

Beyond Global Housekeeping

by H. Patricia Hynes

"The Earth fighting back" is how one commentator described the acute environmental events of 1988. That year medical and human waste floated onto public beaches in North Jersey, Lond Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. That summer a drought persisted in the Midwest agricultural belt with a severity not felt since the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. The drought coincided with a heat wave throughout much of the country. For more than a decade, climate researchers have predicted the results of a buildup of "greenhouse" gases generated largely from the burning of fossil fuels: drought in midcontinental areas; extended heat waves; more frequent and severe forest fires; flooding in India and Bangladesh; and superhurricanes. In 1988, the planet experienced all five.

But who really believes that extended heat waves and superhurricanes are the Earth fighting back? On the contrary, they are dramatic evidence that environmental protection is not working and cannot be left to government agencies and small numbers of activists. This breakdown of the vast, seemingly untouchable systems of climate and atmosphere can make us feel powerless and often hopeless about solutions. Faced with our seeming powerlessness, I contend that it is we who can and must fight back, but we must do more than mop up the waste - a public version of what most women already do in the domestic sphere. We must exact environmental justice, and ensure that the enormous global activity of women to preserve life on Earth does not reduce to global housekeeping after men - their governments and their companies - who do not know how, and do not want to know how, to clean up after themselves.

A profound political alchemy is that women - the people with the least formal power, the poorest and most illiterate in virtually every country - are everywhere catalysts and initiators of environmental activism. In Kenya, anatomist Wangari Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977, after observing that the desert spread when trees removed for fuel were not replaced. Using the tree to spearhead environmental protection, she has involved schoolchildren and upward of 15,000 small-scale farmers,

many of them women, in planting more than 2 million trees.

In the 17th century, more than 300 Indian people led by a woman named Amitra Devi lost their lives trying to save their sacred trees by clinging to them. This is the ancient taproot of the modern Chipko movement of primarily rural women who protest the destruction of their forests and water resources through commercial forestry. The diversified forests used by women and their animals for food, fuel, and fodder are being turned into privately owned,

single-species tree farms run by local men. Chipko means "to hug". Indian women have embraced trees so loggers could not cut them, placed themselves between chain saws and trees where intense logging was destroying primeval forests, and formed human chains across roads to keep out logging equipment.

In the surging Green Parties of Europe and the dozens of US nonprofit environmental organizations, women's membership equals and often surpasses men's. Judie Nelson of the Oregon Department of Natural Resources translated her concern about plastic debris on the Oregon coast into a 350-mile beach cleanup. On an

October Saturday in 1984, more than 2,000 people participated, some driving from 75 miles inland. Nelson's project inspired beach cleanups in other states, and along the Mediterranean Sea in Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Jordan, Spain, and Turkey.

The grassroots anti-toxics movement in the United States is symbolized in Lois Gibbs, a housewife and mother who organized her blue-collar neighborhood in Love Canal in 1978, and forced the government to evacuate 900 families. Gibbs then founded the Citizen's Clearinghouse on Hazardous Waste that now advises 6,000 citizen groups (the majority organized by women like herself) fighting to close leaking landfills and stop the siting of incinerators in their neighborhoods.

But has this enormous activity of women gone beyond global housekeeping? Or are we concentrating on household hazardous waste collection, beach cleanups,



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closing landfills, keeping out incinerators, and staffing voluntary recycling centers while men institutionalize environmental protection and situate themselves in well-financed and powerful organizations and lobbies? If women are so central in the movement, why is the national leadership in the US - the experts quoted, the people historicized - preponderantly white males? Why, if we are so numerous, are we not setting the agenda and developing the strategies? Why, if we are already so effective, need we also set the agendas?

If women do not frame the problems and define the solutions, then we risk inheriting an environmental movement disconnected from and detrimental to our own liberation movement.

For example, the first serial rights to *Green Rage* (Little, Brown), by Christopher Manes of the radical environmental organization Earth First!, have been sold to *Penthouse*, a men's magazine which has featured women bound and hanging from trees. Earth First! prides itself on challenging "human" domination of nature through civil disobedience and ecoterrorism to save trees. Yet, how vacant and baseless is a "green" radicalism that rages against the razing of forests, in a forum that eroticizes the bondage and torture of women, then sanitizes this degradation with "intellectual" and "political" articles printed on recycled paper.

In a 1987 British edition of *The Green Consumer* (Penguin), a best-selling guide to purchasing "environmentally friendly" products, authors John Elkington and Julia Hailes recommend *Playboy* deodorant because it does not contain ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons. Already accused of being little more than "green capitalism", this brand of consumer movement will advance nothing if pornographic images and sexist messages stay intact in "green" products.

The issue of increasing population and decreasing agricultural yields features critically on the global environmental agenda. If men dominate this issue, we will see population planning continue to be defined as controlling women's bodies with risk-laden chemical contraceptives instead of undoing the inequality of women in culture.

What strategies can we use to ensure that the worldwide movement of environmental justice we build is wholly and substantially just?

□ Define environment in its fullest sense: the human and the natural. Saving the environment cannot be cut off from the liberation of women, just as the rain forest movement aims to save rain forests and also the culture of the rain forest people.

□ Make global housekeeping, like local housekeeping and cooking, everyone's job. Otherwise we may end up with a movement that mirrors the economy of house and society: women in neighborhoods organizing to clean up hazardous waste, and men in think tanks negotiating to limit nuclear arms, ozone-depleting chemicals, and global warming.

□ Challenge the roots of environmental problems by focusing on eliminating toxic materials in products as well as minimizing the toxic waste generated by manufacturing them.

□ Demand environmental responsibility of all companies and public institutions. Every workplace can reduce and recycle materials and buy recycled products; conserve energy and water; reward employees using public transportation and car pools; minimize pesticides and toxic solutions used in maintenance; invest in environmentally responsible companies and funds, and in research for alternatives to toxic products and animal experimentation; support environmental education in local schools.

Environmental justice goes much further than environmental protection, a passive and paternalistic phrase. Justice requires that industrial nations pay back the environmental debt incurred in building their wealth by using less of nature's resources. Justice prescribes that governments stop siting hazardous waste facilities in cash-poor rural and urban neighborhoods and now in the developing world. Justice insists that the subordination of women and nature by men is not only a hazard; it is a crime. Justice reminds us that the Earth does not belong to us; even when we "own" a piece of it, we belong to the Earth.

About the author: H. Patricia Hynes is Director of the Institute on Women and Technology and teaches at MIT. She is the author of "Earthright" (Prima), an environmental action guide for the home, workplace, and community, and "Recurring Silent Spring" (Pergamon).

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