beneath the clump I’m holding. I feel the roots release, a miracle. Mike and I get into a rhythm. I wrap a clump of grass around my hand. He drives the shovel deep into the sand. I feel the roots release, then pull and toss. The repetition becomes meditative: Wrap, thrust, release, pull, toss. Wrap, thrust, release, pull, toss. Nothing else in the world exists, just the rasping of the shovel going into the dark brown sand, the ripping of the roots.

Mike works with studied concentration. His father, a policeman, no doubt taught him old-fashioned values: work hard, respect authority. Mike likes to scuba dive, play darts, down a few beers with friends. “I’m not a tree-hugger type,” he says. “But I am worried about the planet. I have little nephews. I’ll have kids someday. I don’t want them to see the aftermath of what we’ve done. I want them to see a cleaner world.”

Mike and I work for about 45 minutes, moving about ten yards north. The vastness of the job stuns me: Removing the 70 acres of grass will take hundreds of hours, weeks and weeks of weeding. I can’t believe that next year, a new crew will have to do this job all over again, since it usually takes several weedings before the rhizomes die. My fingers are starting to blister; my forearms ache. I glance at my watch every few minutes, hoping for quitting time. I don’t want to chicken out, but finally I say, “Man, this is hard work.”

Ricky Arzdorf, a rail-thin 20-year-old with a wisp of a beard, blond dreadlocks, and a hemp hair-tie, pipes up, “I’m glad this grass is hard to pull out. This European beach grass is supposed to be an invasive species? Well, humans are an invasive species.” The difficulty of the work emphasizes the magnitude of the task these young environmentalists see before them: not just removing beach grass, but repairing all the damage people have done to the planet.

Halfway across the country, young activists are engaged in equally important—if less back-breaking-labor, going door-to-door preaching the environmental gospel. I find their Minneapolis office by following the nerve-jangling rhythm of the Beastie Boys to a couple of nondescript basement rooms in the Technology Center at the University of Minnesota. It is a hurricane of young people: They answer phones. They pore over maps. They have intense conversations. They do high-fives. They hug. They joke. They make a swirl of cargo pants and flip-flops, of hip-huggers and college T-shirts.

With all the activity, it takes a few moments before anyone notices me, the lone person older than 25. Then someone turns and says with enthusiasm, “Hi! You must be looking for Naomi!”

Naomi Roth, 23, a recent graduate of Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, runs this summer’s Minneapolis campaign for the Fund for Public Interest Research, a nonprofit, national canvassing operation founded by the Public Interest Research Groups. Around the country, almost a thousand young people in 56 Fund offices are canvassing for the Sierra Club, the National Parks and Conservation Association, the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, and other organizations.

In Minneapolis, Naomi and her troops are drumming up support for a Sierra Club membership drive and anti-logging campaign. Up on the wall of their office, rainbow-colored construction-paper letters announce: “Summer goals: 87,500 conversations, 4,375 new members, \$300,000.”

With energy and sparkle that is part camp counselor, part revival preacher, and part polished politician, Naomi says brightly, “Hey! I’ve got to meet with a few people. You’re going to come canvassing with me later. Why don’t you let Kelly show you around?”

Kelly McSherry, 21, a campaign coordinator who works on public relations, explains the operation. On the floor, and at the few steel desks against the walls, field managers work over maps with multicolored markers, shading the routes that their canvass crews will cover today. Across the room, new hires are learning the pitch that each of them will make about four dozen times each day. Gradually, they begin to “play doors,” role-playing different situations that may come up when they’re ringing doorbells later.

Meanwhile, Naomi and her three campaign directors interview applicants, plow through paperwork, obtain town permits, and plan a staff retreat. Most of the managers come in at 8:30 a.m. and don’t leave until 11 p.m. They party for a few hours with the canvassers, then get up and do it all over again.

“The hours are long, but the people are great,” says Kelly, who’ll be a senior at the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota, in the fall. “Plus it’s a great opportunity to work for something you believe in, instead of waitressing.” For most of the canvassers in the room, this is their first experience with political organizing. Most are college students who found out about the campaign from friends or from help-wanted ads in campus newspapers.

“Sometimes people call you an eco-Nazi,” admits Nick Berning, 21, a field manager and political-science student at Macalester College in St. Paul. “But you get this great feeling,” Arshad Hasan, a 19-year-old student at the University of Pennsylvania, says of recruiting new members. “Today, I made a difference. Today, I talked to people. Today, they got involved.”

At 2 p.m., Naomi turns off the stereo. It’s time for announcements, a briefing on current political events that affect their efforts, and news from other Fund operations nationwide. Many canvassers say it’s the highlight of the day. “Welcome to Thursday!” Naomi yells. The circle of about 40 canvassers and supervisors erupts like football fans

at the Super Bowl. Naomi has the new people introduce themselves and exultantly reminds everyone that 50 new Sierra Club members were signed up the previous day. Then comes the main event: the announcement of “hot nights.”

One of the field managers runs into the center of the circle and starts reading the names of last night’s star canvassers, who collected the most donations or signed up the most new members: “Nick! \$220! John! \$220 and four new members! Arshad! Four members! Eleanor! \$240 and four members!” Each runs around the circle for a victory lap as everyone else claps, whistles, and cheers.

Then we’re out the door, and into the “Justice Mobile,” a leased station wagon filled with Sierra Club flyers, postcards to the Forest Service, in-line skates, fast-food wrappers, and our crew, “the Fridley Five.” Nick, our field manager, gives us a profile of our turf. Fridley is a middle-class suburb on the Mississippi River, just north of Minneapolis. The residents are receptive to environmental concerns; their congressional representative is good on the issues. The neighborhood is near a man-made lake and a high school. Trees arch over the streets and, as in many Midwestern towns, the lawns are enormous. No sidewalks connect the modest, ranch-style houses.

Naomi charges off across the grass. Speed is essential, she explains. No sitting, not ever—not in the office, not on the streets. It slows you down. She’s good with the rap. “Hi, I’m Naomi. I’m here today from the Sierra Club, the nation’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental group ...”

“Hi ... Our national forests are beautiful places, but more than 50 percent of them have been lost due to logging and mining ...”

Naomi would never have predicted that she’d end up managing a canvass campaign, spending five-hour shifts on the street, knocking on doors, trying to make people care enough about trees to take out their checkbooks. “My parents made it clear that I could do whatever I wanted—as long as I went to law school first,” she laughs.

Between her sophomore and junior year at Skidmore, though, Naomi spent a summer canvassing. She graduated, dutifully took the LSAT, and then begged her parents to let her organize a canvass at the University of California at Irvine. Then Green Corps, a group that trains budding environmental activists and conducts canvasses for the Fund for Public Interest Research, hired her as a director. Law school is no longer in the picture. In ten years, she hopes to be running her own environmental organization, or perhaps working with an established group like Green Corps.

Naomi gets a charge out of training young activists. “We’re teaching smart, talented people things that will take their lives on radically different paths,” she says. She also enjoys the intellectual challenge of figuring out what line will have an impact, how to keep people from closing the door.

“My folks joke about their little tree-hugger,” she laughs. “But there are plenty of environmental lawyers already. Besides, I love this!”

It’s difficult to see why, as I trudge and she bounds from door to door, skirting lawn ornaments and climbing endless front steps. No one bites at first. An older woman explains she’s just been diagnosed with cancer and can’t afford it. One guy won’t

even look up from his garage woodworking project. “Don’t want to talk,” he growls. A middle-aged woman comes to the door, then gets her husband. “What’s your pitch?” he says gruffly.

Naomi starts the rap.

“Uh, I think the clearcutting and roads are terrible, but I think I’d support selective logging,” the man says. “You know, I love the Sierra Club books.”

“Well, thanks anyway!” Naomi says cheerily. Finally, at 6:10 p.m., we catch a man, in his early 30s, just home from work. He balks when Naomi suggests a \$60 Sierra Club donation, but brightens when she quickly suggests \$35. “I think I can do that,” the man says, adding that he’s always thought the Sierra Club was “a good outfit.” He goes inside to get his checkbook.

“That experience makes up for all the others, doesn’t it?” Naomi asks. But then hours pass and it’s no, no, no.

“I already gave to help save the Boundary Waters,” says a sweet old lady, referring to the lakes along the Minnesota-Canada border.

“You say we’ve lost half our forest since when?” asks a middle-aged man with a ponytail. “I’d like to check your numbers.”

We walk what seems like miles and only raise ten more dollars. Naomi reads the totals from our “tick sheet”: 75 doors, 44 conversations, 3 contributions for a total of \$55. “That’s my worst night since my very first week,” she sighs. Doesn’t it get her down when it goes badly? “What do you mean?” Naomi asks. “There’s always tomorrow night.”

Driving back to my motel room, achy and brain-dead, I feel humbled by Naomi’s seemingly unflagging optimism. Contrary to the popular rumor that Generations X and Y are mostly slackers, these young people take action. They’re angry. They’re energized. They’re committed to making the world a healthier place.

“There’s an awakening happening now,” says Naomi. “It’s not just a fad. People are serious about it.” For young activists like her, the sense of fighting the good fight makes up for the often grinding, sometimes numbingly repetitive work they’ve chosen. When asked why they do what they do, they mention being part of something larger, of doing their little bit for the planet. Last year, one applicant gave up a \$70,000 job offer to take a \$17,500 fellowship with Green Corps. A junior manager in the Minneapolis canvass will go on next year to direct her own canvass office; another has applied for an environmental internship in Washington, D.C.; still another will be the midwestern regional coordinator for Free the Planet!

Naomi’s sense of an environmental awakening is confirmed in events like last year’s Eco-Conference in Philadelphia, which drew more than 3,000 young activists—far above predictions. Representatives from 40 countries have attended 65 week-long training camps organized by Youth for Environmental Sanity (YES!). Camp participants and attendees at other YES! presentations have gone on to found more than 300 environmental nonprofit organizations and clubs and introduce recycling programs in over 300 schools.

Ask environmental leaders in their 20s what all this means and many envision a coming war with corporate power. Camilla Feibelman, the 24-year-old national director of the Sierra Club's 12,000-member Sierra Student Coalition, likens the goals of this movement to the aspirations of our founding fathers. "They wanted separation of church and state. We want separation of corporation and state," Camilla says. "That will be the rallying cry. That will galvanize all these efforts into a movement."

The young leaders predict that this movement will unify activists of all stripes: environmentalists, union workers, anti-corporate protesters, development experts. It will be a sophisticated battle, one waged with public-relations gurus, impassioned lawyers, shrewd grant writers, online outreach, and political campaigns.

"There used to be environmental activists and race activists and justice activists, but there's a marriage happening now. Young people are more willing to see the connections," says Ocean Robbins, 26, who founded YES! in 1990. "That's what was happening in D.C. and Seattle. Suddenly you don't have to choose one cause over another; you can be for all of it. That's where our power lies."

Heather Millar has written about environmental issues for such publications as the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Business Week*.

Activist Profiles

Rebecca Johnson, 21, grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. She is a senior at Oberlin College and a global warming campaign coordinator for the Sierra Student Coalition.

I'm a Sierra Club baby. My father and stepmother are very active in the Club, so I got to see a lot of this beautiful country as a child, which really instilled in me a love and a need for public lands.

One of the most difficult things has been trying to find a balance between my activism and my schoolwork. I tend to get single-minded when it comes to activism; I got started on my global-warming kick, and now I can't stop! I think it's absolutely the scariest and most important issue of our time. It touches on globalization, human rights, our lifestyles, our choices for energy. We need to make major changes now, or else we're going to get to a point where we can't go back.

People are surprised to hear an eloquent and informed student speaking to them about environmental and political issues. The media portrays us either as a cult of materialistic youngsters, who only care about when daddy's going to buy us our next SUV, or as uninformed "activists" who travel around from protest to protest. So when we can tell adults something they don't know, they listen. They're surprised, so they pay attention.

Gyalpo Tashi is a Tibetan born in India. When this interview was conducted in the fall of 1999, he was 25 and working as the community education officer for the Tibetan Environment Network (TEN), a grassroots program in Choglamsar, India.

At school, we are taught that we should work with the Tibetan exile community, to keep the momentum of the struggle. But when I got out of university, there were no jobs. I had to wait almost two years to get a job in my own community.

Tibetans once lived in an ecological way, but they were pushed into modern times and close quarters in a refugee camp in Choglamsar, Ladakh, India. This rapidly growing community had no infrastructure. It had no dustbins and garbage was a huge problem until TEN helped organize monthly cleaning ups in the camp. Our next project is recycling, but that will take time. We are also trying to educate the tourists—who bring in money, but also leave behind rubbish—about the environment and Tibetan culture.

We have created solar-heated community centers and built greenhouses to encourage Tibetans to grow vegetables organically. This is a new idea for them, because they were nomadic before they came into Ladakh. We also bring a television around to show videos on ecology. They may not be interested in environmental issues, but televisions are rare, so they come out of curiosity.

Laura Shillington grew up in a small town outside Calgary, in Alberta, Canada. At the time of this interview in September 1999, she was 24 years old and fresh from a stint at the East Kootenay Grasslands Stewardship Program in British Columbia.

I've been living out of a backpack for two years. Wherever I can volunteer, wherever I can get a job, that's where I go. I've done research on badgers and tracked wolves for the Central Rockies Wolf Project, where I got paid \$15 a day to snowshoe into valleys to check on wolf traps. When I coordinated the grasslands program, we wanted to promote good stewardship methods. Most of British Columbia's grasslands are privately owned, so landowners would call us, and we would go out to their land and identify different types of grasses, plants, and trees. Unlike how they feel about trees, which are big and sexy, most people think of grass as just grass. Once they learned that there was more than one kind of grass, they usually saw the need to protect this complex ecosystem.

I do miss having a home. But everything I do is really inspiring and rewarding. I've done contract mapping and geographic information systems (GIS) work, but it's so boring to just sit in front of a computer. With conservation work, you see results. I want to continue doing conservation work or activism, even if that also means working at a coffee shop for minimum wage.

Robert Fish, 22, grew up in northwest New Jersey and studied human ecology at the College of the Atlantic. He has been active with the Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC) since he was a sophomore in high school.

When I was a kid, there was a place I used to go, high above town, to escape from everything and think. Then a big company built its headquarters there. That's what got me involved with environmental activism. Most recently, I've worked with the Rainforest Action Network campaign targeting Home Depot to end its sale of wood products from our ancient forests, and with my college's Free Burma campaign. We kicked Pepsi off campus for doing business with the ruling military junta in Burma and

started socially responsible investing for the college's endowment. I also went to the protests in Seattle, D.C., and Philadelphia, and attended the Ruckus Society's Spring Break Action Camp this year to learnS direct-action tactics.

I'm trying to live the life I'm talking—I've been a vegetarian for eight years, and I'm attempting to drive less—but sometimes it's hard. I want to facilitate social change, but I want to have a life. I want time to go for a hike, hang out with friends, or just do nothing, but I don't want to fall into general apathy.

Interviews by Jennifer Hattam

The Ted K Archive

Heather Millar
Generation Green

Young rebels with a cause are taking to the streets, the parks, and the treetops to
fight for the planet.

December 2000

Sierra Magazine, November/December 2000.

<<https://vault.sierraclub.org/sierra/200011/generation.asp>>

The Sierra Club

www.thetedkarchive.com