

Hollywood's full-on green guerrilla

To some people, the prospect of meeting Daryl Hannah, the tall and beautiful actress with bee-stung lips, flaxen hair and faraway look, might seem a treat. To me, it's all hard work and high seriousness – a chance to talk about climate change with one of the world's foremost environmental activists.

It's strictly for this reason that I allow myself, after a decorous conversation over tea at her London hotel, to be dragged around the city – entirely on public transport – frantically lining up on her behalf last-minute meetings with representatives of the UK's green grassroots.

Hannah, who rarely gives interviews, was in London last week to address the Fortune Forum summit – alongside this year's Nobel peace prize winner, Al Gore, Bob Geldof, and (on video link) Tony Blair and Gordon Brown – with an audience of powerful and influential figures whose combined wealth is estimated at something like £100 billion.

Through the newly formed International Clean Energy Circle, the forum, founded by London socialite Renu Mehta, brings together these funders and inventors whose ideas might help to tackle climate change.

And that's just what we need, says Hannah. "We are in crisis. Species are dying by the bucketload and people are suffering in vast numbers. But there is good news. I've learnt about so many really exciting and positive things happening to turn the tide."

Hannah was an early adopter of biofuels. Her home in Colorado has passive and active solar systems. She is a keen knitter, keeps bees, and in her organic garden she grows enough to supply her own needs and to sell at a farmers' market.

Interview



John-Paul Flintoff meets

Daryl Hannah

On her web TV channel, Daryl Hannah Love Life, to which you can subscribe through iTunes, she uploads weekly, five-minute films showcasing these and other climate solutions. But unlike many environmental campaigns, it is almost unrelentingly cheerful.

At home she drives a farm tractor, a GMC truck and a Chevrolet El Camino, running them all on biodiesel. One film on her website shows her licking the cap on her fuel tank, as a demonstration that the reused chip fat she burns is no more toxic than salt or maple syrup.

Naturally, she doesn't favour biofuels produced at the expense of rainforest or valuable crop land, and recently took delivery of 2,000 gallons of rancid oil from a beauty supplier. "So I have two years of fuel. It's hemp oil."

She spoke about hemp at the forum. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson both grew the wonder crop, and the American constitution was written on paper made of hemp. Indeed, an expert told her: "Everything that isn't made of glass or metal can be made out of hemp ... everything." But growing it, in the UK and America, is illegal.

"Hemp is a weed, it grows like a weed. It can be made as soft as cotton and it doesn't need all that water, or pesticides." Every cotton T-shirt, she says, uses nine years of one person's drinking water – one year to grow the cotton and the rest in processing. "We have to be conscious about what we buy. We have to move towards things that will work just as well, but will be better for you and your loved ones."

Hannah subscribes to the green movement with almost religious fervour. When I meet people like this, I always wonder what motivates them. Religion? Chicago-born Hannah was raised a Catholic, but "flunked the catechism". "I took the tenets to heart. I asked why we couldn't take the gold from the ceiling and give it to the poor. If you ask

questions that means you don't have faith. And they didn't like me colouring in the pictures in my Bible."

She saw her parents divorce when she was seven, but developed a close relationship with her late stepfather, a property tycoon. At school, her striking appearance won her few friends. She often came home crying. Another problem was a tendency to daydream. "I maybe had Asperger's. It wasn't widely understood at the time."

Her shyness is legendary. She hid that for years by taking refuge in the parts she played, but off-camera she hates publicity. This is a woman who once required tranquillising to appear at the Oscars. She has acted in more than 40 films, most recently making a big impression as the eyepatch-wearing assassin in Quentin Tarantino's Kill Bill films.

Some years ago, she researched a film role by working undercover in a strip club for five months. "It was mortifying," she says, "but better than having to sit on a talk show in front of an audience and have idle cocktail chat with the presenter."

She's particularly uncomfortable talking about her private life. She had a 10-year relationship with the singer Jackson Browne, and subsequently lived with the late John F Kennedy Jr for three years. She's currently single and has said she would like to be a mother but thinks children benefit from having two parents. She says she may one day adopt the kind of child who is usually overlooked, from a difficult background, or older than most would-be parents desire.

Like other celebrities who espouse causes – and adopt children – Hannah is bound to attract flak. She says she's not worried. "People can and will say whatever they want. I think it's a good idea to practise what you preach. But I also try not to preach. For years I just did this stuff and didn't talk about it. I only started to speak out after 9/11 when I saw that my country was going to war over oil. There are other ways to get around, to move your body from one place to another!"

Did she really have to fly to London to address the Fortune Forum? Couldn't she, like Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, have submitted a video?

"Travel is one of the most harmful things, in terms of greenhouse gases. But there is something invaluable about meeting people face to face. People might ask, why should they go to a dinner to watch somebody on tape?" With guests paying many thousands to attend Friday's event, that's a reasonable question.

"For me, one thing that needs to happen is self-reliance and local economies. Always support the local community if you can. If you can't grow your own food, support your local farmers' market. And if somebody is making clothes in your community, that is better than somebody using slave labour in China."

"Corporate marketing tells us that we have to wash our clothes with this or it won't get the dirt out. And we're told to clean our floors or dishes with something that is actually toxic to children. People buy what they're sold. They don't realise that they have the power to make another choice."

The most important thing, says Hannah, is to reform the way we measure success. "I'm doing the opposite of what most people do. I'm not moving to bigger houses and cars. I'm thinking of moving to a smaller place. And I like the idea of a less permanent structure. With the fires in California recently, I started to think that maybe a permanent structure is not necessarily the ideal."

"I have done it before. I lived in a tepee for two years while I was rebuilding my house. It was great. I highly recommend it. I had a desk with all my books, a queen-sized bed, a kitchen area. And I had a lockbox because you can't lock a tepee, so I could put away valuables and my guitar. (Similar tepees are available for sale on her website.)"

We arrive at the 10th-floor, tower-block HQ of London's chief guerrilla gardener, Richard Reynolds, leader of a group that plants flowers and shrubs on derelict land. After a quick chat, he takes Hannah to see a field of lavender he planted with friends on a traffic island, presents her with a home-made cushion filled with lavender and tells her he already rather cheekily signed her up as an unofficial member of his online posse after she was

arrested in Los Angeles, in the summer, for her part in a campaign to save a community farm in South Central LA.

She'd been hanging in a tree for three weeks and was one of the last people removed from the site, converted to an allotment after the riots of the early 1990s.

"I'm still very upset that we could not save the farm," she says, taking her Guerrilla Gardeners membership card. "It's exactly the kind of thing we need right now. People say adopting a low-carbon lifestyle is expensive, but here were people who did not have a lot of money, growing medicinal and organic food for local consumption in one of the most polluted and dangerous parts of the city. It's exactly what we need to replicate, and it was destroyed."



Hannah found fame as a mermaid in *Splash* but is now more likely to be seen staging an environment protest

Michel Comte

The actress Daryl Hannah has always been an oddball. As a child, she thought she had Asperger's. She hates publicity and once had to be tranquillised to attend the Oscars. Unlike most celebrities, the beautiful co-star of the Kill Bill movies doesn't just talk about caring for the environment. She lived in a tepee for two years, runs her cars on biofuel and last week was in London spreading the green gospel to the rich and powerful