

Erlene Woollard



Tell us about your work



I volunteer with the Suzuki Elders. One of our primary areas of focus is partnering with youth climate activists to organize and deliver intergenerational workshops.

In 2021-2022, during the pandemic we developed a series of virtual workshops facilitated by UBC Medical Students to allow young people to explore the right to a clean environment

We hosted a video summary of their work which we sent to Dr. David Boyd, UN Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment for the North American UN Consultation called "The Phoenix Conference"



We have partnered with Solastalgia Youth Group to create and host workshops addressing eco-anxiety with poetry and visual art. We're currently working on an environmentally focused graphic novel with this group.

Other intergenerational workshops have looked at issues like careless use of plastics, the perils of fast fashion, and the insecurity of our food supply. Our experience has allowed us to develop guides for other seniors, "Talking With Younger Folk About Climate Change" and a workshop called "Letters to the Future".

I'm currently co-chairing Seniors For Climate, a collaboration of Suzuki Elders and SPEC Elders to inspire seniors across Canada to take action in their communities and speak up for effective and immediate climate action.

What makes your work hard?

The habit of compartmentalizing and offloading responsibility to someone else is deeply disheartening. I get frustrated when I hear climate issues are someone else's responsibility, particularly when people want to download onto the shoulders of youth.

It is also taxing to not be heard, and to have to reduce and simplify aspirations for climate action to be more politically palatable to wider audiences. It is psychologically challenging and intellectually demanding to establish common ground and articulate shared principles beyond the status quo.



My work focuses on strategies for reaching and building alliances among those who seem unaware or unconcerned about the climate crisis. I'm always thinking of ways to unearth motivation, build a common voice and a coherent movement for a safe climate future.

What gives you hope?

Hearing projections about how rapidly the climate is changing and how much biodiversity we've lost takes a toll on optimism but hope means we keep acting and finding new sources of encouragement and inspiration to move in the direction of a better future.

I'm grateful for Joanna Macy's idea of active hope as something we do, not something we have. It takes creative and intellectual courage to work towards a goal that isn't yet in sight. When I see this courage in those around me, it gives me hope.

What keeps you awake at night?

There are many inspiring planetary health projects underway, but I worry that the message is fragmented, not valued or even believed. and increases polarization among our fellow citizens.



What do you see if we get this right?



I have a vision for a more equitable distribution of wealth and more just transitions to sustainable forms of energy, food, and housing. There is increasing alarm over the fact that those who have benefited the least from industrial capitalism are bearing the worst consequences of climate change.

Suffering, sacrifices, and costs should be borne more equally across society and supported by those with positions of power.

There are many possible solutions, technologies, and innovations that need to be matched with social and cultural innovation and a redistribution of power.

What would you like to say to young readers?

My granddaughter is dismayed that the wildfires are being described as a 'wake up call.' She wonders how many wake-up calls grown-ups need? I echo this frustration and sense of urgency.

I would say to young people, "Let's work together, and please know that we don't want to merely offload these tasks on you or turn our backs on you".



What about older readers?

I hope for the power and political voice of Elders to be put to good use, to invite all to the fore to work for the common good and to ally with youth to demand non-partisan positive social and climate justice.



Erlene Woodward lives in Vancouver, British Columbia



SPEC Elders Circle
Legacy-making as Elder-making

About Elders in our Midst

The Elders in our Midst project celebrates seniors across British Columbia and Canada who have contributed meaningfully to climate action in their communities. Through youth-led interviews and Joy Hanser's hand-painted portraits, it highlights their unique efforts and inspires all generations to foster community-driven climate action.

Learn More and Connect

Elders in Our Midst: spec.bc.ca/eldersinourmidst

Elders Circle: spec.bc.ca/eldercircle

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