

STING



Twenty years ago this summer, Gordon Matthew Thomas Sumner — a milkman's son from the North of England — became one of the first celebrities to take up environmental campaigning. Many have followed him, but few have done so much to turn their words into action. For Sting, as he is universally known, set up the Rainforest Foundation, which now works in 20 countries, and has helped indigenous and local communities protect more than 100,000 square kilometres of some of the most important ecosystems on Earth.

"It grew out of a childhood thing", he recalls. "I was always fascinated with South America in geography classes at school."

That was in the 1950s where he grew up in a flat over a sandwich shop in Wallsend on Tyne near the city of Newcastle, a working-class boy in what he describes as "a rigid caste system", with "no social mobility". Bright enough to go to university, he dropped out after just a term, and worked as a ditch digger, bus conductor, filing clerk and, finally, a teacher.

Meanwhile he played with local bands, turning up on stage one night in a black and yellow hooped sweater that had been knitted for him by a girlfriend. The other members of the band decided he looked like a bee and called him 'Sting'. The name stuck and became known worldwide in 1977 when his 'New Wave' band, The Police, burst onto the scene. Over the next six years it released five

chart-topping albums and won six Grammy awards — and since going solo Sting has sold over 50 million records.

He had long been concerned about the environment, development and human rights, narrating a rainforest musical, releasing songs about hunger and participating in two Amnesty International world tours. But it was only in 1988 — when he and his wife, Trudie Styler, were invited to Amazonia — that his childhood fascination came to fruition.

"I was in Brazil. I was on tour. I really had no interest in going to the jungle, but Trudie wanted to go, so I said 'OK'. And we met a tribe there and they heard I was a singer, and asked if we could help them protect their land. I didn't know how to do that. So Trudie said: 'Well, let's start a foundation!'"

The tribe was the Kayapo and Sting and their chief, Raoni, toured 14 countries in 28 days to publicise the cause. "They really are exceptional, extraordinary people" the singer said at the time. "Before I went to the jungle I had the same preconceptions as everyone else, that we're civilised, they're primitive. But they are highly evolved people, to the extent that they can live there and not destroy it. We're not civilised at all. We're stupid. We burn down the kitchen and then expect to eat the next day."

By 1993, the Rainforest Foundation had helped win legal recognition for over 27,000 square kilometres of Kayapo land. "To actually demarcate a huge piece of land and protect it gave us the confidence to carry on," says Sting. Annual benefit concerts have so far raised \$25.8 million.

The Foundation concentrates on both human rights and the environment, insisting that the best way to protect rainforest is to enable its indigenous peoples to control and manage their land. More recently it has also focused on deforestation's contribution to climate change.

Both Sting and his foundation have recently been criticised, the singer for the size of his own carbon emissions; the organisation for being slow to disburse money. Sting has promised to "work to reduce" his footprint, and there have been changes at the Foundation.

"We are fighting a battle, and it's never over", he says. "It's been 20 years of struggle, but we are still here." GL.