

CAREERS IN ACTIVISM



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Sponsored by the **UTM Career Centre**

Co-Sponsored by the **Breakdown, Erindale Environmental Association,
Sociology & Criminology Club, Student Administrative Council
and the UTM Women's Centre**

Panelists:

Amina Sherazee Employment, Immigration & Refugee, and
Administrative Lawyer
Downtown Legal Services

Angie Arora Social Worker
Woman Abuse Council of Toronto

Lea Ann Mallet Executive Director
EcoSource Ontario

Maliha Chisti Former Director
UN Hague Appeal for Peace

Panel & Package Developed by: **Madiha Hashmi**

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Overview of “Activist” Careers

An activist is anyone who is fighting for change in society. Therefore, each and every one of us who feels strongly about a cause and is working for it, is essentially an activist. Activism can include students at UTM rallying against tuition increases, a politician using his power to fight for international human rights abuses or a mother of a child killed by a drunk driver talking to students about drinking and driving.

When looking at activism from a career perspective, one realizes that there is a lot of flexibility in regards to adjusting one’s career to include elements of activism. For instance, a teacher can partake in activism by teaching his students about environmental, human rights and global issues, a doctor can dedicate her career towards providing medical services to children in war torn areas or an accountant can work for an employment agency geared towards helping homeless people in Toronto. Since there is no defined “activist” career, it is up to you to be creative and come up with how you plan on combining activism with your career choice.

To help you get started, there will be four main areas of activism that will be examined in detail within this package and through the experience of the four panelists. As mentioned above, you must not feel limited to the areas mentioned as they are not exhaustive to the potential career areas that one can pursue within activism.

Law and Public Policy

Within the legal profession, areas such as poverty law, human rights law and public interest law are obvious activist careers. There are numerous other areas that one can pursue within law to include elements of activism. Panelist Amina Sherazee is an immigration, refugee, employment and administrative lawyer working at Downtown Legal Services who has been working in many capacities to fight against human rights abuses as well as lobbying both local and international governments for unfair practices (refer to the “Panelist Profiles” section for a full biography).

Social Work and Social Justice

Social workers work in different capacities in both public and private sectors to lobby governments, provide counselling, and undertake research, development and evaluation projects in society. Panelist Angie Arora has spent many years working as a social worker and now is part of a policy board that overlooks policies related to women abuse (refer to the “Panelist Profiles” section for a full biography).

Government and International

Lobbying the government to bring about change in both domestic and international settings is another form of activism. Panelist Maliha Chisti is the former Director of the UN’s Hague Appeal for Peace where she coordinated the Global Campaign for Peace Education, developed the first peace and disarmament education pilot project for the United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs and helped to initiate the historic Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (refer to the “Panelist Profiles” section for a full biography).

Environmental

Working for environmental sustainability is crucial in maintaining the world for ourselves and future generations. Panelist Lee Ann Mallet has spent years working towards environmental sustainability by raising public awareness about environmental issue and delivering hands on interactive education programs for youth and adults, promoting responsible personal environmental actions (refer to the “Panelist Profiles” section for a full biography).

Essential Activist Skills

In each of the four activist career areas identified in the previous section, there is specific knowledge and expertise that one must develop. The knowledge is often gained through academic and/or professional training e.g. legal knowledge, government policy. However, there are common some skills. Some of the examples of the skills in each of these categories are provided below.

Some of these skills can be developed through academic work. Others are best developed through co- or extra-curricular involvement like on-campus and community activism.

Project Development

- Planning long-term projects
- Evaluating
- Maintaining records
- Developing project designs
- Gathering support

Communication

- Presenting ideas and data clearly
- Influencing and persuading people/groups
- Mediating/ negotiating conflicts
- Public speaking
- Listening critically
- Writing clearly

Interpersonal

- Interviewing
- Understanding group dynamics
- Observing human interactions
- Recognizing cultural differences/ similarities
- Identifying value systems

Human Relations

- Understanding and interpreting other cultures/beliefs
- Developing sensitivity to cultural viewpoints
- Clarifying other's thoughts and ideas
- Appreciating continuity and change within a historical perspective

Analytical

- Interpreting issues and data
- Understanding components of complex problems
- Offering relevant perspectives

Investigation

- Remaining objective
- Reviewing relevant data
- Applying concepts
- Asking questions
- Applying knowledge creatively
- Defining problems
- Assessing risks

Source: What Can I Do With My Degree Binder

Available in the "What Can I Do With My Degree" area of the Career Centre

Profiles of Panelists

Amina Sherazee

Amina Sherazee is a lawyer who practices in the area of immigration and refugee, employment law, and administrative law at Downtown Legal Services where she supervises law students from the University of Toronto. She is a member of the Law Union and Lawyers Against the War, an advocacy group that opposes military use of force to resolve conflict. Since September 11th, Ms. Sherazee has spoken on many occasions about the international war on terrorism, Canada's own anti-terrorism legislation, and on the global assault on civil liberties.

Her experience in human rights advocacy has included work with the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, the Human Rights Office of the University of Windsor and a wide range of organizations including immigrant, refugee, environmental and women's groups. A few workshops that Ms. Sherazee has conducted include: "The Criminalization of Dissent," "Civil Rights" and "War, Terrorism and Globalization"

A graduate of the University of Windsor Law School, Amina Sherazee earned her undergraduate degree in Women's Studies and Sociology from the University of Toronto. Ms. Sherazee is currently the staff lawyer for Downtown Legal Services, the University of Toronto's student legal clinic.

Angie Arora

Angie Arora completed her Bachelor of Social Work at Ryerson University. During this time she completed three field practica which included the YWCA Women's Shelter, Scarborough Women's Centre, and Amnesty International. It was during this time that she began to specialize in the area of domestic violence, with a particular interest in the area of immigrant and refugee women.

After completing this degree, she became employed with Herizon House, which is a shelter for abused women and children.

She has also completed her Masters Degree in Social Work at York University and completed her field practicum at the Woman Abuse Council of Toronto, at which time she became more interested in community development work in the area of violence against women.

She is now currently responsible for community development work as a Project Coordinator with both the Woman Abuse Council of Toronto and the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians. Her work focuses on the intersection of woman abuse and immigration and refugee issues. Angie also volunteers with the National Eating

Disorders Information Centre, Rittenhouse: A New Vision of Transformative Justice, and the Halton/Peel Pet Loss Support Group

Lea Ann Mallet

Lea Ann Mallett has been an environmental activist for the last 15 years. She holds a Bachelor of Education in Biology and Chemistry and an Honours Bachelor of Science in Physiology and Psychology. Lea Ann has worked as a secondary school science teacher and as a health promoter with street involved youth. Her environmental work began in volunteer-based groups working on wilderness conservation issues. She was a tree-sitter in Clayoquot Sound in the 2003 blockades. In 1996, she was the organizer of a three month blockade camp to protect an ancient forest stand in Temagami. Lea Ann was Director of Earthroots' wilderness conservation campaigns from 1995-2000. She has also worked as a campaign consultant to environmental organizations and as Deputy Director of the International Fund for Animal Welfare. She is now the Executive Director of EcoSource Mississauga, an innovative environmental education organization serving youth, adults and families in Mississauga.

Maliha Chisti

Maliha Chishti is a Ph.D. candidate at OISE/University of Toronto researching post-war reconstruction and its impact on local capacity, with a focus on Afghanistan and Iraq. She is the former Director of the Hague Appeal for Peace, UN office where she coordinated the Global Campaign for Peace Education, developed the first peace and disarmament education pilot project for the United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs and helped to initiate the historic Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Maliha most recently developed and implemented a Canadian government funded project to provide capacity-building training for over 90 Afghan women organizations across Afghanistan with the Afghan Women's Organization. She is an executive board member for Science for Peace, Association of Muslim Social Scientists and the UN representative for Voice of Women Canada– the first national women's peace organization. Her most recent publication is on Transnational Feminism and the Gender Agenda in Afghanistan (forthcoming 2005). She has been given the distinct honour as a Great Minds Alumni by the University of Toronto.

Career Advice From Some Activists

Political Activist – Sue

“Don’t even think about working in this area unless you have a sense of outrage and a passion about some issue. But even the passion isn’t enough. You’ve also got to do your homework. You’ve got to know your facts. No one’s going to listen to you if you really don’t have the factual information to back it up.”

Political Activist – Warren

“As an activist you must be sensitive to the needs of other people and care about the people that you are helping. The work can be frustrating because change often takes place very slowly. So you must be dedicated and motivated. As well, you have to demonstrate leadership. It’s crucial to be passionate and optimistic. You have to believe that you can change things.”

Community Worker - Barry

“To be any kind of a community worker, you’ve got to get involved in the work going on in your community and do that immediately. You volunteer at a community centre, start up your own project—you have to do that to see if you have the tenacity necessary to stick with the job because it can be very frustrating and very bureaucratic.”

Lobbyist – Brian

“You have to develop solid written and verbal communication skills. As well, get some practical experience in the political process itself. Either volunteering on a political campaign or working for a student council.”

Public Policy Analyst – Craig

“If you’re really interested in Public Policy, don’t limit yourself to direct employment in government. There are all sorts of other opportunities in other institutions and organizations in the private and non-profit sector, like think-tanks, advocacy groups, Universities, all of which deal with public policy. Experience in these organizations could lead to opportunities in government if that’s where you really want to work.”

Environmental Health Officer – Peter

“To do this job well, you’ve got to really care about people and empathize with their problems. But you can’t have too thin a skin. Some people won’t be happy to see you. You just can’t take it personally.”

Social Worker - Paul

“Try to figure out why you want to be a social worker, why it's important for you to want to help people. And then use all of your energy to observe people, to observe yourself in your relationships with people. Try to organize your observations; perhaps keep a journal. Look at people, listen to people while they're together. Then when you're in school take courses that help you organize those observations.”

Source: Career Cruising

www.careercruising.com (by subscription, can be accessed electronically at the Career Centre)

Building Your Experience

In order to be an effective activist and to identify the area of activism that you are interested in, it is essential to gain experience. Experience can be gained through many different avenues whether through the courses that one takes or through work, volunteering and extra-curricular experience. The following are some ways that you can build your experience during university.

Academic Experience

Taking courses in your field of interest can be very useful in terms of educating yourself about social, human rights and environmental issues. Individual and group work in courses can also help you in developing skills such as interpersonal and project management as identified in the “Essential Activist Skills” section of this package. The following are some of the many courses and internships offered at UTM that can help you in developing the skills and experience needed for a successful career in activism:

POL 250 – Environmental Politics in Canada
POL 201 – Politics of the Third World
POL 317 – Comparative Public Policy and Administration
SOC 214 – Sociology of Families
SOC 277 -- Globalization
SOC 301 – Social Inequality
ENV 400 – Environmental Internship
CCIT 411 – Internship
WGS 395 – Immigrant and Refugee Women

UTM Clubs/Societies/Student Government

A great way to gain exposure to social activism is to take part in the activities organized by student groups on campus and/or to become involved in student government and university governance. All of the student clubs and organizations at UTM are listed on the UTM website: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/1413.0.html>. The following are some examples of activist student groups at UTM:

Breakdown

www.bdown.org

UTM 's social justice club committed to making UTM students aware of social justice issues locally and abroad.

Erindale Environmental Association

<http://eea.8m.com/>

This club's mandate is to promote environmental awareness through education and action at both the campus and community level

Erindale College Student Union

<http://www.ecsu.ca/>

UTM's student union represents the interests of undergraduate students in both social and academic areas

Student Administrative Council

<http://www.sac.utoronto.ca/>

UTM's student council represents the interests of undergraduate students in both social and academic areas at UTM and UT.

UTM Women's Centre

<http://home.utm.utoronto.ca/~ecewc/>

This organization is working to promote awareness on issues pertaining to contemporary women at both a local and global level

Getting involved with various groups on campus will allow you to build upon essential skills needed for social activism such as interpersonal, organizational, and leadership skills. Please refer to the "Essential Activist Skills" sections for a more detailed overview of essential activist skills. In addition to this, you will also gain an opportunity to network with individuals within your career area of interest.

Volunteer/Part-Time/Full-Time/Work-Study Positions

Volunteer/Part-time/Full-time work in different settings allows one to gain first hand experience into the day-to-day life of an activist and gain necessary skills. The Career Centre has many postings related to activism (www.utm.utoronto.ca/careers). In addition, you can also take a look at some delisted positions from recent months (available only on the Career Centre computers) to get an idea of the kinds of potential work available.

SAMPLE VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Crisis Line Counsellor, Sexual Assault/Rape Crisis Centre of Peel

The organization is currently looking for female volunteers 18 years old and older, to provide support for their 24-hour crisis line. *Training will be provided.*

Source: Career Centre Online Work Opportunities

World Vision Volunteer, World Vision Canada

The organization is currently looking for volunteers to assist with program development, administrative work and international projects

Source: CharityVillage Online Volunteer Opportunities

SAMPLE PART-TIME OPPORTUNITIES

Nature Challenge (NC) Marketing and Outreach Specialist, David Suzuki Foundation

The organization is currently looking for someone to help develop and implement new strategies for expanding awareness and involvement in the Nature Challenge as well as contribute his/her knowledge of sustainable living initiatives and programs to the production of the monthly newsletter and other communication initiatives.

Source: CharityVillage Online Work Opportunities

Crisis Line Counsellor, Sexual Assault/Rape Crisis Centre of Peel

The organization is currently looking for female volunteers 18 years old and older, to provide support for their 24-hour crisis line. *Training will be provided.*

Source: Career Centre Online Work Opportunities

SAMPLE WORK-STUDY OPPORTUNITY

UTM Recycling Coordinator, Environment Department

The recycling coordinator will research, develop and assist with implementing and maintaining a comprehensive recycling program at UTM

Source: Career Centre Online Work Opportunities

Along with current employment and volunteer listings, you can also get access to **delisted positions** through the computers at the Career Centre. Access to recent delisted positions can help you identify and research into more potential opportunities to help you gain experience in activism.

Internships

Internships are another way to gain first-hand activism experience. Many non-profit and non-governmental organizations offer internship experience (some during university and some at graduation). Visit the Career Centre and website to search various internship opportunities (www.utm.utoronto.ca/careers/internships.html).

Note: There are also some credit course internships offered at UTM as mentioned in the top of the page. Another department to contact at UTM would be the Internships and Experiential Learning Department: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/500.0.html>

SAMPLE INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

The Environmental Youth Corp. (EYC) is a 6-12 month internship for post-secondary graduates as part of national or international environmental projects.

www.cchrei.ca

Youth Challenge International www.yci.org and **Canadian World Youth** www.cwy-jcm.org both offer international community/international development experience.

Katimavik www.katimavik.org offers Canadian community development experience.

Sample Internship Opportunity

International Human Rights Law Youth Internships, Canadian Lawyers Association for International Human Rights (CLAHR) & Canadian Bar Association (CAB)

www.claihr.org/youth_contact.htm

The Canadian Lawyers Association for International Human Rights (CLAHR) in coordination with the Canadian Bar Association (CAB) is offering internships abroad to recent law school graduates. This internship program arranges for law students to be placed with human rights law groups in various developing countries, such as Bolivia and Guyana. In cooperation with law faculties across Canada, the internship provides an opportunity for young Canadian law students to participate "directly in the day-to-day work of human rights groups in developing countries". As part of the internship, interns will research various human rights issues (e.g., violence against women, labour law, refugee rights) and prepare legal analyses.

Source: Career Centre Online Internship Directory

Sample Internship Opportunity

UTM Environmental Sustainability Officer, University of Toronto at Mississauga

This position develops and delivers programming that encourages members of UTM's community to think and act responsibly on issues of environmental sustainability. The Environmental Sustainability Officer will assist the campus in dealing responsibly in areas including, but not limited to, recycling, composting, energy conservation, transit use, emissions, waste reduction, disposables, emerging environmental technologies, and naturalization

Source: Canadian Council for Human Resources in the Environment

Directories

Taking advantage of organizational directories will help you in networking with individuals who are in activist careers. Networking is an essential skill needed to learn about social activism as a career and how to go about tailoring your career so that it entails elements of social activism. A complete list of directories in the Career Centre can be found at <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/careers/directories.html>. Along with this, the following are some online directories that are particularly relevant for those interested in activism. They will allow you to look up organizations in your community that you may be interested in working or volunteering for.

CharityVillage

<http://www.charityvillage.com/>

A directory for the non-profit sector including 3,000 pages of news, jobs, information and resources for executives, staffers, donors, and volunteers

Community Services in Peel

<http://www.pinet.on.ca/csd.htm>

Provides access to information on more than 1,700 resources in Peel Region including health & social services, information & referral, libraries, community groups, government offices, and much more

Planet Friendly

<http://www.planetfriendly.net/>

*Provides information about issues involving peace, environment, sustainable living, food, community, communication, democracy, human rights, and activism. There is also a link to **Goodwork Canada**, an online environmental job database.*

EcoSource Mississauga

<http://www.ecosource.ca>

EcoSource Mississauga is a leader in grassroots environmental education. This organization works to deliver hands-on interactive educational programs to youth and adults, promoting responsible personal environmental actions

Canadian Environmental Law Association

<http://www.cela.ca>

CELA is a non-profit, public interest organization that uses existing laws to protect the environment and to advocate environmental law reforms

International Development Research Centre

http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-1-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

IDRC is a Canadian public corporation that works in close collaboration with researchers from the developing world in their search for the means to build healthier, more equitable, and more prosperous societies.

Corporate Knights: Top 50 Corporate Citizens

<http://www.corporateknights.ca/best50/index.asp>

A listing of Canadian companies that are leading the charge to a better world.

Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)

<http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca>

CIDA works in partnership with many non-governmental agencies. Their website provides links to many activist groups.

Profiles of Some Activist UofT Alumni

Name/Position Title	Profile
Natasha Mistry Junior Professional Consultant, United Nations Volunteer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- B.A. (International Relations Specialist, Political Science Specialist, French Minor)- Participated in a Junior Professional Consultant Program at the United Nations Volunteer (UNV) Program Headquarters in Germany- Worked for the preparation and promotion of the International Year of Volunteers 2001 by writing articles, editing the <i>Global Update</i> magazine and conducting workshops on volunteerism
Dr. Joan Simalchik Professor and Activist	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Professor of “Immigrant and Refugee Women” and “Women and World Cultures” at UTM- Completed her Ph.D specialization in “Women in Canada and Internationally” as well as in “Immigrants and Refugees” from the University of Toronto/OISE- Was former director of the Canadian Council of Victims of Torture- Has served on the Ontario Refugee Hearing Board
Thomas Klassen Policy Analyst, Ministry of Universities and Colleges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- B.A. Sociology, M.A. Sociology, M.Sc. Urban Planning- Worked with the City of Toronto’s Planning and Development Department, as Planning Assistant in an economic consulting firm in Ottawa, research officer with the Ministry of Housing in Toronto- Currently working with the College Affairs Branch of the Ministry of Toronto

<p>Aubrey Iwaniw UTM's Environment Affairs Officer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - UTM alumna - Currently works as UTM's first Environmental Affairs Officer - Former president of EEA and active member of Breakdown - SAC director last year during which time she started SAC's first Ministry of the Environment
<p>Simon Black TA, Politician, Activist</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - UTM alumna and TA - Completed Master's degree in Labour Studies at McMaster - Works with homeless people in Peel, on sweatshop and anti-poverty campaigns and is active in the global justice movement - Member of Amnesty International & Fair Vote Canada - Joined the NDP 10 years ago and ran for MP for the Mississauga-Erindale area

Where to Get More Information

UTM CAREER CENTRE RESOURCES

There are many services and resources offered by the Career Centre that can help you in exploring and planning for your activist career. Check out the Career Centre website: www.utm.utoronto.ca/careers for more information. The following are some of the many services and resources that you can take advantage of:

Volunteer Fair

- Held in September every year
- Your chance to meet with different organizations such as EcoSource Mississauga and the Sexual Assault Rape Crisis Centre and find out how to get involved and gain experience
- A list of participants is listed on the Career Centre website in September www.utm.utoronto.ca/careers/volfair.html

Internship Fair

- Held every year in February, this fair allows students to learn about a range of internship opportunities in Canada and internationally.
- www.utm.utoronto.ca/careers/internships.html for more information

Professional Schools Fair

- Held on the first Wednesday of every October in the Student Centre
- Speak with representatives from various professional schools in Ontario such as Masters in Social Work, Masters in Environmental Studies, Law, etc.
- A list of participants is posted on the Career Centre website in September

Extern Program

- Career exploration program where you can meet with people working within activist careers
- Placements range from one to five days during the Reading Week in February or after the exam period in early May
- Previous participants have been placed with social workers, public policy analysts, family counsellors, lawyers and many others

Alumni Mentorship Program

- Opportunity for 3rd and 4th year students to get paired up with and learn from the experiences of alumni currently working in an activist career
- Previous mentors have included family counsellors, human rights lawyers, and social workers
- Applications are due every year in September

Electronic Resources

- Career Centre Website:
 - o “Career Info” section provides links for research into possible activist careers such as Social Work, Public Policy Analyst, Environmental Analyst
 - o “Finding Work” section provides links to information on Internships, Employer Directories, Employment Services, etc. that can help with Job Search strategies
- Career Cruising Website
 - o Useful resource to look into Job Descriptions, Working Conditions, Salary Information, Interviews, Associations, etc. for various social activist careers
 - o There are hundreds of different careers as well as over 900 multimedia interviews of people of different careers. “Activist” is also listed as a career option!

Print Resources

- Career Profile Binders
 - o Sectioned off binders that contain Career Info, Profession Associations, Education, Articles and Sample Posting print outs.
 - o Relevant binders include Social Work (SOC-415), Lobbyist (SOC-416), Environment (NAT-212), Lawyer (SOC-411)

- Books
 - o A lot of different books are available in the library that can help you identify careers by majors and interests.
 - o A new book at the Career Centre is *Politics, Government and Activism* (SOC-411). While this is an American book, so government structures are not directly applicable to a Canadian context, it contains lots of useful ideas.

Career Counsellors

- If you are unsure about your career direction or want help with shaping your career direction, you may find it helpful to make an appointment with one of our career counsellors
- Drop by or call the Career Centre at 905-828-5451 to make an appointment

Job Coach

- You've decided on a career or the type of job you want but what's the next step? Lynn Sharer, Job Coach can assist you in organizing your search and providing you with the marketing tools to help you successfully land the job you want.
- Drop by or call the Career Centre at 905-828-5451 to make an appointment

OTHER RESOURCES

The Sierra Club of Canada: How to Be an Activist

<http://www.sierraclub.ca/national/activist.html>

Read about grassroots activism and how to become an activist in your community.

International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development

<http://www.ichrdd.ca/splash.html>

Here is an example of a Canadian activist website, which advocates for enhanced human rights and democracy around the world.

YouthActivism.org

<http://youthactivism.org>

Find out what other young activists are undertaking and have accomplished.

Z Communications

<http://www.zmag.org>

A major news and information resource for activists around the world

Activist Websites for Women's Issues**

http://www-unix.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/links_actv.html

List of numerous websites that focus primarily on women's issues activism

Environmental Activism Links from EEA Website

<http://eea.8m.com/>

UTM's EEA website contains many useful educational and activism links

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

<http://www.policyalternatives.ca>

Canadian web site dealing with local social and societal issues

Canadian Council on Social Development

<http://www.ccsd.ca>

Canadian info and news on social and community issues.

**** Don't forget to attend the Careers for Women's Studies Majors panel on Thurs, Jan 20 from 5-7p.m. for more resources of women's issues activism**

Article

HOW TO BE AN ACTIVIST

by Elizabeth May

The author, who has no academic credentials for activism, has based the following on over 30 years of campaigning. She is currently Executive Director of the Sierra Club of Canada.

How to be an Activist

There is no formal school for activists. No university degree qualifies the graduate to practice grassroots organizing. Environmental activists, like many other practitioners of social change, come in all shapes and sizes, from all walks of life, and even from all political parties. And all of us learn from experience. On the other hand, we should be able to benefit from the experience of others. Unfortunately, more often than not, people suddenly find themselves in a situation that requires a certain moral heroism. They had not planned to become activists.

Environmental problems themselves create activists. When a toxic landfill threatens the neighbourhood, local lawyers may volunteer to do some legal work, scientists may offer volunteer help and the community of concerned parents suddenly find themselves wondering how to write a press release, circulate petitions, and, even conduct a sit-in in a politician's office. By the time they are in the thick of a campaign, it is hard to know where to turn for help and advice.

The reality of ordinary people picking up the gauntlet and becoming politically active is largely unknown to the as-yet uninitiated public. By the time the small neighbourhood citizens group gets its issue before the public, its members are already being labeled as "environmentalists". From that point on, their true identity is lost as surely as Clark Kent's when he emerges as Superman.

The media labeling process does society a disservice. It cuts off "activists" and "environmentalists" from "normal" people. The general public, as demonstrated by numerous polls, supports the principles of environmental protection and restoration, but usually they believe it is for some other category of people, called "environmentalists", to do the work they support.

When an environmental group is described as a “special interest” group, there is a blurring between those who protect “special” interests, usually of a financial nature, and those who work on a volunteer basis, usually at personal sacrifice and expense, to pursue a cause in the public good.

The reality of activism, for the environment or any other cause, is that democracy is at work. Citizens are exercising democratic rights. Rather than being the exception to the rule, for democracy to thrive, all citizens should be activists.

A Few Rules of Thumb

Recognizing that environmental activism is a democratic right, it is important to have a few rules of thumb to encourage the neophyte.

- Refuse to be intimidated. If you are told that a subject is too technical or scientific for you to understand, don't believe it. Elected politicians make these decisions all the time based on general knowledge and their sense of public opinion. The claim of “expert” versus average concerned citizen is inherently anti- democratic and elitist. You may not be an expert. But you can read and understand what experts have to say. Make a note of good quotes (including the source) of expert views concerned with the environment. Start your own card file of references to unleash if someone tries to suggest you don't know enough to be involved.
- Be creative! Every campaign and issue has its own dynamic. Let your creative juices flow. Maybe satire will work for you. Maybe song. Even conventional campaigns can attract more people if you have an optimistic, innovative approach.
- Don't take no for an answer. If you want to meet an elected official, call every day. Drop by the office and get to know the staff. Be persistent. The squeaky wheel.
- Ask lots of questions. Get to the bottom of issues. Do your homework.
- Use the telephone. It is a great research tool. Ten times better than writing and asking for information is phoning until you find the person who knows the answer and will immediately send you information. In addition to getting what you want, you may have uncovered a good source for future information - and maybe even an ally in the bureaucracy.
- Be unfailingly polite. Being persistent is not the same thing as being rude. You may be in this for the long haul, so don't burn any bridges.
- Leave no stone unturned. Think about who knows who. How can you expand your network? Your allies may come from unexpected places, so do not make assumptions. Ask people for help.
- When someone in government does something good for the environment, be sure to give public credit and thanks.
- You can accomplish anything, if you don't care who gets the credit.
- Remember that politics is also personal. Watch out for burn- out. You'll need the support of friends and family. Build love into your campaigns.

For the rest of this article, please refer to <http://www.sierraclub.ca/activist-publication/>
Sierra Club of Canada National Office
Tel: (613) 241-4611 Fax: (613) 241-2292
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web: www.sierraclub.ca/national