



Saving Mother Nature — milk jug style

By Sue Mason
staff writer

RUTHELLEN STEC DOESN'T RECALL when she got involved in the ecology movement. It's something she's always been into. So it makes sense that when considering a career change three years ago, her interests turned to the environment.

Today, Stec with friend Suzie Miller are using their creative talents "to educate others about the serious situations threatening our environment." They are Earthbound Environmental Creations, a fledgling company with a unique way of sending its message — on T-shirts, notecards and jewelry.

"This was a ton of work," said the 29-year-old Taylor resident, waving a hand at a pile of merchandise spread out on a conference room table at the Robert Michael Ellen agency in Bingham Farms. RME is the parent company of Earthbound Environmental Creations. "It was a lot of hard work to get the information on these animals . . . like the palm cockatoo. Does anyone know that the palm cockatoo is an endangered species?"

Their work is free flowing — simplistic designs with simplistic mes-

sages almost in a nursery rhyme fashion.

Pink elephants parade across a pin that states: "Oh, what a wonder if you could see the beauty of an elephant roaming wild and free. Don't take their tusks; please let them be. Stop the poaching of ivory."

THREES OF all shapes border another pin that extolls: "See the forests; watch them grow in all their splendor. The world should know. The treetops reaching for the sky could all be gone before we die."

The two women started working on Earthbound three years ago when they worked at the same ad agency. Stec was an assistant creative director; Miller, 27, the art director.

They went in early and stayed late to mold an idea into reality, challenged by their co-workers' belief they wouldn't actually do it.

"People knew what we were doing and figured we would be leaving (the agency), but they didn't think we'd go this far," Stec said. "It kind of challenges you when people don't think you can do it and excites you when you can pull it off."

Their first step was to figure out what Earthbound would stand for.

Promoting the environment is a broad field, so the two women decided to select 12 endangered species — the rhinoceros, sea turtle, humpback whale, mountain gorilla, dolphin, coral reefs, black-footed ferret, manatee, panda, cheetah and, of course, the elephant and palm cockatoo — to become advocates for.

Earthbound also takes on overlogging, animal cruelty and save the earth, or "what we call living with nature," Stec said.

Their first efforts were to create information cards that accompany their products. The cards talk about the animal and why it is endangered and encourage active involvement in its preservation.

ONCE THAT was done, they worked on the sayings, started on the jewelry designs and picked the design elements for the T-shirts and notecards.

"We were like we were possessed," said Stec of the time devoted to creating the merchandise. "It was sickening, just sickening . . . and we're still like that."

Even figuring out the color schemes was time consuming. Working with 30 black-and-white copies of the drawing and colored pens, they sat for hours "saying what about this," Stec said.

Keeping with their commitment, they decided all their products would be environmentally safe. The T-shirts are 100 percent cotton, the notecards printed on recycled paper and the jewelry made from recycled plastic. "It's practically washable," Stec said, holding up a pin, "Made from milk jugs."

Planning done and armed with \$25,000, they started producing the Earthbound products. One printer churned out the notecards, another tackled the jewelry. The latter was no easy job since the plastic, black in color, had to be coated in white before the colors — up to 12 on some designs — was applied.

TWENTY-FOUR pieces were printed on each of 5,000 sheets. Stec and Miller had the job of punching out each piece and attaching the pin or earring loops. The conference room at RME and Miller's Ann Arbor apartment serve as assembly points for Earthbound.

"Suzie kept saying she was going to get arthritis because she had to punch the holes for the earring and I glued on the pins," Stec said. "When we got bigger, we're definitely going to have someone help us with that."

The big move came in June 1990 when they ran an advertisement for Earthbound in Buzzworm, an environmental issues magazine. Since then they have gone on to have booths at trade shows like the recent Ecology Exposition in Atlanta and market their goods through a catalog and 15 wholesalers around the U.S.

Earrings and pins are priced at \$11 each, with sets costing \$20. The T-shirts — "Protect the Gorilla," a forest "In All Their Splendor," "Protect the Sea Turtle" and the elephant "What a Wonder" — sell for \$10.99. Notecards cost \$8.75 for 10 cards and matching envelopes.

Earthbound is at the point of breaking even financially, putting Stec and Miller in the position of helping other environmental groups with donations. That is, after all, the stated goal of Earthbound.

IT HAS ALREADY helped organizations like the Michigan Humane Society, Global Relief and Defenders of Wildlife by providing their creative services.

"It's nice working with non-profits that are interested in the same thing we are," Stec said. "Anything we do for a group is free of charge or we sell them our materials cheaply. When you work for a real good cause, it's hard, really hard, to price it right. You always end up under-cutting it."



Ruthellen Stec (left) and Suzie Miller are working on pages of a coloring book geared to educate children about endangered species. Through such Earthbound

Environmental Creations as the coloring book, jewelry (above) and T-shirts (right), they're trying to educate the public about ecological concerns.

photos by STEVE CANTRELL/staff photographer

