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Julia Butterfly Hill

Ten years after her historic tree-sit, she still puts the 'active' in 'activism'

by Rob Parsons



Each year, billions of North American monarch butterflies undertake a remarkable journey to spend the winter in central Mexico's high mountains, carpeting treetops in gold. Some estimates place the colonies' density as high as 50 million per hectare. The pines and eucalyptus trees of Pacific Grove, California also are a wintering spot for the monarchs, some traveling as much as 2,000 miles.

This holiday season, a rare and remarkable butterfly has flown to Maui. Julia Butterfly Hill, best known for her two-year tree-sit in a 1,000-year-old, 200-

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foot tall California redwood, came to Hawaii, specifically to spend some time in the ocean. "It's also reminding me," Hill says of her visit to Maui, "that I'm trying to manifest a home somewhere warm, near an ocean. I know a home is coming."

Much of Julia Butterfly's childhood was spent on the road—her father was a traveling preacher—and her adult life has mirrored those early wanderings. Since descending from her two-year vigil in Luna (her name for the tree she fought to save from clear-cutting), her notoriety launched her into a near-nonstop tour as a motivational speaker for numerous environmental initiatives and issues. "For seven years, I averaged 250 events per year," she says.

"The irony is not lost upon me that I became my dad," she adds, smiling broadly.

I became aware of her tree-sit protest—which lasted 738 days, from December 10, 1997 to December 18, 1999—about the time I was getting my feet wet in local community activism. Within a week I read a newspaper article about her, then saw a TV news segment. I was profoundly moved—even overcome—by emotions, by the level of commitment required to fight so passionately for a worthy cause.

Hill traveled to California from Arkansas, after a near-fatal collision with a drunk driver required almost a year of rehabilitation. Attending a reggae fund-raiser to save old growth forests, she met a group of individuals who were trying to monkey-wrench efforts by Pacific Lumber Company to clear-cut, partially through tree-sits. No one had stayed in a tree as long as a week before they picked Julia. With a team of eight supporters hoisting provisions to her, she lived on two six-by-six platforms and endured freezing rains, El Nino winds and intimidation by company helicopters, security guards and loggers.

"The trees needed someone to communicate in ways that others could understand," Hill says. "What won over the loggers in the end was treating them as human beings. Solutions have to embrace our humanness, or they won't work."

Her vigil culminated with an agreement to protect Luna, and nearly a three-acre buffer zone.

Her best-selling book, *The Legacy of Luna*, bolstered her appeal as a

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sought-after speaker. She has co-founded the Circle of Life Foundation, which helped organize an eco-friendly music tour called We The Planet.

She toured in a 40-foot biodiesel bus to showcase sustainability, with bamboo floors, radiant heating from the engine and recycled tiles and materials. The bus is currently leased to the Sustainable Living Roadshow, a carnival-like assortment of musicians, DJs and puppeteers who provide school programs, music and games for kids.

Hill also co-founded Engage Network, a worldwide non-profit that trains small groups of civic leaders to build alliances and enhance social change in their communities. "I look to find where the spark is needed," Hill says.

One of the original donors to the People's Grocery in Oakland, she says the effort "changed the conversation to inner city food justice" in an area of East Oakland that once had 131 liquor stores and just one market.

"Food is my first love," she gushes. "Food is my passion." She started baking at age five, cooking at seven, and opened a restaurant at 18. "I am a JOYOUS vegan," she exclaimed in an E Magazine interview, adding that she understands some consider the dietary choice to be rigid, bland or judgmental. "I am clear that our forks and plates are weapons of mass destruction or tools of mass compassion based on the choices we make."

While on tour, she invites local grassroots groups to attend and to share information. One that particularly moved her was the South Central (Los Angeles) Farmers Cooperative (SCF), at the time a 14-acre inner city working farm—the largest in the country—that fed 350 families. Founded in the wake of the devastating 1992 riots, SCF was much more than a farm, incorporating a community center, after-school programs, nutrition classes and more.

But, in 2006, the land was sold to a wealthy developer, and bulldozers were poised to level the garden oasis. Five days before she was scheduled to go on tour, Hill joined an effort to keep them from being evicted.

She agreed to do a tree-sit in a majestic walnut tree, the only location from which one could view the entire farm. She postponed the tour, getting all her organizers to agree, and offering some a live interview while she tree-sat. The group was able to hold the sheriff off for a month, though the site

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was eventually leveled.

As of today, three years later, nothing has been constructed. "They could have been growing all this time," Hill laments. CSFC now runs a Community Supported Agriculture operation with produce grown outside the LA city limits. The story is chronicled in the 2008 Academy Award-nominated documentary, *The Garden*.

Hill has put her own life in danger, as a "risk taker in a positive way." In 2002 she was called in to assist indigenous people and activists in Ecuador, where an Occidental Petroleum pipeline was proposed to penetrate precious and unique Andean cloud forest habitat. At one point detained in a broom closet, she was subsequently jailed and deported against her will.

Describing her personal style of diving into the deep end of activism, she stresses that "who we are is exactly who we need to be, though society tells us otherwise." She recounts speaking to youth-at-risk, telling them, "I may be the only one who will tell you, 'You don't need to change—you just need to change your focus.'"

Of her visit to Maui and time in the ocean, Hill says, "I'm healthier in a place like this, so everything I do is healthier. We've disconnected from the Nature of our human nature. We have to build bridges back to those places."

Julia Butterfly terms herself a "revolutionary," bringing solutions to the problems of our time. She says a combination of information and inspiration is needed to get people to change.

"I'm so grateful," she says, "to belong to the web of people around the world who choose to be crazy enough to care—and choose to act from that place of caring."