



# Elizabeth May's passion

*The head of the Sierra Club is one of the environment's toughest advocates; when she talks, Ottawa listens*

For Elizabeth May – executive director of the Sierra Club of Canada, an organization devoted to developing a grassroots network for protecting global ecosystems – environmentalism is not just a hobby, a lifestyle or even a full-blown career. Caring for the earth is May's vocation, and the passion it obviously inspires in her started early, nurtured by family ideals and brought to fruition by a combination of her

strength and intelligent resolve.

“The really important ingredient was that I was raised in an activist environment, where if you knew about an issue, there was certainly an expectation that you’d do something about it,” May says of her upbringing on the family farm in rural Connecticut.

For May, the first big issue came at age 13, when some of the sheep on the farm started “twitching and dying.” Undeterred by a veterinar-

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ian’s inability to find the cause of death, May dived into *Silent Spring*, the 1962 best-selling book by American scientist Rachel Carson, which was fast becoming the touchstone of a burgeoning environmental movement. It was not long before May had her answer.

“I put two and two together and wrote the municipal government in the town where I grew up to ask if they had been using any pesticides in the vicinity of our farm that year.”

TONY FOLURSE



Elizabeth May, executive director of the Sierra Club of Canada, in front of her Ottawa office

It was an astute guess and was openly confirmed by officials unused to defending their use of poisons, especially to teenagers. May wrote back, pointing to the pesticide as the probable cause of the death of her family's sheep, describing symptoms and quoting passages from *Silent Spring*.

"I never heard from the city again," May muses, adding, "it wasn't unusual to be an activist in my house. It would be unusual not to be."

Unusual, or perhaps, even impossible. May's mother, Stephanie, was an environmentalist who helped fight atmospheric nuclear testing in Connecticut. "My whole childhood was spent watching activist things happening all around me. I got involved in (environmental) movements just by following my mother around to meetings," she recalls, a pattern that continues for May, now 49, and her daughter Victoria, 12.

"I'm certainly raising my daughter that way," May remarks, her motherly pride almost palpable, the girl's name creeping into conversations and her physical presence manifested in the numerous pictures of Victoria that adorn May's utilitarian office at the Sierra Club's national headquarters in downtown Ottawa.

May holds a coffee mug decorated with Victoria's image as she dashes from one room to another, a calm and efficient whirlwind, discussing with staff the day ahead, breaking away smoothly to pose for the photographer. "I thought this would be amusing for the gang," she says with a grin, tacking a picture of herself, half-buried in a snug embrace with Liberal leadership contender Paul

Martin, onto a hallway bulletin board.

The view from her office is all black tar-papered roof and staid Ottawa skyline. If she notices the irony of an east-facing window, turned directly away from Parliament and most of the buildings that house Canada's political elite, she says nothing.

IT WAS HALF MERCURIAL FORTUNE, half planned destiny that brought May to Canada at the age of 18, in 1972. Her father, an insurance company executive, had moved the family to Nova Scotia partly in disapproval over the Vietnam War, and partly because he "fell in love with Cape Breton." His desire to "get out of the rat race,"

from Dalhousie University Law School in 1983, quickly working her way as an environmental lawyer from Nova Scotia to Ottawa, before her eventual appointment in 1986 as senior policy advisor to then federal environment minister Tom McMillan.

It was a chance to wield far-reaching power over Canada's environment, and May used it well, drafting new legislation and pollution control measures, and playing an instrumental role in the creation of several national parks, including British Columbia's South Moresby, about which she has since written a book

(*Paradise Won: The Struggle to Save South Moresby*, McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1990).

But in 1988, May and McMillan parted philosophical ways, and she resigned over a disagreement with how the Environment Ministry was handling an environmental review of the proposed construction of the Rafferty-Alameda Dam on the Souris River in southern Saskatchewan.

That resolve, says long-time colleague Stephen Hazell, is vintage Elizabeth May. "She blew the whistle on the minister and resigned, which happens so very rarely."

Hazell, currently the executive director of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, was at that time legal counsel for the

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May recalls, led to the family's impoverishment, and she was forced to quit university and waitress to support herself. But working for a living did not get in the way of a feverishly active environmentalist schedule. Detailed files on pesticides that she had amassed in Connecticut served as the backbone for protests when at 19 May became leader of Cape Breton Landowners Against the Spray, who fought the forest industry's budworm insecticide spray program in Nova Scotia.

Almost a decade later, she found the means to return to university and graduated

Canadian Wildlife Federation, which had sued the ministry over Rafferty-Alameda. The Federal Court of Canada eventually quashed the permits for the dam's construction, deeming them illegal.

According to Hazel, May's decision to quit, and to say why, reflects an almost unheard of idealism. "You always resign for family reasons," he says drily. "You never resign because the minister did some bad stuff. It took a lot of guts for her to do that."

So it was that in 1989 she came to the Sierra Club of Canada. Her work there, involving ever-changing education and activist

campaigns about issues such as endangered species, pesticide use, climate change, forest protection and the phase-out of nuclear energy, obviously agrees with her, and she continues fighting the good battle.

For May, battle means self-sacrifice of the kind she once again demonstrated in the spring of 2001 when she staged a 17-day hunger strike on Parliament Hill, forcing the government to promise to relocate families living near the infamous lead- and arsenic-laced tar ponds of Sydney, Nova Scotia. Relics of the region's long-gone steel and coal industries, the ponds are now, effectively, open sewers, dubbed by May as being "the worst toxic waste site in North America."

The recipient of numerous awards and titles, including the United Nations Global 500 Award (1990) and honorary doctorates from Mount Saint Vincent University and the University of New Brunswick, May is less interested in discussing herself than the environment.

"In the advocacy area, she is one of the most effective political environmentalists who exist in the country," says Bob Slater, recently retired from a 30-year career with Environment Canada and his position as senior assistant deputy minister. Slater met May over 20 years ago in Cape Breton. "I thought, 'There's an interesting person. There's someone who's extremely articulate, extremely capable of marshalling a compelling argument and presenting it with passion.'"

May's message today concerns our climate. "Our biggest threat right now is climate change. We fight very hard to save specific wetlands and specific forests, but even if we push back the bulldozers and save the wetlands, if the climate changes drastically, then those wetlands will dry out. That's the kind of thing we're looking at."

May is blunt in attributing blame. "People in Ontario are among the world's worst offenders in terms of [contributing to] climate change," she says flatly, naming our dependence on fossil fuels as the greatest culprit. On this issue, as with all issues, May puts her money where her mouth is: she does not own a car.

As she talks, she shuffles through mounds of paper on her desk, over which hang a picture of May with former U.S. president Bill Clinton, and another of a younger May with rock-star environmentalist Sting. Framed handwritten notes in Clinton's southern scrawl begin charm-

ingly "Dear Elizabeth," progress through "Thanks for your advice," and end simply "Sincerely, Bill."

May is whirling from the room again, pressing a copy of another of her books, *At the Cutting Edge: The Crisis in Canada's Forests* (Key Porter Books, 1998), into a journalist's hands. Her packed suitcase sits nearby, ready for a flight to Toronto later in the day. Over her shoulder, May cannot resist one last reference to her daughter's commitment to walking as a way of reduc-

ing greenhouse gas emissions, and her youthful proselytizing. "I don't think she's obnoxious, but she'll encourage her friends to walk to the store instead of taking the car, because that's what she's used to." It's one more measure of just how deeply rooted May's beliefs run, reflecting the commingling of her family life, personal past and current environmental goals. ♡

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