

Yvonne Kupsch

Planting a Partnership in Africa

Yvonne Kupsch made her first journey to West and East Africa in mid-1986, on behalf of "Trees for Africa," which is an initiative of the Vancouver branch of the United Nations Association in Canada (UNAC), and which is linked to the The Tree Project at UN headquarters. Kupsch had with her a list of 16 working groups in British Columbia that were eager to make links with community-based organizations in Africa that had forestry projects. The plan was for her to identify indigenous groups working in forestry in six countries and to bring back a contact list. The next stage was to be a conference in March 1987, in Vancouver, to which some African representatives would be invited to give a firsthand account of the problems at the village and community level—problems of deforestation and the need for fuelwood, problems of resources and information. The eventual hope is that links can be made between the B.C. groups and African communities and associations, links that may help meet these needs and solve these problems.

After returning from Africa in 1986, Kupsch talked about the tree project—and a bit about her own life:

"The Tree Project began in 1983 and has since developed into an international clearing house for information on NGOs [Non-Governmental Organizations] working in forestry. However, its first big effort was to support a worldwide tree planting campaign during International Youth Year [IYY] in 1985.

"That's how I got involved. I was working in Saskatoon in the regional office of Katimavik, which was a national youth volunteer program. My parents are both from the Netherlands; my father is a geologist and my mother has been very active in the multicultural movement. They came to Saskatoon in the 1950s, and that's where I grew up. Saskatoon, by the way, prides itself on having a lot of trees. I'm 31 now and, although my background is in foreign language studies, I've worked mostly in information services, public relations and communications. I worked in that capacity in the Saskatoon office of Katimavik, which served the Prairies and the Northwest Territories.

"Katimavik has always linked the idea of youth with environmental awareness. We then promoted International Youth Year and the fact that Katimavik participants could get more involved in environmental questions by having a tree planting campaign. It was really successful. Over a two-year period, because Katimavik ran a pilot year first, participants planted well over two million trees in 300 communities across Canada. And they participated in many other related activities, [such as] awareness programs on the importance of the environment, the tree being a symbol for the greater setting.

"During the planning for Youth Year, Katimavik had a representative on the advisory committee of The Tree Project in New York, the central clearing house for the worldwide IYY tree planting campaign. So I was sent down on a six-month internship. I ended up working there on the project—which is part of the Non-Governmental Liaison Service [NGLS]—with another Canadian woman, Jill Carr-Harris, for a year and a half!

"My present project started when the United Nations Association in Canada, Vancouver Branch, decided to launch a 'Trees for Africa' partnership program. The Vancouver branch of the UNAC under its president,