

feature

Green activist stresses community, stability

by Geoff Ineson

Local environmentalist Sandra Sweeney is a true leader in the field. She is a well celebrated activist and intellectual whose breadth and erudition have inspired many concerned individuals. She has been solicited recently by the Nova Scotia Department of the Environment to conduct a lecture series. I had a chance to speak with Sweeney before she left for the Czech Republic where she is to teach Environmental Studies.

So where does your environmental verbal experience come from?

Well, I am self-taught in a lot of ways. For example, all my knowledge of plants and plant conservation and habitat conservation is all self taught. I've never taken an academic course in regional conservation strategies of any sort except for what I've done at home. We do have lectures within the society on whatever that topic happens to be.

It's really just an enthusiasm which I am very interested in. If I wasn't doing it in terms of working with an NGO [non-governmental organization] then I'd still be doing it as a hobby. It's a window into the natural world. You can look up the plant life and you can know what kind of rocks are underneath because you know what kind of nutrients that particular species needs. It's a wonderful window of learning. I really enjoy it.

It beats television I'd imagine.

Well, yeah it beats TV (laughs)

Your first degree was in philosophy?

Yes, I took a Philosophy degree in Hull at the University of Quebec, during the year of the Referendum. Serious philosophizing and politicizing going on. I was the first anglophone to go to the campus. From there I did a French degree, Language and Linguistics, and then I did a Political Theory degree, then from there I came to Dalhousie and did the Environmental degree. [SRES—School for Resource and Environmental Studies]

People look at my background and think it's all over the place and totally inconsistent; but to me it's very consistent. There's thought, there's how that thought is expressed in language and communication, and literature; how you want to preserve particular thoughts, ideas, or events. And then there's politics which is thought or communication brought into the public sphere. And then there's environment which is where you want the communication directed. To me it's a very consistent way of looking at things.

Has being as woman who's gone into political realms on matters on which you are an authority run you into any problems?

White middle-class men in resource management don't appreciate it at all. I was at a Department of Natural Resources strategy planning workshop several months ago and there were five women and a hundred guys, and all the guys were white, no blacks, no natives. The men were all over forty and the women were all under forty.

And not only that but you go to these interviews when you have people posing questions who don't really understand this "environmental thing". They are being told to do it but they don't really understand why they have to do it. And they don't really understand how to implement and integrate policies and ideas

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To what extent is there a lack of participation, or apathy from the community? Do you see any progression towards action?

If you have a good solid community you can do all kinds of things. If you don't have that sense of community, it's difficult to get anything done. If you don't have appropriate public education, if you can't step outside your community and see what your communities

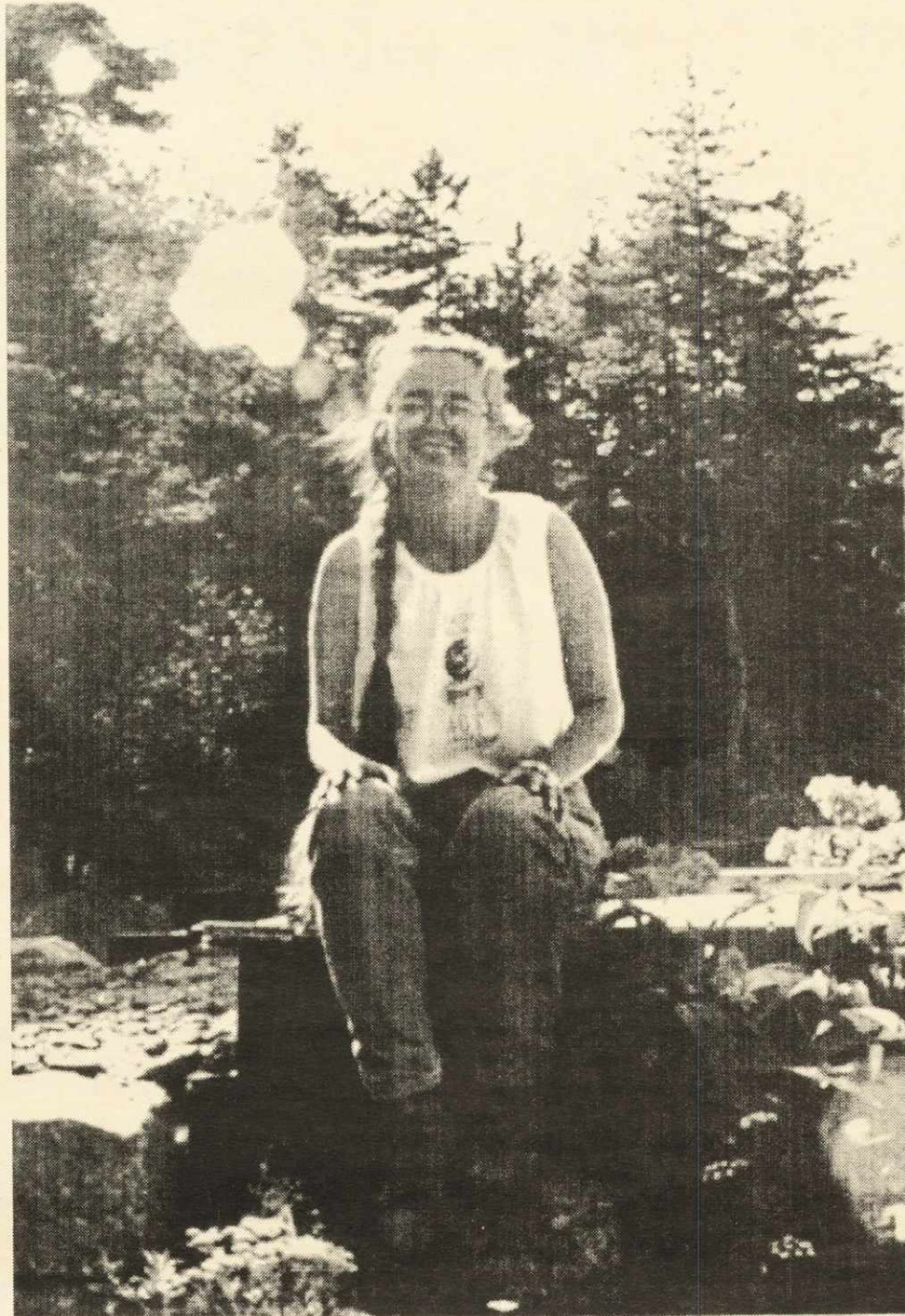


PHOTO: GEOFF INESON

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values are and target your information to that, then you don't get anywhere.

The metropolitan authority and their recycling program is a perfect example. What? Three or four percent of metro is recycling: Big Deal. They do it with beer bottles, why can't they do it with soft-drink bottles?

So we've over-fished the Grand Banks, a large amount of farmable protein is becoming extinct from pollution and over-fishing... one has to wonder about even the salmon going the way of the whales.

I think Oceanography is a model of statistics from variables as they are made known. Farmable protein is the application of agricultural theories and agricultural politics in the ocean. It involves monocropping particular species like scallops and other interconnecting species. These are losing their habitat in the same way that we talk about terrestrial species losing their habitat in virtue of urban expansion or urban sprawl. Our whole seas are dying: the Baltic, the Black. How do you save these whole parts of the ocean that are polluted from pesticides, herbicides and industrial waste? It all ends up in the ocean.

Well let's go back to land for a minute here... who can afford the kind of technology that would

make a change in salmon farming and thus produce more fish?

A family or two or three; new people that can afford this technology moving into a community (which has a big effect on a community) that can afford this so-called necessary transition — necessary in some peoples minds — from actually going out and not fishing, but farming. And so what you get is a change in the power structure in communities, a change in who's interacting with who, and who's working for who, and how many people own their own boats any more.

There's all kinds of things involved in the social dynamics. There are a lot of forces out there saying let's make the transition; but a few forces out there saying let's think about the transition. It's just another case where technology will rescue us. It's a whole concept of farming.

That's something I think about a lot; about how the types of environmental problems we've caused are because we are agriculturally orientated as opposed to communally orientated or hunter-gather orientated. We do a lot of talking about this whole urban thing and how the effects of urbanization and industrialization have affected what we do. Talk about how

farming effects the land in terms of what types of additives we put into the soil or into the animals but we don't very often look at ourselves as having grown up through this whole archetype of agriculturalism: I mean agriculturalism as an ideology; as opposed to hunting as an ideology. I think about that a lot, because that's the whole thing about law and who owns the land. People who don't have to work in the fields... you end up with an idle class of some sort, the division of property, and blah-blah-blah. And I wonder how different things would be if we didn't think about owning land, which is what agriculturalism is: it's believing that you own the land. What's needed is a land ecosystem that parallels with a social ecosystem.

In light of the population's doubling factor set for the next 50 years, let's talk about Official Population Policy. This is a topic that's been circulating about for a few years, both China and India have active policies; I'd like your thoughts on the subject.

Well, in China, for instance, they have taxation coercion, here we have it as well but it's happening the other way around. Here we have reward instead of punishment, that's all. It's still coercion. It's a touchy topic with too many.

...what is our agenda in wanting to control the population of a given third world country? Is it really humanitarian?

The thing is, even if you have a North American middle-class couple that will only duplicate themselves — that they only are going to have two kids, it would seem that there's a replacement value and that we may stabilize the population, but those kids and their kids are going to consume way more than ten kids in India or Africa. There, life is so much more uncertain, it's a whole different set of variables: we face environmental degradation through excess; as their lives are threatened through impoverishment.

We should ask, what is our agenda in wanting to control the population of a given third world country? Is it really humanitarian? Are we really concerned about the kids starving to death? Or are we concerned about civil unrest when things get scary because there are too many people and not enough food?

When you look at an ecosystem or a food web, it's really complicated, you have to try to imagine them three dimensionally. Most of environmental teaching is aimed at a triangle. You've probably seen the food pyramid, it's a two-dimensional image, a triangle can only ever be a two-dimensional image. But once you start to think about it as a web going off in all directions, it's kind of like a geodesic type of thing and you've got to try to see all these interconnections and when you see that in an ecosystem, you have to take that and apply that in a social system from the community level to the global level.

We have to see that what we are doing is having impact on the biosphere and we don't like to do that. It makes us uncomfortable to think about the fact that Western individuals each have about forty slaves in the third world. It takes forty people in Bangladesh living the type of life they lead to keep us driving BMW's and eating out of microwave ovens.

