

ENVIRONMENT

Gay and green

Meet a diverse group of eco-queers who honor the same guiding truth: Environmental rights are gay rights. We share one atmosphere with the world
By Rachel Powell





Brianna Cayo Cotter; Cotter and her team protest Native American deforestation (inset).

The year 2006 may well go down on record as the year of the environment. But before Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* and the mass reawakening of the American consciousness for green living, thousands of gays and lesbians were already pouring their fervor for equal rights into a broader fight for eco rights. Meet some of the unsung maverick heroes among us.

Brianna Cayo Cotter, communications manager, Rainforest Action Network

At a mere 25 years old, Brianna Cayo Cotter goes head-to-head with some of the world's largest corporations—rallying, publicizing, and pressuring until they surrender. She called out Ford Motor Co. at a recent conference of journalists for “greenwashing”—which is, as she puts it, “spending a ton of money on ads with Kermit the Frog proclaiming ‘It’s Easy Being Green’ while having the lowest fuel efficiency and highest greenhouse gas emissions of any U.S. automaker.” In fact, Ford is suing to prevent the state of California from mandating lower greenhouse gas emissions for vehicles.

The San Francisco-based Rainforest Action Network and Cotter have achieved their most recent triumphs by attacking

corporate culprits’ purse strings. “We went after large loaning institutions [like Wells Fargo] for funding destructive practices—for instance, Burger King clearing out rain forest trees to grow cattle feed; Home Depot pilfering the Amazon’s wood; and mining giant Massey Energy Company blasting West Virginia mountaintops for coal, eroding land and destroying Appalachian lives.” Cotter rallied and educated residents and consumers, going so far as to hang a banner on a local mountaintop that read WELLS FARGO: LOOTIN’ AND POLLUTIN’ SINCE 1852, until the bank agreed to comprehensive environmental and social policies reform. “Destructive business as usual is no longer acceptable,” she says. “It’s scary to hang off the side of a building with a giant banner, or slide information about clear-cut logging under investors’ doors at a fancy hotel while being followed by security guards and police. But what antiabortionists, homophobic bigots, and CEOs are doing to people and this planet is so much scarier...the more I use my voice and speak to truth and justice, I become less afraid and more powerful.”

Darby Hoover, senior resource specialist, urban program, Natural Resources Defense Council

Darby Hoover wants you to know that ►

HEJSELAAR: GREENFACE; CAYO: PROTEST; RAINFOREST ACTION NETWORK (2)

ENVIRONMENT



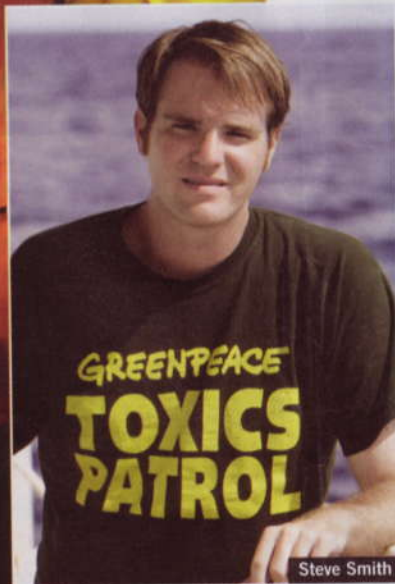
half the earth's forests are already gone—destroyed to make toilet paper, facial tissues, paper towels, and other disposable paper products. Notes the Web site of the Natural Resources Defense Council: "If every person in the U.S. replaced just one roll of virgin-fiber toilet paper (500 sheets) with one roll of 100% recycled-fiber toilet paper, we could save 423,900 trees."

Hoover, a 43-year-old San Francisco-based activist, has the difficult task of educating individual consumers and rallying

major corporations to make sweeping changes in their paper procurement, usage, and recycling practices. She sees the problem as a philosophical one. "There is no concept of waste in nature...but humans throw away things they don't want, as though there is really any 'away' to throw things."

Hoover was bitten by the green bug while part of a student-run recycling program at Stanford University. "People think they can recycle everything from dirty dia-

Stephanie Hillman



Steve Smith

pers to electronic equipment. The weirdest thing I ever found, though, was a pig's head in a cardboard recycling bin."

Steve Smith, media officer, Greenpeace USA

Operating out of Greenpeace USA's Washington, D.C., office, Steve Smith, along with out San Francisco-based colleague Krikor Didonian, spearheaded the U.S. leg of Defending Our Oceans, a 14-month expedition around the globe to highlight various threats facing the world's oceans. Smith, 27, has brought media attention to everything from illegal Japanese whaling and Suez Canal oil spills to pollution in ordinary people's homes. While exploring the trash vortex between Hawaii and California, Smith reports finding "a toothbrush, melted plastic bits, crates, bits of rope, and bottles—all pulled out of a remote area of the Pacific. If people knew that their household items would end up out here, poisoning the small sea creatures...I wonder if they would throw them away." As for avoiding this result, Smith points out, "The solutions to the problem of plastics in the ocean can really be quite simple: something as easy as using a reusable bag."

Smith felt the call to Greenpeace as a young boy and has tirelessly led campaigns across international borders through a no-holds-barred attitude, having been arrested many times. In 2002, protesting Exxon Mobil's refusal to acknowledge the global warming crisis, Smith spent 12 hours chained to a gas pump while wearing a tiger suit

[Exxon's iconic mascot] in Luxembourg. "Just yesterday I picked up *Le Quotidien* [a French-language Senegalese paper] and saw myself in full color, and full tiger suit, emblazoned across the front page."

Stephanie Hillman, actions campaigner and trainer, Greenpeace USA

From her base in Washington, D.C., 41-year-old Stephanie Hillman trains volunteers in a broad range of protest skills, including boat driving, scaling buildings, and extreme-weather survival. She has put herself between a whale and a harpoon. She has slept outside in temperatures as low as minus-60 degrees Fahrenheit on the Alaskan Arctic Ocean to protest British ▶

HILLMAN: GREENPEACE/MELISSA MOLYNEUX SMITH: GREENPEACE/ALEX HOFFORD

ENVIRONMENT



A 400-year-old coral destroyed by fisherman trawling for orange roughy

Dean Baigent-Mercer

Petroleum's building of the offshore oil rig Northstar, which would have executed the U.S. congressional threat to open the entire U.S. Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to more drilling. She has jumped on board a moving cargo ship at 14 miles an hour—in the fog in the middle of night. And she has slept for days on a narrow ledge 2,000 feet above Rio de Janeiro in pouring rain alongside huge rats. Says Hillman, "I often have people say to me, 'I could never do the kinds of things you do.' I try to teach, more than anything, the power of one's voice and simply living by example."

Eric Heijsselaar, actions coordinator, Greenpeace Netherlands, and Steve Erwood, legal administrator, Greenpeace International

Legally married in March 2002, Dutch husbands Eric Heijsselaar and Steve Erwood each quit regular day jobs to join Greenpeace. Heijsselaar, 35, began as a volunteer climber, working on historic projects such as protesting Shell Oil's dumping of the Brent Spar crude-oil storage rig into the North Atlantic in the mid 1990s. He jumped onto the ship's platform from a hovering helicopter, spending the next six days living with a broken ankle in the gutted facility before Shell abandoned its plan.

This year the couple helped prevent

major expansion into the Amazon jungle by five multinational soy traders. (Large-scale soy farming in the production of animal feed has overtaken ranching and illegal logging as the main engine of deforestation.) Of course, their actions have upset more than a few South American businesses, so much so that Heijsselaar's recent return to the Brazilian Amazon resulted in numerous death threats. "Being driven around in a bulletproof car was a new experience for me. My part of the job got a bit hairy when I was being fired on with big firework rockets while being on anchor in an inflatable [boat]."

But there are also smiles along with the trials. After Heijsselaar's arrest with 11 other activists who scaled the walls of Cape Town, South Africa's Koeberg nuclear power station, the duty officer asked if any of them were married. Eric was the only one who raised his hand. When asked for the name of his partner, Eric replied, "Steve." Erwood, 37, who admits he handles the less glamorous paperwork and legalities but keeps his mate and other campaigners well-fed on harsh expeditions, wasn't there, but he says with a laugh, "The look on the policeman's face was, apparently, priceless."

Dean Baigent-Mercer, communications officer, Greenpeace New Zealand

Dean Baigent-Mercer's campaigns against bottom-trawling are on display at the United Nations. This practice—where fishermen rake giant nets across the ocean floor, grabbing everything in their path and destroying unique and unexplored ecological areas—is the biggest environmental assault by the fishing industry of New Zealand. Baigent-Mercer says, with a beaming face, "We've shown the New Zealand bottom-trawling industry up as liars and ocean clear-fellers. Of course, most of the orange roughy caught by [this practice] is exported to the U.S." He hopes people connect the fish they eat with how they're caught.

As national spokesman for a group



Jeanne Rizzo (right) with Arnold Schwarzenegger

CORAL: GREENPEACE/PULMAN; BAIGENT-MERCER: JOHN T. PUSATERI JR.; SCHWARZENEGGER AND RIZZO: MICHAEL RAUBER

called Native Forest Action, Baigent-Mercer, 33, helped stage a five-month tree-sit that eventually led to the end of all logging of native old-growth forests on public land in New Zealand. Baigent-Mercer also personally owns a nearly 70-acre patch of ancient rain forest. "On the fringes, I'm planting an organic permaculture orchard" that mimics relationships and patterns in nature to create balance among the land, plant, soil, and human entities; he also performs wetlands restoration. "I've got political, media, and practical sides to how I express my activism," he says.

Y. Fray, owner of Ecolimo

Y. Fray is a one-woman business crusade. "I started with nothing but a belief, no investors, and one Toyota Prius," she says. What she did have was 20 years of limo driving experience, and what she created, in 2004, was the first all-alternative-fuel driving service. "I suffered a lot of mockery from other drivers and my own mother—in the beginning, they all assured me I would fail," she remembers. They assumed that since hybrid cars aren't chock-full of traditional luxury amenities, people wouldn't be interested. "But I told them—and I was right—people don't care what the car looks like; the luxury is being driven by a professional and dependable driver in a car that's clean and safe. My customers are happy, and they feel they are making a positive statement and are part of the solution."

Just two years later, Fray, 49, has a fleet of Priuses as well as natural gas-powered and biofueled luxury cars and SUVs. For her biofueled vehicles Fray primarily uses a walnut oil-based fuel that incorporates other natural by-products, like vegetable oil and chicken fat, though she notes that fuel-injected cars, such as her Mercedes E320s, are more "picky," forcing her to keep multiple biofuel formulas on hand; it's all part of her commitment to provide a clean, green alternative. She has offices in Santa Monica, Calif., and San Francisco, with plans actively under way to open branches in New York City and Washington, D.C. She's even receiving requests from other limo companies to borrow her stock. "The drivers that used to laugh at me aren't laughing now," she muses. Indeed, she has A-list celebrity clientele, including the Spielbergs and Leonardo DiCaprio. She hopes Ellen DeGeneres will call on Ecolimo to drive ►



Filmmaker Pip Starr interviews a Carteret Islands refugee.

her to the next Academy Awards: “She is a great gay role model. She could encourage others to make a responsible choice.”

Barbara Brenner, executive director, Breast Cancer Action, and Jeanne Rizzo, RN, executive director, the Breast Cancer Fund

The two leading ladies of breast cancer prevention advocacy, Barbara Brenner and Jeanne Rizzo attack environmentally caused cancers—and wasteful cancer spending by nonprofits and the government—with radical vision and one chief goal: revolutionizing how these spenders think. “Millions and millions of dollars have been raised, but why are we still sick? Where are all the funds going?” asks Brenner. Furthermore, she says, “considerable resources are spent each year to encourage women to make changes in their personal lives that might reduce the risk of breast cancer, but many factors that contribute to the disease lie far beyond a woman’s personal control.” The women cite the nearly 100,000 synthetic chemicals currently in

commercial use, with thousands more appearing annually, and note that 90% of them have never been comprehensively tested for their possible risks to people.

“We’re asking the hard questions through our campaigns,” says Brenner, 55, who is herself a breast cancer survivor. Her wildly successful “Think Before You Pink” campaign turned a spotlight on companies exploiting breast cancer to make a profit, be it by walks, runs, or a variety of pink-ribbon products promising a portion of proceeds to the cause. In many cases that contribution is minuscule.

Though she and Rizzo, 60, are from two philosophically distinct nonprofits—both based in San Francisco—their combined efforts helped to pass landmark legislation in California. After a four-year battle, SB 1379 was passed by the state legislature and signed into law by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in September 2006. It creates a program to monitor pollution’s effects on people and to help doctors and scientists better understand the relationship between chemical exposure and increasing

disease rates, including breast cancer. Together their organizations coauthored “State of the Evidence: What Is the Connection Between

the Environment and Breast Cancer,” now in its fourth edition, available for download at the Breast Cancer Fund’s Web site. The document reviews and analyzes nearly 350 scientific studies linking environmental poisons to breast cancer and offers a 10-point plan to reduce risk factors and reverse the tide of the epidemic.

Lori Lewis, facilitator, region 9, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Lori Lewis is a grand-scale problem solver and peacemaker. The 49-year-old San Francisco-based dynamo—whose responsibilities extend throughout California, Nevada, Arizona, and Hawaii as well as the U.S. Pacific territories and 147 federally recognized Southwest tribes—facilitated a staggering 150 meetings this year with a mix of federal, state, local, and tribal agencies; large and small businesses; academics; and nongovernmental organizations in order to tackle their particular environmental issues, effect mutual education, and devise plans of action. In 2005 Lewis convened a diverse group of 25 Los Angeles-area governmental agencies and community-based organizations to combat industries that were discharging pollutants into Santa Monica Bay, threatening marine life and local seafood.

The EPA administers the Superfund program, which coordinates the spending of

THE ADVOCATE
Poll

Should the government consider global warming to be a bigger threat to national security than terrorism?

Sign on to *The Advocate's* Web site beginning December 19 to cast your vote and leave your comments. Results will appear in the February 27 issue.

PIP STARR PICTURES

tax monies collected from offending industries and uses those dollars to clean up the most environmentally hazardous sites. When culprits are unknown or no longer in existence, Lewis is in charge of paying for the cleanup and then pursuing legal remedies against the offenders—"if we can find them." A 21-year veteran of the EPA, she considers it a stellar government agency for LGBT employees because of its activities and workplace environment, even under the duress of the current administration's budget cuts. "We're all paying for the [Iraq] war," she says. "We've been through many administrations, and their political appointees come and go, but the people who work here day in and day out have a great passion for the environment."

Pip Starr, Australian documentary filmmaker

Pip Starr chose his path as an independent filmmaker after several gay media outlets shunned his activist themes: opposition to the nuclear industry, support for free trade, and environmental advocacy. Why does he think gay media ignore ecological issues? "Not sure why this is," the 39-year-old says with a sigh. "I suspect it's because everyone knows that global warming is a huge and important issue but one that challenges our right to consume ourselves stupid. It's easy, even for gays, to dismiss challenging voices by calling the issue not a queer one."

According to the World Wildlife Fund's "Living Planet Report 2006," person for person, the United Arab Emirates is the most damaging force to our ecosystem, with second place going to the United States. Starr says, "Sadly, the least of the offenders are indigenous peoples across the globe, whose carbon footprint [the impact of human activities on the environment as measured in greenhouse gases produced] is basically nil," but they bear the brunt of the damage.

Starr's current documentary profiles the evacuation of indigenous Carteret Islanders from their atoll in Papua New Guinea. Global warming is eroding the islands' shores, causing them to sink and

wiping out area food sources. At press time, plans were under way to begin staging evacuations of the atoll's 2,000 residents in December 2006, though destination land and citizenship rights were uncertain. "How will they survive elsewhere? They never have depended on any outside source for anything," says Starr.

Gay media notwithstanding, Starr sees our sexuality as an impetus for environmentalism. "I think nature *created* people to be queer for good reason...we tend to become artists, storytellers, and spiritual guides or leaders."

Mark Stevens, campaign manager, National Environmental Trust

Mark Stevens combats the oceans' villains: overfishers, bottom-trawlers, and polluters who threaten to decimate delicate ecosystems and fisheries in as few as 40 years. But the waters are vast and virtually impossible to police, so Stevens, 39, targets consumers' sympathies.

In 2002 he launched the "Take a Pass on Chilean Sea Bass" campaign, focusing on the trendy delicacy because "they're endangered in all waters and extinct in two. Our campaign resulted in U.S. rules for electronic tracking." That tracking has made it extremely difficult for pirates to get the fish from boat to port to table.

"One of the best things about working in conservation is that it is easy to be gay," he says. "Environmental groups treat gay partners just as they treat married people when it comes to benefits and invitations to office social events. Plus, I'm an environmentalist who happens to be gay, rather than a gay environmentalist. Other than my relationship with Randy [his partner, a 54-year-old fellow environmentalist who is World Wildlife Fund's director of government relations], my sexuality is not an important issue in my life. That said, I did organize the first 'Gay and Green' happy hours at [Washington] D.C. bars." ■

Powell is a TV writer and producer, with such credits as South Park and Dilbert, as well as a political humorist and activist.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Find your own way to save the planet by visiting any of the following sites:

www.ran.org
www.nrdc.org/land/forests/gtissue.asp
www.greenpeace.org
www.solargeneration.com
www.deepdeptrouble.net
www.eco-limo.com
www.bcaction.org
www.breastcancerfund.org
www.epa.org
www.net.org/marine/csb
www.krillcount.org