

Women on Top

Two BC women moved beyond front-line environmental activism to make a difference where it matters most: in the boardroom. Their pioneering efforts have earned each of them an Ashoka Award for initiating social change.

B Y J E S S I C A W E R B

Think “activist” and the word conjures up a number of images—people chained to trees, angry protest marches against globalization, and occasionally pies lobbed at politicians. It generally doesn’t elicit images of professionals working with businessmen and politicians to discuss tax laws, or visiting mills and publishing houses to provide feedback about paper production. But this is a new brand of activism, one that is not only about staging protests, but also about creating solutions with those previously considered “the enemy.” Leading the way are two forward-thinking women from Vancouver Island. Donna Morton and Nicole Rycroft—both in their 30s—have each garnered a rare Ashoka fellowship for their passion and innovative thinking.

Founded in 1980 as a source of investment and support for social entrepreneurs, Ashoka is a global organization that elects Ashoka Fellows in more than 48 countries. To date, Ashoka has elected more than 1,400 Ashoka Fellows; only four of the individuals were from Canada. What is most apparent about the entrepreneurs singled out for recognition are their innovative and uniquely effective methods for achieving social or environmental progress. So it is with Morton and Rycroft, who both departed the ranks of angry protesters to begin building relationships with “the enemy” with the aim of turning them into allies.

Morton: Evolution of an Activist

Morton’s call to arms is the concept of tax-shifting, which she describes as the “single most significant lever you can pull to address climate change and environmental pollution and energy consumption.” The mechanism behind tax-shifting is so disarmingly simple that it seems too good to be true: tax the bad things in society, and give tax breaks to those who contribute to the good things. A company that produces more toxins or creates more waste would pay higher taxes than one that operates in a more environmentally or socially responsible way. In a bid to escape paying taxes, businesses and consumers would naturally move towards sustainability. It may appear overly simplistic, but according to Morton, and research backed up by Alan Thein Durning, some 2,600 economists—including eight Nobel Laureates—have endorsed tax-shifting as a response to global climate change.

Her passion—if a word like passion can readily be applied to taxes—has led her into face-to-face meetings with such political heavyweights as Paul Martin and federal NDP leader Jack Layton. Her “think-and-do-tank,” the Centre for In-

tegral Economics, worked closely with Winnipeg mayor Glenn Murray in his creation of the New Deal agenda, which included the use of municipal tax-shifting with consumption-based fees and fines. Now, Morton has her eye on her hometown of Victoria, after which she’ll focus on Vancouver, to ultimately “build a body of evidence, case by case, municipality by municipality, that tax-shifting works, and present it to the federal government.”

She looks to the successes achieved in Scandinavia where, she explains, tax-shifting policies have resulted not only in greater sustainability, but a more stable and buoyant economy. “[Countries in Scandinavia] have some of the best economic indicators in the OECD. Governments make decisions every day based on that story. But when you look at places in the world with the best economies, they don’t believe that story. [Sweden is] one of the leaders in sustainability, and they have a rocking economy. Our organization is starting to dismantle that myth of choosing between today and the future for a viable economy.”

Morton, evidently, dreams big. And with her no-nonsense black power suits and business vocabulary, you can bet that she doesn’t look out of place in meetings with the businesspeople and politicians she now regards as allies. But things weren’t always this way. Morton, who once chained herself to an oil drilling vessel in Esquimalt, admits that she was once more on the trouble-making side of activism. Inspired by Helen Caldicott, of whom she first became aware in the NFB film *If You Love This Planet*, Morton jumped head-first into the self-righteous, angry world of the student activist. “I started out as a high school and university activist focused mainly on peace, women, and human-rights issues. In high school, I got involved in high school politics and worked with an organization called Students Against Nuclear Extinction.” At the age of 24, participating in the Commission on Resources and the Environment review as a youth representative, Morton realized that she had to rethink her concept of reality.

“I got involved in the land-use plan for Vancouver Island, and I left feeling changed. Maybe everyone has a piece

of the truth. Maybe logging executives have a right to be there, just as much as I have a right to be there. I left that process feeling like these issues were incredibly complex...and in that mess of people’s interests and very disjointed visions of what the future needs, I thought, ‘How could I become part of a brokerage of relationships?’”

After learning about tax-shifting and researching its efficacy as the business and communications director with the Seattle-based Northwest Environment



Donna Morton of the Centre for Integral Economics once chained herself to an oil drilling vessel in Esquimalt.

PHOTO BY CLAIRE MALCOLMSON

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Watch (NEW), in 1998, Morton launched the Centre for Integral Economics, initially as an affiliate of NEW. “For my first 15 years as an activist, I thought that all you had to do was present the right people with key ideas, and they would go ahead and make changes. But that’s not the way it works. You have to position yourself close to people who are close to the people who will change and affect change.”

Rycroft: Relationship Broker

Positioning the right people together is something that Tofino-based Nicole Rycroft knows plenty about; by forging relationships between various interested parties, her Markets Initiative non-profit group has virtually single-handedly changed the face of book publishing. A coalition of the Friends of Clayoquot

Sound, Greenpeace Canada, and the Sierra Club of Canada’s British Columbia chapter, Markets Initiative was the force behind Raincoast Books’ decision to print its titles—most notably J.K. Rowling’s latest tome, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*—on ancient-forest-friendly, 100-percent post-consumer recycled paper.

“Basically, we contact publishers about the environmental context around the world,” the Australia-born Rycroft, who founded Markets Initiative in 1999, explains. “Most book publishers are aware that they use a lot of paper. We educate them about how much of the world’s paper comes from biologically diverse forests. We ask them to write a letter of commitment that, over a set period of time, they will phase out paper originating from ancient growth forests.”

Growing up in the Australian bush, Rycroft had an early love of nature, and by the age of nine, she had started an environmental group. In her 20s, she began volunteering her research skills in environmental and social justice issues, looking into logging of ancient forests in Australia and human rights in Nepal. In 1996, when she moved to Canada on a work visa, she took up arms against the loggers, and participated in blockades before a realization struck: “There’s only so long that people can stand on a logging road, or be chained to a tree, before they’re eventually moved to one side and the loggers move in. I guess I just felt that for me, the way to plug into the environmental movement with the skills I had was to work on a more systemic level.”

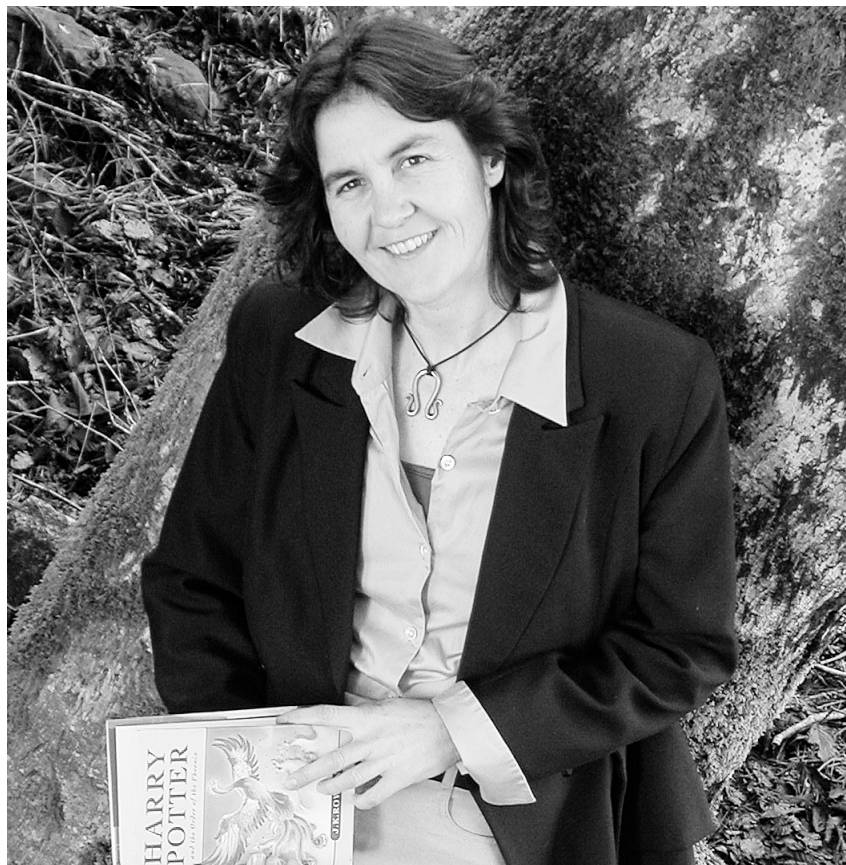
With a vision of an infrastructure allowing mass producers of paper products to print on ancient-forest-friendly paper, Rycroft developed a plan to facilitate that dream. She began the mammoth task of brokering relationships between printers, paper mills, book publishers and even authors, ensuring that the demand for eco-friendly paper would drive an industry-wide shift towards supporting sustainability. Publishers that have made the shift have benefited from more than just a cleaner conscience; the positive publicity gained by printing flagship titles on 100 percent recycled paper is the kind that simply can’t be bought. Facilitating this kind of change makes such perfect sense—business-wise as well as ecologically—that Rycroft says she is sometimes astounded that no one ever thought of it before.

The facts that drive Markets Initiative’s ongoing commitment are, in fact, frightening. Despite a growing understanding of ecological issues among the general public, according to a 1996 study entitled *Toward a Sustainable Paper Cycle: An Independent Study on the Sustainability of the Pulp and Paper Industry*, globally, 71 percent of the world’s paper supply is derived from ecologically valuable, biologically diverse forests rather than from tree farms. And that’s not happening in places like Brazil or Japan; Rycroft says that almost 40 percent of Canada’s ancient temperate rainforests and 65 percent of Canadian boreal forests are logged to produce paper. And by 2020, paper consumption is predicted to increase 77 percent.

The figures may appear insurmountable, but after only three years, Markets Initiative has clearly demonstrated that, in fact, change is possible—even with a tiny staff of two part-time employees. “When we first started, none of the printers in Canada had ancient-forest-friendly paper available. Now, we’re at the point where we have 67 publishers in Canada with commitments to shift away from, or eliminate, the use of papers from ancient forests. Eight printers now stock these papers—paper mills developed eight new types of paper.”

The secret of Rycroft’s success might be a combination of research, and the marketing and business acumen she clearly possesses. With no prior experience or education in the marketing and business worlds—she holds a BA in Physiotherapy—she has proven to be something of a publicity whiz. She has even garnered the support of such Canadian literary idols as Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findlay, Pierre Burton, Alice Munro and Austin Clarke with the risqué ad campaign “Who’s good between the covers?” which pictured the Can Lit heavyweights in bed. But for all her achievements, Rycroft prefers to deflect any praise to those she considers her colleagues. “Market Initiative’s successes wouldn’t have been possible without the work that the publishers have done. They really are the ones leading initiatives here and internationally.”

Underlying the success of both the Centre for Integral Economics and Markets Initiative is their founders’ ability to create new opportunities by bringing the right people together from all sides of the so-called bargaining table. After years of confrontation-based activism, Morton and Rycroft have found that true change is possible only when all sides are given an equal voice. With a sprinkle of business speak, and a large dose of emotional intelligence, these women have opened up the channels of communication to bring economy and ecology together in ways that serve to benefit all of us. ♻️



Nicole Rycroft of Markets Initiative has taken tree-hugging to a whole new level.

PHOTO BY JACQUELINE WINDH

Almost 40 percent of Canada’s ancient temperate rainforests and 65 percent of Canadian boreal forests are logged to produce paper.

Jessica Werb is a freelance writer with an interest in health and science matters. She welcomes comments at jessicawerb@hotmail.com.

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