

[Page 21 - On the Trail of Elizabeth May](#)ISSUE : [Issue 53](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1990/1/1

On the Trail of Elizabeth May Elizabeth May's name has been a household word among both supporters and opponents • and she continues to provoke thought about environmental questions. She was Senior Policy Advisor to the federal Minister for the Environment, a position she resigned in June 1988. We caught up with her this past summer in Margaree Harbour, her home base since 1973, working on her book about the establishment of the national preserve of South Moresby, British Columbia. This is taken from our talk. I've been working a lot this year on tropical rain forest issues. It's through David Suzuki last fall. David called, from Brazil, to his wife Tara--both of them are friends of mine. He called Tara in Vancouver, said he was in Brazil, and he couldn't see a thing because of the smoke, because of the fires in the forest. And he was crying when he called her, and he's never wept on the phone before. So she was really shaken up by it. And what he called to tell her was that we had to organize fund-raising events for this one chief that he'd met down there, a man named Paiakan. And that he wanted to convince Paiakan to come to Canada sometime in the fall, and would we organize things. So Tara called me. And that was the beginning of something that's taken up (my time)--and is the beginning of something I'll be doing from now on--is a connection with indigenous people in tropical forest areas. We had an event in Toronto and an event in Ottawa. And Gordon Lightfoot sang, and David spoke. And we ended up raising \$70,000. It was just incredible; we got tremendous public response. And we sent all that money down to Paiakan. He's an amazing young man. He's only 35 years old. And he's already led the Kaiapo through a number of incredible battles. They want to bury nuclear waste in the jungle--he had to fight that. (Then) a gold mine took over an area near his village. And he led 74 warriors, and captured a gold mine with 5,000 people in it. I mean, if they made a movie about it, no one would believe it. And not a person was injured. And he's also led the campaign against the dams that they want to build on the Amazon River. And he took his case to the World Bank in Washington. The World Bank was going to give the money (to Brazil). The World Bank (loan) was part of a larger restructuring of Brazil's debt, involving all the commercial banks--in order to aid Brazil in their second electrical power sector, building a hundred-and-some dams all through the Amazon. It would create a flooded area the size of Great Britain--separate reservoirs, but that much area would be flooded. So Paiakan went to World Bank officials. When he returned to Brazil, having spoken to representatives of the World Bank about the impact this would have on his people--there are now 5,000 Kaiapo living in that area--the Brazilian government charged him with the equivalent of sedition.... So, after having been charged once, the fact that he would make another trip, go through Europe and North America, try to mobilize people against the World Bank loan, not knowing what would happen to him when he got home--he