

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

Peter Schwartzman

Environmental leaders: Thanks for your vision, commitment and sacrifice

In this column two years ago, I took the opportunity to give thanks to my family for providing the nurturing and support that has enabled me to live a rewarding life. Many people have also played a key role in paving the environmental path that I have chosen (and continue to navigate). While several of these people have been presented here previously (e.g., Sandra Steingraber, Julia Butterfly Hill, Aqeela Sherrills, Bogaletch Gebre, & Amartya Sen), other influential people have largely gone unrecognized. In what follows, I hope to introduce you to some of these folks and say a little about why I find them so important and worthy of mention. May this "thanks"-giving prompt others to consider and draw inspiration from the breadth of environmental leaders and their activities.

Rachel Carson is best known for her book *Silent Spring* (published in 1962). This book, which outlines the hazards of pesticide use, is responsible arguably for the birth of the modern environmental movement. One of the most widely read environmental books in history (and also one of the most profound), *Silent Spring's* conclusions are as relevant today as they were forty years ago. It should definitely be part of any high school or college curriculum.

While Carson's legacy revolves around this groundbreaking work, she serves as an inspiration as well for the path that she took and the obstacles that she faced. Her academic experience and success was marred by continual financial hardship and a culture that didn't expect women to become scientists (and certainly not ones that were as determined and outspoken as Rachel). Diagnosed with breast cancer while writing *Silent Spring*, Rachel fought through many health setbacks to finish the masterful work. Once published and released into the public sphere, *Silent Spring* was vehemently attacked by the chemical industry which used multiple tactics to defame and undermine her authority. As a result, she spent the last two years of her life in ailing health and exposed to a continuous barrage of criticism. Fortunately, the book's popularity and its wide acceptance by the public likely provided her some solace and satisfaction.

Despite industry's efforts to damage her reputation irreparably, Rachel Carson's vision and scientific insight lives on. Globally, many countries are beginning to phase out the "dirty dozen" (twelve widely-used and very harmful chemicals). Unfortunately, the United States has been one of the most resistant to join these negotiations. Consider the Environmental Protection Agency's decision just last week to exempt pesticides from the Clean Water Act. This EPA attempt to deregulate potentially harmful chemicals serves as but one small indication of how corporate-friendly this Administration has been. Given this realization, it is imperative that we citizens educate ourselves and become modern day advocates for the use of alternative (safe) chemicals and processes. Beyond Pesticides (www.beyondpesticides.org) is an organization currently leading this effort. Sandra Steingraber's book, *Living Downstream*, is a contemporary version of *Silent Spring* and gives an outstanding overview of these issues as well.

Chico Mendes lived a relatively short life (44 years) but in that time he contributed so mightily. Raised in the heart of the Amazon, Chico and his family were rubber tappers—a profession involving the sustainable harvest of sap from the rubber trees native to the rainforest. Going back



Rachel Carson

photo: Library of Congress

many generations, this form of farming served his community well until the 1960s when global rubber prices plummeted forcing many members of the region to sell land—usually to wealthier cattle ranchers. Subsequent cattle ranching in the area resulted in the clearing of large expanses of land (requiring the removal of the forest). This practice made the rubber tappers livelihood unproductive and ultimately



Chico Mendes

left large expanses of land unusable. In response to the increasing loss and degradation of the forest, Chico began to unionize his fellow rubber tappers. He recognized that without collective organization their economic and social rights would be trampled. On the other hand, large land owners thought that their political and economic control was more important than the sustainable harvest of forest materials or the maintenance of traditional communities. As a result, when the rubber tappers resisted being displaced, many rubber tapper leaders were killed, including Chico. Fortunately, before his death

in 1988, he was able to bring the issue of his people to the forefront of the environmental movement. With the assistance of several well-known environmental groups along with the unrelenting support of many rubber tappers, Chico was able to raise enough awareness of the situation that international banks were provoked to reconsider and renegotiate loans. These loans subsequently were to have a great impact on the direction development took in the region. A large extractive reserve (a land area where commodities, such as rubber and nuts, are harvested providing the local people with economic security and a vital forest) was created and many others have followed. Though the continued destruction of the Amazon (and other tropical forests) remains one of the greatest environmental tragedies currently underway, the efforts and sacrifices made by Chico Mendes and other Amazonian people cannot be overstated. You can learn more about Chico in the book and movie, *The Burning Season*, and at a website dedicated to his life: www.chicomendes.com.

Wangari Maathai may be a household name to some of you given that she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 (the first African woman to do so; also, equally remarkable, the first environmentalist as well). However, for those that are less familiar, let me tell you a little about this amazing contemporary woman.

Born and raised in Kenya, Wangari was the first woman from eastern Africa to earn a Ph.D. (in veterinary medicine). In 1977, at the age of 37, Wangari founded the Green Belt Movement (GBM), an environmental organization that transformed her country's landscape and its people. The GBM set out to plant trees all across the country

in an attempt to reduce/prevent erosion which had been destroying biological and agricultural lands at a rapid rate. This planting of over 30,000,000 trees, disproportionately executed by Kenyan women, has spared further degradation and provided hope and inspiration for millions of people.

Wangari's path to fame (having received numerous prestigious awards in addition to her Nobel Prize) came at great personal sacrifice as well. Arrested numerous times for non-violent demonstrations for open, democratic elections, Wangari has struggled for justice innumerable times. She lives with the active understanding that political stability, citizen empowerment, and environmental health are all prerequisites for a peaceful and sustainable life for all. We are blessed that she survived such mistreatment, and we have much still to learn from her wisdom and her ways. To see more about Wangari, pick up her most recent book, an autobiography, entitled, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2006, ISBN 0307263487) or one of her other books: *The Greenbelt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (2003, 159056040X); and, *The Canopy of Hope: My Life Campaigning for Africa, Women, and the Environment*, (2002, 1590560027).

Vandana Shiva's intellectual work (which includes at least a dozen books and more than 300 journal articles) spans so many dimensions of environmental thought it is hard to imagine an environmentalist more prolific and yet diverse in interests. Born and raised in India, and a physicist by training, Vandana seeks to bring attention and motivate action surrounding issues related to water, genetically modified foods and organisms, globalization, gender, and biodiversity.

In the 1970s, Vandana was a "tree hugger" as part of a struggle to curtail unsustainable, biologically-damaging logging in her country. In early 1980s, she studied the effects of mining on the environment and as a result of her work on this problem, the Supreme Court of India banned mining in the region. According to Vandana, this experience convinced her that intimately connecting intellectual pursuits with real world problems and popular, non-violent struggle/activism was an incredibly important enterprise (interview in *Life Positive*). More recently, Vandana founded an organization to begin/maintain organic agricultural practices (something she feels has been corrupted by petrochemically-fixed forms of farming that are being promoted by developed countries). Most recently, Vandana has been bringing attention to the many unsustainable elements of globalization.



Wangari Maathai

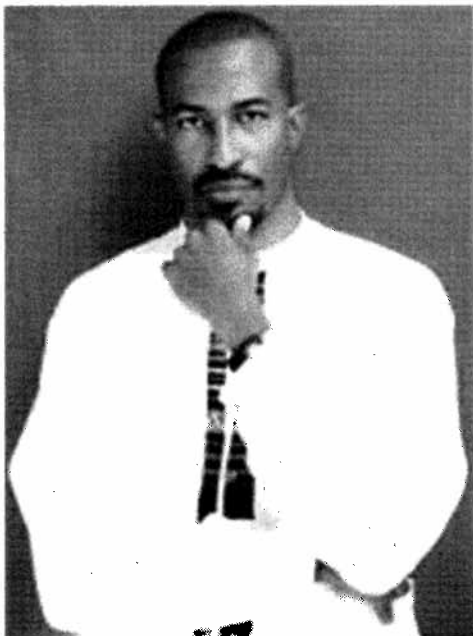


Vandana Shiva

Undeterred by the forces working against her, Vandana has dedicated her life to the cleansing of the Earth and the improvements in people's lives. She never forgets about current and future generations and she exudes a spirit that all of us could benefit from. To learn more from Vandana, read her most recent book, entitled, *Earth Democracy; Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (2005; ISBN 089608745X) or one of her many other books, including: *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply* (1999; 0896086089); and, *Biopiracy: the Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (1997; 1896357113).

Van Jones is probably the least known of the six leaders that are being thanked here, and he is also the one least likely to be associated with environmental issues. Despite this, Van should be thought of as one of our young and vibrant environmental leaders. Founder of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights (headquartered in Oakland, California), Van works tirelessly to expose the abuses within our criminal justice system. A 1993 graduate of Yale Law School, Van might be considered a "new-wave" environmentalist since his efforts draw attention to human rights violations and other non-traditional environmental concerns.

So what is the connection between the environment and the criminalization and incarceration of young people (the majority of whom are from low-income backgrounds and/or people of color)? Urban communities, many of which are lacking access to healthy food, economically-sustainable jobs, and adequate health care, suffer from an overabundance of air and soil pollution, noise, congestion, brownfields (i.e., abandoned industrial lots), and prison/jail cells. If a significant portion of our population lives daily with these environmental hazards, must we not rectify



Van Jones

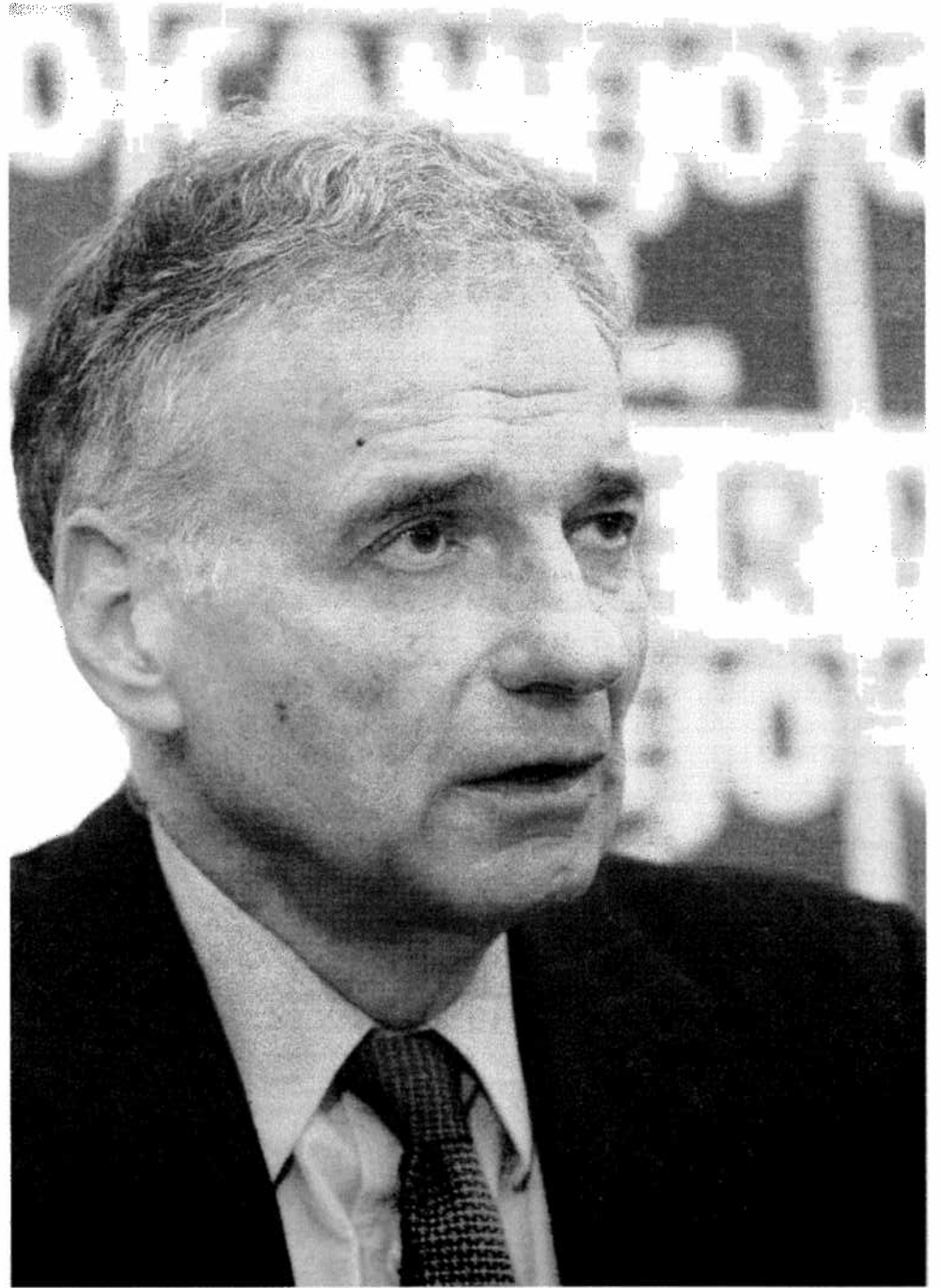
the situation as soon as possible? Saving the whales, stopping deforestation overseas, and curbing overfishing of coastal waterways are all meaningful activities but clearly these issues aren't any more important than the well-being and livelihood of our citizens. Van Jones provides all mainstream environmentalists entryway into these local struggles, ones that are likely occurring closer to home than some of the broader, global environmental problems we face.

Fortunately, Van has received much recognition for his valiant efforts. In 1997, the Rockefeller Foundation provided Van with a "Next Generation Leadership" Fellowship to enable him to carry out his important work. In 1998, the prestigious Reebok International Human Rights Award was presented to Van. In 2002, the World Economic Forum named him a Global Leader for Tomorrow. As you can see, while not an elected politician, a wealthy philanthropist, or a "tree-hugger," Van Jones represents one important environmental leader that we all can draw inspiration from. For more information on Van's Ella Baker Center go to: <www.ellabakercenter.org>.

Today, **Ralph Nader** is probably best known as a presidential candidate; he has run for the position four times. However, Ralph's consumer advocacy work may be the more significant and enduring of his contributions. Educated at Princeton University and a graduate of Harvard Law School, Ralph has helped create more non-governmental organizations (NGOs) than most of us can name. Now 72 years old, Ralph has succeeded in much of what he has endeavored, including many environmentally-related accomplishments.

Ralph has long been working and advocating for consumer rights and protections. Some of his early work is credited with stimulating the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (1970) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (1970). In 1971, at the age of 37, he founded Public Citizen (www.publiccitizen.org), one of the most influential NGOs in the past quarter century. Though working on issues beyond the environment, Public Citizen was instrumental in investigating in and advocating for environmental initiatives such as the Safe Drinking Water Act, fuel conservation and economy, and the banning of Red Dye #2 and DBCP (a pesticide known to cause sterility in men).

Ralph Nader's impact on our nation has been profound. From the improvement of airline and automobile safety to increased integrity of the insurance industry, from the quality of our drinking water to the regulation of polluting industries, Ralph has indeed mounted a steadfast and productive opposition to technological



Ralph Nader

photo: MCT

"conveniences" and "business-as-usual." May his unwillingness to accept the status-quo prompt more of us to speak up for the health and vitality of our communities. To learn more about Ralph and his environmental thinking, read one of his many books: *Who's Poisoning America* (1981; ISBN 0871562804); *Menace of Atomic Energy* (1979; 0393009203); and, *The Frugal Shopper* (1992; 0936758309).

Six heros/sheros have been presented. Hopefully one (or more) of them has intrigued you. Never forget where you are going, but never forget how you got here either. These minds and hearts have had a lot to do with the good things we enjoy and benefit from. May you take part in what they have started to make a better world for yourself and future generations.

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