

The Sierra Club

Why the present leadership still needs to take a hike

by Diana Hull

The Sierra Club's home base is California, where tract homes rise up overnight in the strawberry fields and yesterday's bare hillsides are covered with dwellings to be seen the next time you drive by in the traffic. Nowhere in the world, including Bangladesh, is the population growth curve rising so precipitously nor demographic change more relentless than in California.

In no other state is the result of population growth so obvious, its damage to the natural world more conspicuous, nor its remedies easier to identify.

Virtually 100 percent of California's population growth in 1990-2002 came from direct immigration (57%) and the rest from births to foreign-born women.

Here on the edge of the continent the toll on the environment from too many people makes "pro mass immigration environmentalism" a contradiction in terms because the coast has been identified as one of the 25 most endangered ecosystems in the world. Yet the Sierra Club refuses to identify the cause of this damage to all they claim to hold dear, wilderness, woodlands and biodiversity.

Since 1996, the club has instituted a "gag order" on discussing U.S. overpopulation. That is why the present leadership faced opposition again this year from a group of independent board candidates whose views on this policy are compatible with a minority faction already serving on the board. If several of this spring's candidates had been elected, a new coalition could reverse the Club's stonewalling on the need for U.S. population reduction and end certain "deals" they have made with pro-immigration interests. Naturally the possibility of "a changing of the guard" caused a brouhaha, which became, as power struggles go, a

brutish assault by the Club's present leadership on those intent on replacing them.

Although the Club admits *its* primary goal is replacing President Bush because of his environmental policies, this attempt to replace *their* leadership has caused the Sierra Club President Larry Fahn to claim that opposition candidates were not only "outsiders" but connected with bigots and "right wing extremists" This attack parrots the tiresome slander of the most unscrupulous enemies of a sensible immigration policy, those self-appointed "beacons of tolerance" at the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Judging by the most exacting standard imaginable, the independent candidates had distinguished backgrounds and extensive credentials for the jobs they were seeking and are the kind of outstanding Americans that a saner Sierra Club leadership would welcome with open arms. Yet a postcard to members before the election warned that the Club has been "targeted for a hostile takeover by anti-immigration and animal right's groups."

Candidates so maligned were, for example, Richard Lamm, the former very popular three-term Democratic governor of Colorado and a lifelong environmentalist; Professor David Pimentel of Cornell University, an international authority on agriculture and energy; and Frank L. Morris, formerly with the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.

Morris said he was shocked that "the Club leadership would try to smear me for taking a position on population held by the majority of African-Americans and Americans in general."

This need for population reduction was also endorsed by the "giants" of the environmental movement, Lester Brown, Stewart Udall, Gaylord Nelson, and Martin Litton of Grand Canyon fame. This was also the position of the late David Brower and the John Muir Sierrans.

So the unanswered question is why a once laudable

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organization like the Sierra Club still insists that even if U.S. overpopulation has negative consequences for the environment, the Club will not deal with it. How they have gotten away with such a duplicitous position for so long is as difficult to explain as why they took such a stand in the first place.

Evidence suggests that club leaders have made an unsavory bargain with certain state and national elected officials – like the Latino Caucus in Sacramento and Washington, who promote open borders and mass immigration. In exchange for the support of these groups for selected environmental initiatives, which probably could have been achieved on their merits alone, the Sierra Club helps promote a “social justice” agenda for immigrants that includes the club having “no policy” on illegal entry and no recommendation for reduction in the overall numbers of immigrants.

This would explain, for example, the 2002 testimony of the California Sierra Club in Sacramento favoring approval of California drivers’ licenses for illegal aliens – a topic clearly outside of the Club’s purview, but of major importance to the Latino Caucus in Sacramento. This was a measure so unpopular with the majority of Californians; it helped bring down Governor Davis. There is evidence of the same kind of “deal-making” with a variety of pro-immigration members of congress who want to please their ethnic constituencies. That means not calling attention to the connection between immigration, overpopulation and a whole list of environmental problems.

Consequently the kinds of environmental threats the Sierra Club selects to take on, and the environmental damage they choose to ignore, are evidence of this political “tilt” that accommodates certain elected officials, the open borders political and business lobbies, and the preferences of funders like the Ford and its sister foundations.

In early spring the Sierra Club was party to a lawsuit trying to block construction of the final portion of a fence along the U.S. Mexican border in order to protect the habitat of the coastal scrub sage bird. But completing the fence could actually save the bird’s habitat from being trampled by thousands of immigrants illegally crossing an obvious opening in the barrier between the U.S. and Mexico.

When the rights of illegal immigrants to enter the country are involved, the Sierra Club ignores the

environmental damage they cause. And apparently they place higher value on the habitat of a bird than on the welfare and property of ranchers in the path of drug traffickers and human coyotes in the Southern Arizona desert. They have ignored illegal alien incursions into and through thousands of acres of oak woodland, grassland and unique desert vegetation in the Coronado National Forest and the Organ Pipe National Monument in Arizona. Frequent testimony to the Congress has described the human and vehicular traffic through these areas that has created trails the width of roads. Vegetation has been destroyed to such an extent that steep hillsides have been eroded and much ground laid bare, with litter spread wide – discarded clothing, blankets, food containers, toilet paper and human excrement. People in official positions with first hand knowledge of this desecration have given testimony about it repeatedly – local Sheriffs, County Attorneys, Park Rangers, and members of the Border Patrol.

Groups that supported the independent candidates in the recent Sierra Club election also testified on this issue, along with immigration research and reform groups, embattled ranchers and homeowners near the border, and relatives of border patrol officers who have been assassinated while on duty in this dangerous area. Yet the Sierra Club has never protested this scandalous and much-documented environmental damage – another example of their selective outrage and refusal to acknowledge the obvious.

There were actually five independent candidates likely prepared to challenge current club policy and election of any three of them would have put the independents in the majority. This fact was only too obvious to the current board majority and also threatened the tenure of Karl Pope the Executive Director.

Unfortunately the outspoken Paul Watson of the Sea Shepherd Society gave the group in control the sound bite they needed. He said, “We’re only three directors away from controlling that [Sierra Club] board. And once we get three more directors elected...[We’ll] change the entire agenda of that organization.” Truthful in part? Yes! Politically astute? Hardly!

Using this boast Groundswell Sierra, a group formed to defeat the independent candidates, sent out Watson’s statement on a postcard to 750,000 Sierra Club members. They described themselves as “loyalists” in contrast to the independent candidates who they said had “targeted

the club.” They referred members to warnings to that effect that had appeared in the *LA Times*, *Denver Post* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* – stories most likely planted there by the Sierra Club itself.

A pre-election postcard also contained a note from Robert E. Kennedy Jr. urging members to vote for directors proposed by the nominating committee. This committee, he asserted, “cared about the Club’s 112 year old mission, especially important because of the Bush administration’s assault on the environment.”

Whether all this pressure on the membership to defend the power of the incumbents was actually legal is still uncertain – but a threat to the position of well-

entrenched leaders in any rich organization can expect to be challenged by “all means available.” So the defeat of the independents in 2004 was not surprising in what turns out to be the early rounds in this very important policy struggle.

How long can the obvious be avoided? Nationally, the adding of two million immigrants a year defeats many of the Club’s efforts to clean the air and preserve natural resources. The muting of this mission through “politically correct” deal-making must end. Why? Because it is only by protecting the human habitat from others of our kind that we can save the sage bird, too. •