

environment



The Schworer family

A photograph of a woman and a young child standing in a grassy field with mountains in the background. The woman is kneeling and holding a banner that says "SGS" and "VICTORINOX". The child is standing next to her, also holding the banner. The banner is white with a black section on the left and a red section on the right. The woman is wearing a dark blue shirt and black shorts. The child is wearing a white shirt and khaki pants. The background shows a vast landscape with mountains under a cloudy sky.

For the Sake of the Earth

Seven summits. Seven continents. One family. One goal—save the environment

BY ANUPAMA BIJUR

How far would you go to save the environment? The Schworer family's log reads thus: 70,000 kilometres in their expedition vessel, 400,000 vertical metres and 18,000 kilometres cycling, over 10 tonnes of waste removed from coastal areas and protected nature parks and 47,000 students inspired to protect nature.

And along this journey, the Schworer family has amassed carbon credits, using human, wind and solar power only. Dario Schworer, a Swiss environmentalist and a qualified ski and mountaineering guide and his wife Sabine, a nurse, began a journey in 2002 to spread the

environment

message of environment protection. Their expedition called *TOPTO TOP* aims to journey across seven continents and seven summits, educating school children along the way about the environment, organising clean-ups and participating in sustainable energy dialogues whenever they've been invited. The United National Environment Programme and the government of Switzerland support their project but along the way the Schworer family has found other sponsors like Victorinox and SGS. Victorinox? Dario laughs, "We were stranded in Patagonia for a long time and that's where Salina was born. Her umbilical cord was cut with a Victorinox knife. The Swiss Ambassador to Chile heard the story and that's how Victorinox came on board."

The *TOPTO TOP* family's message is simple—inspire young people to protect the environment, and have fun while you learn to live in harmony with nature. "There are a lot of organisations, NGOs and even the media to a certain extent which focus on the negatives with regard to the environment. So it's important to say what is going right. We have seen good examples of sustainable living and good solutions to environmental problems. After close to 10 years of being on this expedition, we can tell you that our planet is still very beautiful," says Dario.

Sail, cycle, walk... While on land, the Schworers and their team cycle or walk or climb when there's a summit to be scaled, but on sea, they have a special sailboat. Designed by Bernard Nivelte, this 50-foot aluminum sloop was given to the

"We helped with a one-time investment in a solar panel to run the pumps so that they didn't need diesel. Sometimes, a small difference in the chain can help solve a problem."

family with a hull, mast and sails. "We have to outfit the boat and sell it back to the manufacturer," says Dario. Called the *Pachamama* (an Inca word which roughly translates to Mother Earth), the sloop can operate sustainably and fully autonomously with the use of renewal energies with maximum safety in the roughest marine conditions. Several international companies have been testing their equipment outfitting this sailboat.

To arrive in India, the family has been sailing from Singapore, Langkawi, Phuket, Andamans, Kolkata, Sri Lanka, Kochi to Delhi. From Delhi, the family had to fly to Switzerland on a medical emergency when baby Noe, one of the Schworer children was detected with some birth defects that have now been set right after a surgery.

Back in Delhi a few months later, the *TOPTO TOP* expedition attended the Brightest Young Climate leader conference in New Delhi and then it was back to Kolkata and on to the Nepal border on cycles. Trekking along the Nepal border, the expedition began a trek/climb to the Everest base camp. Baby Noe was the youngest member at the base camp, at a height of 5,400 metres. For three months, the *TOPTO TOP* team organised clean-ups and spoke to tourists about leaving behind a mountain cleaner than how they found it. While the clean-ups happened, Saline, the eldest of the Schworer children, went to school with the Sherpa children, while Dario and some members of the team attempted to climb the Everest when optimum climbing conditions prevailed. At 8000 metres, when they received a forecast that weather conditions had deteriorated, they decided not to ascend any further. Instead, they participated in an air rescue along with Air Zermatt in the recovery of two climbers who had died during an attempt to reach the summit.

For Dario, this expedition is not as much about adventure as it is about delivering an unequivocal message to people. In Delhi's Amity school, the *TOPTO TOP* team suggested that the students collect a pencil each, which they could then send to a nomadic school in Ladakh that had been destroyed in the recent floods. *TOPTO TOP*'s talk with the students involved



Schworers at Sydney



Sailboat Pachamama



Clean-up drive at Everest

raising awareness about environmental disasters and informing young people on how to help the victims of such disasters in simple ways.

Through their expedition in Europe, South America, Australia and now currently in Asia, the *TOPtoTOP* team has found some universal behaviour patterns in people. Says Dario, “Everybody loves nature. And there are a lot of people working for its protection. It’s also clear that culture and geography influence our attitude to the environment. In villages and less developed areas, we have found that people’s lifestyles are much more sustainable than in the urban areas. In the tropics, most people live day to day, and think less about the benefits that their present lifestyles will bring in the future.”

Keeping cultural differences in mind, the expedition’s goal is to establish a world record by 2016. “We still have to go to Africa, Denali (Mt McKinley) in Alaska and Antarctica. Then we hope that other people will take over the foundation and continue what we have started.”

TOPtoTOP, besides educating school students, also works as a facilitator to connect people in remote corners of the world with companies who could improve their lives. Says Dario, “We’re also networkers. We first try to learn how

“Being on the sailboat and climbing mountains has given the children a great sense of equilibrium. They can climb trees and stairs with the skill of trapeze artists.”

people live, instead of advocating to them about renewal energies. In Polynesia, we found a group of people heavily dependent on diesel pumps to get water out of the sea, to treat it to reduce salinity and to make it potable. They had to sell their fish rights to the Chinese to buy diesel to get the pumps running. When the fish in the reefs depleted faster than they could breed, they seemed to get deeper in debt. We helped with a one-time investment in a solar panel to run the pumps so that they didn’t need diesel. Sometimes, a small

difference in the chain can help solve a problem.”

While staying on course with their mission, the Schworer family has grown. All three children—Saline, Andri and Noe—were born during the expedition. “When we started our expedition, we didn’t think that kids would be a part of this. But during the early years, our sailboat had an accident and we were stranded in Patagonia for a long time. We had made a pact that we would try at least 30 times before we gave up on our expedition. At that time, we connected with many companies in Europe to join in and test their products on our boat. We worked with many schools in Argentina and Chile and that’s when Saline was born. That was a testing time for us—to decide whether to continue or not. We decided to continue because we had put in so much effort already into the expedition. Now I think it’s the best decision we have made so far. The children have their parents with them 24 hours and we share all our experiences.”

Being on the sailboat and climbing mountains has given the children a great sense of equilibrium. They can climb trees and stairs with the skill of trapeze artists. In China, says Dario, some parents wondered if it was not cruel to deprive the children of television. Says Dario, “They don’t watch TV but nature is the best TV channel.” Adds Sabine, “We are happy with our children. They’re door openers. They don’t judge people. We connect with others more easily because we are with our kids. People can relate better to us.”

Over the last eight years, the Schworers have seen some changes in our approach to environment. “In 2002, there was a need to create awareness that our planet was in danger. Now it’s time to focus on solutions,” says Dario. And that is the purpose of this expedition: compiling sustainable solutions from all over the world for the protection of our environment.<<