

Town & Country Magazine

Four Forces For Nature

Meet some of Mother Earth's best friends: four women who get her message—and who are doing everything they can to share it with the world.

By Diane Guernsey
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“THERE ONCE was a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings.” With these words—the kind that a mother might use to tell a bedtime story—Rachel Carson began *Silent Spring*. The book, published in 1962, awakened an entire generation of Americans to the threat of pesticides poisoning our air, water and soil, as well as to a new world view in which humans were woven into the web of nature, not set untouchably at its center.

As eloquently as Carson wrote, the tale she told was anything but soothing: with fact after disquieting fact, it spelled out the havoc being wreaked on plants, animals and people by the new chemical products that had flooded the market after World War II. Carson's troubling message resonated widely, and people all over the country began to ask, as she did, “Can anyone believe it is possible to lay down such a barrage of poisons on the surface of the earth without making it unfit for all life?”

Carson, who died of cancer in 1964, never lived to see her legacy unfold, but it endures in our near-universal awareness of pollution's detrimental effects and in the welter of far-reaching agencies and laws created within a decade of Carson's passing—the Environmental Protection Agency, the vastly expanded Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act.

Carson's spirit lives, too, in the countless women who have followed in her path, sounding the alarm about the grave environmental hazards we face and striving, each in her own way, to avert them. The list of threats is long: overpopulation, rainforest decimation, ozone depletion (identified by atmospheric researcher Susan Solomon, Ph.D.), toxic spills, wholesale species die-offs, hormone and endocrine disruptors (documented by Theo Colborn, Ph.D., whom many consider Carson's modern-day counterpart), overfishing and—the catastrophic peril looming over all—global warming.

“I deeply believe,” Carson once told Congress, “that we in this generation must come to terms with nature.” If not, was her implication, then nature will come to terms with us. Carson's words are as immediate as ever, and her successors carry on. Meet four contemporary women who aim, literally, to save the world.

Deirdre Imus

Founder and president, Deirdre Imus Environmental Center for Pediatric Oncology (dienviro.com)

Every environmentalist can talk about the forces of nature, but Deirdre Imus actually *is* one. At least, so she seems when she locks her blue-green eyes on you and describes her work at the Deirdre Imus Environmental Center for Pediatric Oncology, at New Jersey's Hackensack University Medical Center (HUMC). “It's our mission to identify, control and ultimately prevent the environmental factors that may cause pediatric cancers and other health problems with our children,” she says in soft but rapid-fire tones. “We're trying to find tangible ways to remove toxic chemicals that we know are making our children sick.”

Imus cites a horrific array of statistics: Cancer is the leading cause of death by disease in children, with about 12,500 cases diagnosed each year and a 1 percent annual increase nationally, particularly in leukemias and once-rare brain tumors. One in 6 U.S. children is diagnosed with a developmental or learning disability, and 1 in 166 with autism. Obesity and diabetes are rampant. Asthma, which is heavily influenced by environmental factors, tops the list of chronic childhood illnesses.

In another person, these figures might induce despair—but for Imus, who has been fascinated by healthy living since her Waterbury, Connecticut, girlhood, the reverse takes place. She speaks the words as if for the first time, seeming to draw fresh energy and conviction from each new statistic. “When you look at the state of our children's health, it gets an F,” she concludes. “That's what drives me. The statistical picture is scary, and we've got to change that.” Her passion, which in another might feel overbearing, seems born of a powerful, overriding call to care for children—all children, not just her own or a select handful.

Given Imus's wealth (she is married to legendary radio and television host Don Imus), she could have spent her days in pleasant recreation. Instead, she has propelled herself into the world as a full-time agent of change. In 1998, with her husband, she designed and built the 4,000-acre, eco-friendly Imus Ranch for Kids With Cancer, in New Mexico. The couple and their eight-year-old son, Wyatt, spend summers and school breaks there, helping children with life-threatening illnesses rebuild their health and self-reliance through fresh air, organic food and a genuine working-cowboy experience.

In 2001 she founded her environmental center, which gives institutions in-depth, step-by-step training on how to go green. In tandem with this, she launched Greening the Cleaning, an institutional line of nontoxic cleaners now used by 200-plus organizations, including New York's Port Authority (a newer retail line comprises an all-purpose cleanser, laundry liquid and a glass cleaner; imusranchfoods.com).

While pursuing her quest on many fronts—advocating at the state and federal levels for better chemical-safety testing and more children's-health research, working with nursing schools on green health-care protocols, speaking at institutions and schools—Imus also brainstormed her latest initiative: a state-of-the-art women and children's pavilion at HUMC.

In late 2005 the medical center opened “the hospital that will change hospital environments forever,” she says—a serene, airy complex built to Imus's specs from green materials (recycled steel, cotton-denim insulation) and offering inpatients' families private suites, kitchens and, in place of a cafeteria, a chic, Manhattan style restaurant with a largely organic menu.

As intently as she promotes her cause, Imus, who takes no salary and whose endeavors are strictly nonprofit, is also a realist. “A lot of environmentalists give you a doomsday scenario but don't give you ways to change things,” she says. “People left *An Inconvenient Truth* saying, ‘Oh, my God, how am I going to stop the glaciers from melting?’ I say, ‘You won't by thinking that way. Start with simple things in your life.’” In addition to using green cleaning products, she advises, “take a food that you eat often, and make that one food organic. If you eat macaroni and cheese, make sure the cheese is organic. Otherwise, you get high levels of dioxins, hormones and pesticides in the milk. With that one change, you're improving your child's health.”

Imus's new book series, *Green This!* (Simon & Schuster), will help people make these changes: the first volume, coming out this month, covers green cleaning A to Z; sequels will deal with baby and child care, home design and food.

As always with Imus, the conversation circles back to her core concern: children's well-being. Her voice softens as she speaks of her work with the Imus Ranch kids. “Sometimes it bothers me to think about all the children out there whom I can't help,” she says. “But every day—though this sounds corny, I hold it true to my heart—I think about Mother Teresa. She was amazing the way she helped so many people, one at a time. So you work with the kid right in front of you—and before you know it, at the Ranch, we've helped transform the lives of 700 kids. That relieves the stress of thinking we have to do something bigger. After all, what are we really doing that's bigger than that?”

Frances Beinecke

President, Natural Resources Defense Council (nrdc.org) “We have a lot of work to do” is a phrase that Frances Beinecke uses quite often. If it was true when she first came on board at the fledgling Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), in 1973, it's even truer now.

Beinecke, who became NRDC's president in 2006, joined the group as an intern while enrolled in the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and got in virtually on the ground floor—of both NRDC and the modern environmental movement. Born and raised in Summit, New Jersey, and a longtime hiker and lover of the outdoors, she had already bought land in the Adirondacks, whose century-old protected status inspired her respect for what citizen activists could achieve. She was also influenced by her parents' public-service ethos (the family name, a Yale byword, adorns the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and Beinecke Plaza). “At a time when I was wondering what direction I was going in, the environmental movement was taking off,” she says. “I was very lucky.”

Even earlier, NRDC, led by its cofounder, attorney John Adams, had shown its mettle—brilliantly taking on corporate polluters and government agencies in court and working to strengthen the landmark Clean Air Act, in 1970, and to implement and enforce the Clean Water Act, in 1972. But in Beinecke's thirty-four years at NRDC, the group has grown exponentially into one of environmentalism's “Big Ten,” using its size and clout to decisively shape public opinion and government policy. Beinecke wields an annual budget of \$67.5 million, a staff that includes hundreds of scientists and litigators, and a highly active membership of more than 650,000. Small wonder that NRDC has been described as setting environmentalism's gold standard.

Beinecke's quiet, unruffled air little hints at how much NRDC's mission has broadened in recent years, but her words bring it home. "We've learned that our concerns about the water quality in the Hudson River or the air quality in New York City are actually global in scale because pollution travels long distances," she says, sitting ballerina straight in her office chair. This expanded perspective has forged an entirely new sense of mission at NRDC. Now, says Beinecke, the top priority for the organization, as for environmental leaders worldwide, is to fight "the largest problem now facing the planet"—global warming.

To do this, she says, NRDC must carry out "an enormous shift in focus," from controlling pollution to combatting the root cause of climate change: carbon emissions from power plants and cars. "We need to convert from fossil fuels to alternative energy sources—a really enormous technology transfer."

The group is pursuing this agenda around the world: its Beijing office, for example, is encouraging China (soon to overtake the U.S. as the earth's top carbon emitter) to adopt carbon-cutting, energy-efficiency policies. "The challenges are huge," says Beinecke, "but we think we know what the solutions are."

Some of these are simple actions that people can take on their own. "Step one: conserve energy. When you buy your next car or appliance, get the most energy-efficient one. Buy compact fluorescent lightbulbs. Unplug your BlackBerry and cell-phone chargers when you're not using them—they're vampires, sucking electricity out of the wall. Step two: join a group like NRDC and demand action from your community, state and federal leaders. They should all be asked what they are doing to solve the problem and be held accountable."

As seriously as Beinecke takes her work at NRDC, she lights up when describing its relaxed office culture. Her three daughters, now adults, grew up running up and down its hallways, and Beinecke and her staff relish traditions like the annual Thanksgiving pie-making contest. "The only year that I brought a pie, I dropped it on the way in," she says with a laugh. (Thus was born a new category: the Beinecke Aesthetic Award.)

For recreation, Beinecke and her husband, environmentalist Paul Elston (with whom she and Laurance Rockefeller cofounded the New York League of Conservation Voters), visit their Adirondack property. "It's beautiful, wild and very restorative," she says. "I hike, bike, swim, canoe and fish, cross-country ski and go snowshoeing. I like to be outside and experience nature."

"When I got into this," Beinecke says, "I thought, 'I want to be an environmentalist because I don't want to be in the city; I want to be out in the great outdoors.'" A smile flits across her face. "In fact, here I am on the twelfth floor on West 20th Street in Manhattan—having a great time."

Paulette Cole

Cofounder, CEO and creative director, ABC Home Furnishings of New York (www.abchome.com)

"Be the change you want to see in the world." These words of Mahatma Gandhi adorn a page on the Web site of ABC Home, the fabled Manhattan home-furnishings emporium located at 19th Street and Broadway (and sibling of ABC Carpet, across the street). Clearly, Gandhi's sentiments impel the store's owner and CEO, Paulette Cole. She has called ABC Home "more a museum than a store," and "indeed its seven floors, which lure 22,000 customers per week, are a rich, gaily colorful gallimaufry of carpets, dangling chandeliers, embroidered pillows, mirrored chests, French Provincial tables, sleek contemporary sofas and all manner of baubles, bangles and beads. But this glorious profusion is tied together by a powerful thread: Cole's vision of a brave new world of green home design, a world created through her artistry, business acumen and sense of mission.

The blonde, quiet-spoken Cole cofounded ABC Home in the early 1980s with her then husband, Evan Cole, as an offshoot of ABC Carpet, the hugely successful store started by her great-grandfather more than a century ago. Almost from the beginning, she brought to ABC an open, eclectic sensibility influenced by her youthful travels abroad, including trips to India and Asia. The Coles adventurously followed their instincts, importing Oriental rugs, European luxury linens and antiques from all over and creating the groundbreaking Spirit East collection. In less than ten years, they made ABC Home an enterprise with \$80 million in annual revenues.

As time went by, Paulette's fascination with Eastern-based philosophies—enriched by studies with Deepak Chopra, Buddhist monk Perna Chadron and others—deepened. Increasingly, she regarded ABC's offerings not as mere merchandise but as an intimate expression of the cultural and spiritual experiences of both the people who made them and those who bought them. Increasingly, too, this attitude clashed with her husband's desire to rapidly expand the business. In 1999 the couple separated, and in a wrenching decision, Paulette gave Evan control of the store. She traveled and spent more time with their four-year-old daughter, Lena. She also joined the Social Venture Network, a group of successful entrepreneurs who view socially responsible business as a way to combat ills

such as poverty and environmental degradation. Fueled by a new vision of ABC as a place where luxury, social responsibility and greenness could peacefully coexist, Paulette bought Evan out in 2004 and returned to ABC as its CEO and creative director. She set a lofty target: that in ten years' time, ABC's merchandise would be 100 percent environmentally and socially responsible.

Though ABC's revenues had been sagging, Cole was determined to effect this "retail paradigm shift" at every level. She appointed a director of social responsibility, Amy Chender, who began guiding ABC's vendors and manufacturers through the painstaking process of obtaining green materials (such as woods approved by the Rainforest Alliance) and measuring up to socially responsible business codes. Today the "green luxury" theme resonates strongly throughout ABC: upstairs, in its Grounded department, sit huge chairs and benches crafted from gorgeously writhing river-root wood from responsibly managed forests; downstairs are glass cases filled with organic creams and lotions. To people puzzling over where to begin with their green-living efforts, Cole offers this pointer: "One place to start is your bed. If you can, trade up to one that is organic, because conventionally made bedding is treated with synthetic chemicals and you're breathing in those vapors for eight hours every night. When you understand that you're sleeping on a bed that's exuding outgases, it's hard to continue to do that." ABC sells 100 percent-organic Green Sleep mattresses.

And so far, with 25 percent of ABC's merchandise now counted as environmentally sustainable or mission-related, the bottom line hasn't suffered. On the contrary, patrons are willing to pay a premium for environmentally responsible goods. "Last year was a very good year," Cole says with a smile. The road to sustainable living may be slow, but she's adamant that ABC will stick to it. "With us here to model this for other businesses and to educate consumers at an influential level, the journey will be that much faster," she says. "As long as it proves healthy and lucrative and fruitful, we can encourage others to walk with us."

Leslie Hoffman

Executive director, Earth Pledge (www.earthpledge.org)

"I thought I saw a tidal wave of green design coming," says Earth Pledge executive director Leslie Hoffman, describing her first career as a carpenter and green builder in 1970s Maine. Though Hoffman—a kind-eyed brunette who projects a warm, low-key competence—enjoyed great success in providing clients with high-efficiency solar-heating systems and locally harvested woods, the green revolution she hoped for didn't materialize.

In 1994 she took the helm at the Manhattan-based nonprofit Earth Pledge at the request of its founder, the world-renowned labor attorney Ted Kheel, who had established the group to drum up interest in the 1992 international Earth Summit, in Rio. When Hoffman started, Earth Pledge "was basically the shell of an organization," she says. Despite this, within only a few years Hoffman's blend of soaring vision and hands-on practicality made Earth Pledge one of the sustainability movement's most innovative and persuasive advocates.

Earth Pledge is not a massive membership organization like NRDC; rather, it's a modest but highly effective combination think tank and eco-tech laboratory. Working hand in hand with corporations, governments and professionals, the group uses its resources (almost \$2 million annually) to research, create and promote the cutting-edge, earth-friendly technologies that are needed if we are to stop global warming. As it happens, these technologies touch on nearly every aspect of our daily lives, from the structures we live and work in to the food we eat, the clothes we wear and the garbage we produce and must dispose of. "We really work to highlight the interconnectedness of all these industries and technologies," says Hoffman.

One of her best-known initiatives is the award-winning Green Roofs program. On twenty-five New York City apartment and office buildings, including its own headquarters, Earth Pledge has helped to cover roofs with sod, plants, flowers and trees; these clean the air and reduce energy costs and storm-water runoff, which washes untreated pollutants like car oil, antifreeze and pet waste from city streets directly into the water supply. Green roofs also ease the urban "heat trapping" that can make cities up to eight degrees hotter than the suburbs. Earth Pledge is now pursuing Green Roofs programs in Minneapolis, Atlanta and Los Angeles, and other cities have caught on as well.

The Waste = Fuel Initiative, planned for several New York City sites, aims to solve two dilemmas—the need for alternative energy and the need to dispose of waste—by processing food and other organic refuse to produce methane gas, which can be converted to liquid fuel or used to generate electricity. Discussing this nitty-gritty technology sparks Hoffman's self-deprecating chuckle. "I told a friend, 'Most non profits have celebrities who help them out, but I'm a middle-aged woman who's into garbage. For a celebrity, that's not really a sexy draw!'"

This un-glam image is more than offset by Earth Pledge's FutureFashion project, a Fashion Week runway show in which designers

such as Oscar de la Renta offer eye-popping, eco-friendly haute couture created from organic or sustainable materials like hemp-silk, corn fiber and bamboo. (Some of the one-of-a-kind garments are available in stores or at the designers' boutiques.) This year, major FutureFashion events are slated in New York, Boston, Los Angeles and Kuala Lumpur.

Hoffman's tastes are literally down-to-earth: a favorite getaway is her small Hawaii farm, where she grows organic coffee, tropical and exotic fruits and bamboo for structural material. "My house is very simple," she says. "I pick and prepare the food from the gardens, sit on the lanai while watching the sunsets and drop into bed exhausted most nights from working the land." Her Shelter Island, New York, garden also holds hundreds of vegetables and flowers, and, she confides, "I garden on the Earth Pledge green roof when I get a chance to run up there."

Can individual acts like these really make a difference to our planet's future? Absolutely, says Hoffman. "The really vital thing is to pay attention to what we consume, all day, every day. Before buying anything—from little stuff on up to the car you drive and the house you live in—ask how big it is, what's in it, who made it, where it came from and how much energy it took to make it. The choices we make every day really do make a difference."