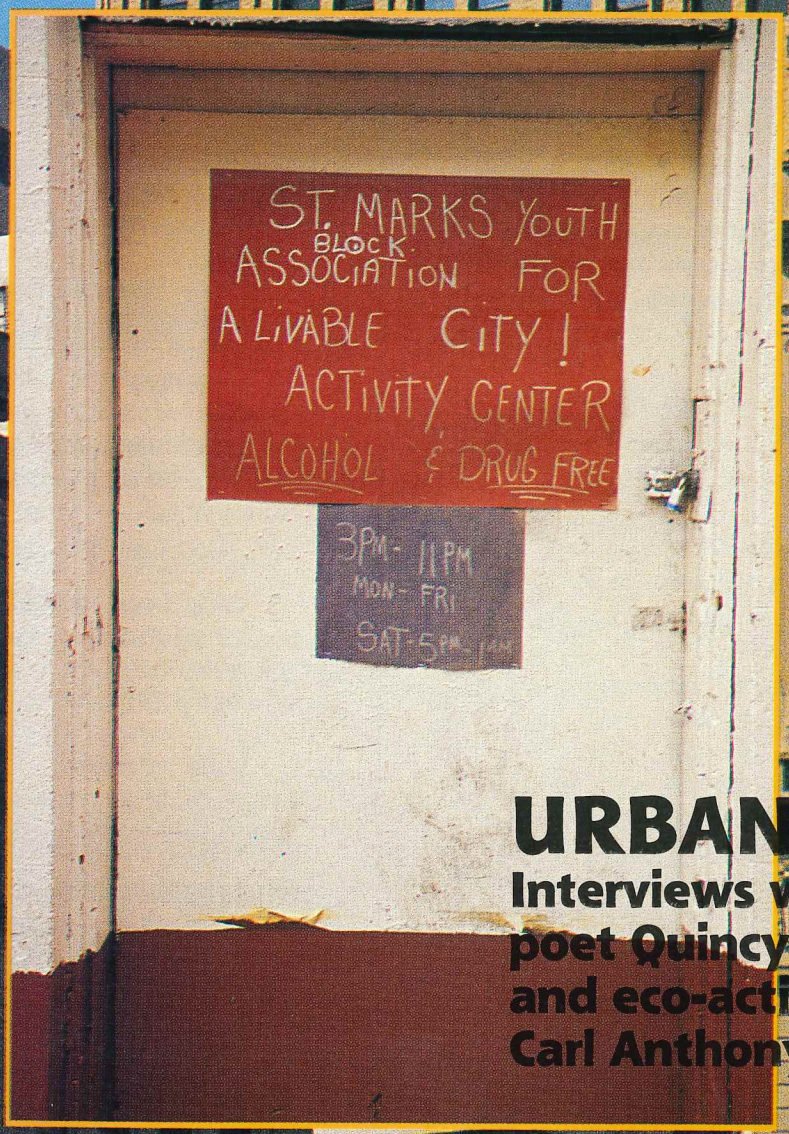
Bill Mollison: The Global Gardener

Urban America: Racism, Rage & Restoration

PROUT JOURNAL

FOR PERSONAL & PLANETARY TRANSFORMATION

VOLUME 6, NUMBER 2
$5.00/$6.00 CANADA



URBAN JUSTICE

Interviews with poet Quincy Troupe and eco-activist Carl Anthony

02
7 25274 79365 5

ENVIRONMENTALISM

ONLINE

J. SCOTT CHRISTIANSON & DAN WENDLING

While in Malaysia, organizing international training courses in wildlife conservation, Raleigh Blouch uses a laptop computer and a modem to communicate with his home office in the United States. From his office at Middlebury College, Steve Trombulak uses electronic communications to coordinate courses on sustainable development in Costa Rica. Sue Glen, at the University of Oklahoma, uses electronic mail—popularly known as e-mail—to cooperate with Hungarian ecologists on a grasslands restoration project. These are just some of the many ways that conservationists use computer communications, otherwise known as online communications, as an important tool in their work.

Although often drenched in technical jargon, computer networking is actually very simple. Information is typed into one computer, then rapidly transmitted over phone lines to computers in other parts of the world. E-mail duplicates many of the traditional modes of communication—letter writing, chatting, conferences, etc., however, online communication is usually faster and more cost effective than traditional means of communication. It also eliminates problems such as slow or lost mail, and excessive paper usage.

"Electronic mail is more convenient than the telephone because of the time difference," explains Raleigh Blouch. Raleigh uses e-mail on a daily basis from his office in Malaysia to exchange memos, schedules, and requests for literature with the Conservation and Research Center of the Smithsonian Institution. "We also use faxes," he says, "but I like e-mail better for an informal exchange of ideas because it's not necessary to make a hard copy and I've never had a problem with lost messages."

Besides exchanging electronic letters and memos, online environmentalists transmit much larger documents, such as press releases, newsletters and grant proposals. Sue Glen developed a grasslands restoration proposal with her colleagues in Hungary by using e-mail to transfer the manuscript back and forth as it evolved. Electronic communication is much more efficient than the post," she says, "and more reliable than the Hungarian phone system."

Because some varieties of online communication can be very inexpensive, many groups use electronic newsletters to communicate. They are a good way of requesting help with projects, advertising courses, and announcing job openings and new publications. The Biological Conservation Newsletter is distributed online to 850 subscribers in over 25 countries. Other online newsletters include the Indonesia/Malaysia Fauna Interest Group News Communiqué, the Energy and Climate Information Exchange (ECIX) project newsletter, and the Tropical Timber Newspaper.

Many environmental organizations are taking advantage of the speed of computer networks to distribute press releases and legislative alerts. Releases from such strong lobbying forces as The Sierra Club and Green Peace are easily found on most environmentally-oriented computer networks. For newspaper or newsletter editors, online press releases are great "canned" articles, complete with contact persons and references. One press release from the Friends of the Earth contained a one page article and two pages of notes and references for editors!

Virtual Communities

One of the most exciting features of online communications is electronic conferences—virtual communities—which are open forums in which anyone in the computer network can participate. Online conferences are usually made up of people who

are geographically separated but share the same interests, and who communicate with each other through a computer network devoted to those interests. Online conferences are becoming important channels for distributing environmental information. One conference user noted, "When I first heard about the Earth conference, I figured it was nothing but a bunch of half-crazed, deranged hippies. It's turned out to be one of my most valuable sources of information."

Since these conferences reach large numbers of people, one of their most important functions is to spread the development of environmental awareness. By using computers at Lewis J. Hobbs Junior High School in Medford, Massachusetts, students are able to communicate with the online conservation community. "A bunch of us are planning to teach recycling to the elementary students as a school project. We've planned out a series of five lessons using information we've gotten from environmental groups on the computer. Another project we're doing is gathering responses from around the country, and making a report out of them, kind of like a country-wide update on recycling."

Although providing an efficient means of sending and receiving information is the main function of online communications, computer networking directly benefits the environment in two ways. First of all, e-mail saves a lot of paper compared to ordinary mail. Both The Sierra Club and National Wildlife Federation recommend using e-mail to save paper, and currently the National Science Foundation uses a program called PC-Express to accept lengthy grant proposals electronically.

Second, by using online communications more people can work and shop at home, which in turn reduces dependency on cars and fossil fuels. Currently an estimated 5 million people use their computers and modems to work at home. There is even a magazine, *Home Office Computing*, devoted entirely to using computers for home businesses.

EcoNet

Started in 1984 by the Institute for Global Communications, EcoNet is now the premier computer service for environmentalists. Unlike most large computer services, EcoNet is not operated for profit, but is part of the nonprofit Tides Foundation. Mark Mobley, an EcoNet coordinator, calls EcoNet: "an organizing tool which eliminates dependency on travel; it may prove to be a major cohesive force for years to come."

EcoNet now has over 2,500 subscribers and is growing at a rate of 150 new users per month. A recent article in World Watch commented, "Given the size of the United States, this may appear to be a fairly small group, but it is one with considerable leverage. More than 60 percent of EcoNet's online phone directory, which gives the names and addresses of all of its users, reads like a bibliography of the American environmental movement." EcoNet is also internationally accessible; users can correspond with colleagues in Canada, England, Germany, Brazil and many other countries. In addition, EcoNet is connected to 30 other computer networks, allowing users to communicate with a huge online community. Its power lies in its 200 conferences with topics ranging from rural sociology, alternative agriculture and agro-economics to hazardous waste disposal, incinerators and underground storage regulations. Additionally, EcoNet provides access to over 500 related conferences from other networks.

EcoNet's newest feature allows users to send faxes, which makes it easier for users to take quick action on an issue. For example, when an EcoNet user sees a bulletin about the newest clean water legislation in the clean air conference, he can type a letter to his representative while online and then fax it directly to Congress. A printed letter is in the legislator's office fifteen minutes after the constituent reads the bulletin!

"When I first heard about the Earth Conference, I figured it was nothing but a bunch of half-crazed, deranged hippies. It's turned out to be one of my most valuable sources of information."

For more information on EcoNet, contact: Institute for Global Communications, 3228 Sacramento Street, San Francisco, CA 94115, or call 415-923-0900. You can reach the Prout Journal on EcoNet at: RLogan.

J. Scott Christianson is an environmental columnist for the local newspaper in Columbia, Missouri. **Dan Wendling** is the operator of the Coin of the Realm computerized bulletin board system (data: 301-585-6697) in Silver Spring, Maryland.