

Who's the Greatest? Who's the Greenest?

Simon Hodgson read the list of Eco-heroes published by the Environment Agency with great interest. As he worked through the names of 'people who have done most to save the planet' he found himself musing on the nature of social change.

By the time you read this, Christmas will be a distant memory. The pulled crackers, crumpled wrapping paper and discarded greeting cards will be well on their way to the landfill, MRF or incinerator (depending on your local authority). With them too will be the newspaper editions from those becalmed days between Christmas and New Year; days when the politicians are on holiday, the stock exchanges quiet and barring natural disaster, the editors find themselves staring at blank screens. So in a tradition dating back – I'm sure – to Dickens' stint on the Morning Chronicle, they set about producing lists. "The 100 greatest moments of 2006", "2006 – the sporting highs and lows", "The 50 people we loved and hated in 2006" – you know the sort of thing.

But in compiling our very own 'list of lists' for last year, we must start not on 26 December (although this undoubtedly marks the start of high season), but a month earlier when the Environment Agency released its judgement on 'Eco-Heroes' – the 100 men and women who have done more to look after our planet than anyone else.' Now that is an interesting project. Eschewing the conventional '...during 2006' suffix, the compilers gave themselves thousands of years of human history to pick from. And they drew their 'eco' definition similarly broadly. Thirteen experts were asked for their nominations and after a 'heated debate' in the office, the Agency's *Your Environment* magazine (we have those here too, Ed) was able to count down from 100 to 1 in the approved Top of the Pops style.

Now before I go on, let me reassure you that this article isn't going to cavil at the experts' choices, or offer my own preferences as an alternative. I did wince

at entry number 100 – Santa Claus – which felt like a convenient inclusion to give the PR team something to work with in the run up to Christmas. One can also object to the logic: the official citation mentioned his sleek 'no carbon' operation, but a simple back of the envelope calculation for eight ruminants pulling a sleigh several million miles suggests considerable levels of methane emissions.



Rachel Carson

Photo: Courtesy of the Lear/Carson Collection, Connecticut College

Nor is it a retrospective – a chance to simply plough through the list highlighting previous interviewees from these pages. Having said that, Tim Smit (22nd), George Monbiot (23rd), David Bellamy (18th), and Fritjof Capra (15th) were all there, as was Jonathon Porritt who made it all the way to number 3. This makes him the greatest living eco-hero – at least according to these experts (remember I said I wasn't going to argue!). There are also a number of fisherman's tales – interviewees almost caught but who eventually got away – and a good overlap with my 'to do' list (now augmented with several new names).

There's one interviewee missing from the paragraph above: Michael Meacher makes it in at number 24, one of only three British politicians, and the only

British minister. None of his predecessors or successors in the job of Environment Minister is visible, including the current incumbent. Does that strike you as odd? People with millions of pounds of budget at their disposal, dedicated staff teams and direct or indirect control of enormous enforcement agencies, and they didn't make it on to a list of eco-heroes that was, frankly, propped up by such environmental luminaries as Jamie Oliver and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Surely they must have done something to help protect the planet?

Well it struck me. Not, primarily, as a judgement on the effectiveness of the ministers in question, but it made me go back and look again. Where were the people with big jobs? The Ministers? The European Commissioners? The CEOs? The Environmental Regulators? (Although, in fairness the Agency did exclude all its people in the interests of objectivity.) There is a smattering: Gro Harlem Brundtland, Lord Browne, Margot Wallstrom and Al Gore, for example. But the pages are dominated by outsiders – activists, maverick academics, journalists and campaigners. Where were the insiders? The people whose actions affect millions; whose decisions can save or damn a forest? These are strikingly under-represented.

Maybe they are the problem. Maybe it's true that these people represent the military-industrial complex, intent on destroying the Earth, and the rest of us must fight them. The little man against the big. But the powerful are people too. They walk in the country. They smell the flowers. They have kids. It's surely too much of a simplification to cast them all as evildoers. The furthest we can go with this argument is that they are generally inactive, disinterested and therefore complicit. Possibly.

Or maybe it's that they are anonymous. Which of us can name the current Minister for X, or European Commissioner for Y? The power rests with the office, not the person, and once

gone they are forgotten. This feels nearer the mark. In support we can look at some of the people who do make the list: Gore, Meacher and Brundtland are all perhaps feted principally for continuing their enthusiasms after they left office.

But on balance I think it's to do with the nature of change. And whether you are a glass-half-full environmental optimist, or see the last of the precious water running down the drain, you will certainly agree that the environmental 'movement' is all about change. The citation for the all-time eco-hero Rachel Carson mentions "the dramatic transition that came in her lifetime, which she helped bring about, from the Age of Innocence to the Age of Awareness ... from seeing the natural world as a mine, dump or playground to seeing 'the environment' as the system in which we are embedded". Our eco-heroes to date have been changing the way we see things. They have been articulating the problems, formulating new ways of thinking, shifting the public mood. That's what we've needed. So it's no surprise that the list is full of thinkers, writers, and

professional thorns-in-the-flesh.

And yet this is arguably just the first wave of change. We're aware. We've defined the problem. Next we need solutions. We need clever, practical ideas, and we need the clout and consistency to make them work even when they aren't comfortable. And in turn this is going to require a generation of eco-heroes on the inside of the system. People who

can implement what's needed, make it happen, carry millions along with them. Let's hope that the twentieth anniversary list of eco-heroes is much better spread with Ministers, CEOs, and billionaires. It's your turn guys.

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