

In conversation with Nicole Rycroft:

Changing the systems that drive the loss of our forests

A major break in Nicole Rycroft's life helped her develop a new vision for her philanthropic endeavors. Today, she helps corporate decision makers drive climate solutions and conservation.

Nicole Rycroft received the Climate Breakthrough Award in 2020. This award is presented to extraordinary strategists around the world with a credible vision for tackling the climate crisis. I can't think of anyone more deserving of it. For years, I have known Nicole as one of the most incredible social entrepreneurs, who together with a highly dedicated and smart women-led team of activists, keeps on positively surprising me – from “greening” the full Harry Potter book series to setting up an impact fund and galvanizing a partnership with LVMH.

Change takes time, we are told. What Nicole has proven with her solutions-driven not-for-profit organization Canopy, which works to protect the world's forests, species, and climate, is that “you can change global supply chains in five years' time. But if we are motivated, we can literally change overnight.” The organization has been the driver of change in the environmental policies of hundreds of companies and supply chains in the packaging, publishing and fashion industries for the last 20 years and counting.

Saving trees: Not her initial career plan

Given Canopy's success and impact around the world, it may come as a surprise to learn that saving trees was not part of Nicole's initial career plan. While she inherited her grandparents' passion for wild places, she was an elite-level rowing athlete and a trained physiotherapist in Australia. However, on her way to the World Championships in her mid-20s, an illness dramatically ended her sports career. Her positive mindset, motivation and passion made her see this challenge as an opportunity to dedicate her life to a major cause: “It was such an incredible gift to have one of those experiences that just stop you in your current trajectory, and make you realize what's really important, and ask yourself ‘what do I actually want to be doing with my life?’ I have always felt that clean air, clean water and a stable climate were fundamental human rights.”

After a long recovery, Nicole volunteered in Southeast Asia for two years, during which she carefully documented the link



between human rights violations and environmental degradation and started developing ideas for her future. She grasped the opportunity to move to Canada, “the belly of the beast of consumption in North America,” when the government offered visas to much-needed physiotherapists. Her former profession was thus merely an entry ticket for her mission to save the world's forests. Nicole started actively volunteering until she got her residence permit and founded Canopy from her kitchen table with a USD 1800 budget in the first year and a simple belief: “We don't need to use 400-year-old trees to make shipping boxes or t-shirts. We are smarter than that. What we need to do is to find and accelerate the adoption of climate-friendly solutions that are fitting for a 21st century economy.”

Canopy's mission is to find solutions that support a shift away from being fully dependent on forest ecosystems in industries such as packaging, clothing and paper. For Nicole, “the customer is always right.” Therefore, rather than changing the behavior of 7 billion people, Canopy targets corporate decision makers with the power to spend millions if not billions of dollars every year and helps them develop environmental policies to shift their practices towards conservation and sustainability. This creates a strong economic and political incentive for fabric and packaging producers to change their sourcing practices. “In our world of supply and demand, the majority of society's impact is concentrated in supply chains. By engaging corporate decision makers to join us in creating a lasting legacy, we've created a vehicle where the marketplace is playing a vital role in driving climate solutions and conservation at the scale and pace that we need, rather than acting as an impediment.”

Harry Potter: Leading by example

For Nicole, one of the first and biggest highlights of Canopy has been without a doubt the “greening of Harry Potter.” Canopy reached out to various publishers including the publisher of Harry Potter, which at the time was the largest print order in history, to encourage them to use more environmentally friendly paper. J.K. Rowling eventually personally joined the initiative, a key factor in driving the positive momentum of change and

impact in the publishing industry with regard to the protection of the world's forests. Ultimately, the seventh volume of the Harry Potter series was printed on ecopaper in 24 countries, an achievement that also led to the creation of 40 new environmental papers, which are still on the market today.

After the publishing industry, Canopy decided to focus on another industry responsible for deforestation and forest degradation: the fashion industry. Seven years ago, Nicole realized that the fashion industry was a growing threat to the world's forests as 200 million trees were disappearing to produce viscose fabrics each year. It thus became an objective to re-direct the fashion industry's supply chain before it hit a critical inflection point and doubled production within the decade.

When Canopy announced their first brand partners, one of the largest viscose producers called them wanting to also partner with them, followed by many more that were initially not interested. Canopy now engages with 455 brands accounting for USD 790 billion in revenues, and producers responsible for more than 90 percent of global viscose production are committed to changing their policies in the spirit of environmentalism. Following the shift in supply chains over the last seven years towards more sustainable sourcing, 52 percent of viscose production is now verified as low risk of originating from endangered forests.

Canopy – a changemaker in the industry

To date, Canopy has worked with and improved the purchasing practices of over 750 of the forest industry's largest customers,

ranging from book publishers to leading clothing brands. These companies have enormous influence when it comes to transforming unsustainable tree-based supply chains and creating incentives for climate-friendly alternatives and large-scale, durable conservation, needed to protect our planet. The organization is approached on a daily basis by entrepreneurs who develop disruptive technologies relevant to Canopy's mission to save the world's natural habitat. The most promising solutions are matched with market needs, developed into commercial pilots in collaboration with the best strategic business partners and then scaled.

Success does not slow Nicole down, as she still sees a lot to do. For example, the packaging industry alone leads to the disappearance of 3 billion mature trees per year and 50 percent of the world's forests need to be protected to stabilize our global climate and biodiversity. She and her phenomenal team will continue to leverage skills, innovation and passion to drive positive change.

Here are some of Nicole's key lessons:

- Focus on impact and be clear about the change you want to create.
- Be shameless: ask for what you want and share what is needed in the world.
- Have the courage to raise awareness and engage the community – your best partners can be unexpected.

Article by: Nina Hoas, Head of LGT Philanthropy Advisory
Photo: generously provided by Nicole Rycroft