

# How Deeply Did Wall Street Investor David Gelbaum Damage the Sierra Club?

BY BRENDA WALKER

It was a very bad day for the cause of protecting America's wilderness and resources some years back when the Sierra Club secretly took over \$100 million in tainted donations from Wall Street investor David Gelbaum. The enormous contribution came with strings attached, namely the stipulation that America's flagship green organization would not mention excessive immigration as harmful to the environment generally and resource preservation in particular.

As a result, the Club management rejected its own environmentally proper immigration policy with no explanation. The cause was a closely guarded secret for years.

In 1989 the Club's official position was: "Immigration to the U.S. should be no greater than that which will permit achievement of population stabilization in the U.S." The aim was to create an environmentally sustainable America, where human population growth would not outstrip natural processes that renew water, soil, forests, and other resources vital to human existence.

So it was both mysterious and alarming to concerned Club members when in 1996 the Board of Directors voted to adopt a "neutrality" policy regarding immigration:

The Sierra Club, its entities, and those speaking in its name will take no position on immigration levels or on policies governing immigration into the United States. The Club remains committed to environmental rights and protections for all within our borders, without discrimination based on immigration status.

A group of Sierra Club members (including this writer) got together not long thereafter to work within the Club's democratic process to return to the original policy. The association was at first called the Sierrans

for US Population Stabilization, but the Club management threatened to sue (despite Gay & Lesbian Sierrans, Sierra Singles, etc.), so the name was shorted to the acronym and exists today online as SUSPS.org.

SUSPS reformers worked in good faith to overturn what was seen as a curiously bad policy decision, one that defied basic environmental principles. The first effort was to poll the membership with a ballot question during the 1998 annual Club election about whether to return to the tradition policy regarding immigration. The Sierra management ran an unfair election with a competing question to confuse voters, and the SUSPS ballot question got only 40 percent. SUSPS then ran candidates for the Board of Directors who are voted in by members, winning one seat (out of 15) in 2002 and two more in 2003.

In 2004, SUSPS ran several highly qualified candidates for the Board, including the one-time Democratic Governor of Colorado Dick Lamm and former Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Frank Morris. Nevertheless, the Club management was worried enough about maintaining control that it launched a scorched-earth attack on the SUSPS candidates, accusing them of racism and a "hostile takeover attempt" — by an election! Those SUSPS reformers would try anything!

The Alinsky-style campaign of outrageous personal slander succeeded and SUSPS candidates lost, with the help of a snoozy media that couldn't imagine that gentle greenies could do mean things. But some important questions came out at that time, such as the source of vast sums of money showing up in Sierra coffers.

Candidate Dick Lamm asked, "Is this foreign money? Is it money that comes with special obligations? It's negligence to spend money of that amount without knowing the source."

The jig was up when moneybags Wall Streeter David Gelbaum was outed as the open-borders puppet-master of the compromised Sierra Club. That revelation happened in October 2004 when the *Los Angeles Times* published the article, "The Man behind the Land," which revealed his gift-giving and stipulation:

---

*Brenda Walker is publisher of the websites LimitsToGrowth.org and ImmigrationsHumanCost.org. A resident of the San Francisco Bay area, she is a frequent contributor to The Social Contract.*

David Gelbaum insisted that he played no role in the election. He dismissed allegations that he is calling the shots at the club in any other way.

“None of that is true,” he said. “I’m not some Svengali. I’m not that engaged.”

But he said Pope long had known where he stood on the contentious issue. “I did tell Carl Pope in 1994 or 1995 that if they ever came out anti-immigration, they would never get a dollar from me.”

Gelbaum said he was a substantial donor at the time but not yet the club’s largest benefactor. Immigration arose as an issue in 1994 because Proposition 187, which threatened to deny public education and health care to illegal immigrants, was on the state’s ballot.

He said he was so upset by the idea of “pulling kids out of school” that he donated more than \$180,000 to the campaign to oppose Proposition 187. After the measure passed, he said, he donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to civil rights lawyers who ultimately got the measure struck down in court.

Gelbaum, who reads the Spanish-language newspaper *La Opinion* and is married to a Mexican American, said his views on immigration were shaped long ago by his grandfather, Abraham, a watchmaker who had come to America to escape persecution of Jews in Ukraine before World War I.

“I asked, ‘Abe, what do you think about all of these Mexicans coming here?’ ” Gelbaum said. “Abe didn’t speak English that well. He said, ‘I came here. How can I tell them not to come?’ ”

“I cannot support an organization that is anti-immigration. It would dishonor the memory of my grandparents.”

Big mistake. True environmentalists think about the earth they are bequeathing to their grandchildren, not the ancient opinions of grandparents. As the late David Brower stated, “We don’t inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.”

Incidentally, the Sierra Club has a position of influence among green organizations, where there is a lot of following the big dog. So what the Sierra Club does matters beyond its individual policies.

David Gelbaum seems to be an earnest liberal with good intentions who happens to like the outdoors. He was quoted in a 2010 *New York Times* article (“You’d Never Know He’s a Sun King”) as remarking, “I was interested in the environment because as a child my hap-

piest memories were of camping and hiking.” He has donated generously to programs that expose poor city kids to wilderness experiences. His \$101 million secret donation to the Sierra Club was to expand its Youth in Wilderness programs and other club activities.

Interestingly, the aforementioned *Times* article reported that he donated \$200 million to the Sierra Club. Apparently, he continued contributing even after the controversy following his earlier bribe, er donation.

After the nation’s financial tumble in 2009, he told the American Civil Liberties Union that he could no longer write an annual check for \$20 million. The ACLU said “Ouch!” because the Gelbaum money accounted for 25 percent of its operating budget. Ultra-liberal lawyers had to tighten their alligator belts a notch or two.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Ed Vick, David Gelbaum, Michael Bloomberg, and Wes Moore.

In addition, his \$250 million donation to the Wildlands Conservancy helped preserve 1,200 square miles of land in California, including half a million acres of Mojave Desert. Gelbaum also gave \$250 million to a charity he founded, the Iraq Afghanistan Deployment Impact Fund, to aid veterans, in part to remember his father who served in World War II.

So the guy has a mixed record of influence, which definitely includes some worthwhile activities. However, his impact on the Sierra Club was entirely harmful. Perhaps the Sierra elites would have abandoned their earlier bipartisan approach regarding the environment in any event, but the Gelbaum bribe pushed the Club over the cliff into Alinsky-style leftism, where character assassination has replaced reasoned debate.

The Sierra Club has gone full tilt left. In 2013, the Board voted unanimously to support amnesty for illegal aliens and the Senate bill, even though a doubling of legal immigration was part of the deal. Sierra’s Executive Director Michael Brune spoke in terms of the amnestied persons being 11 million new environmentalists, noting, “Right now, there are 11 million people

who don't have the tools, who can't act without fear. They can't vote. They can't engage in the public process. They can't advocate for clean energy without the threat of deportation."

Funny, but the number of illegal aliens deported because of demonstrating for environmental issues seems to be zero.

The Sierra Club even avoids the topic of environmental destruction when it is committed by diverse aliens. The Mexican cartels' toxic marijuana patches in treasured national parks like Yosemite and Sequoia have created no-go zones, too dangerous for hikers to explore, but the Sierra Club has said it has "other priorities." On the Mexican border, the thousands of invading aliens routinely leave tons of trash as they make their way toward stealing American jobs — wait, are these the crusading environmentalists Michael Brune wants to welcome?

The Sierra Club once defended America's natural heritage, following in the steps of John Muir and David Brower. These days, it has switched to the globalist club, particularly on global warming, where it calls for a big-government, top-down approach to control every aspect of Americans' lives. The early proponents of conservation, like Muir and Teddy Roosevelt, loved the freedom they experienced in the wilderness and wanted others to share that feeling. But that sensibility has been lost, replaced by diversity touchy-feelyism.

In 2009, the Club's website posted a blog, "Yep, We're Too White," disparaging the fact that its membership was mostly white and touting efforts to increase diversity. The same year, the then-Executive Director Carl Pope observed disapprovingly, "If you go to a Sierra Club meeting, the people are mostly white, largely over 40, almost all college-educated." It sounds like Sierra leaders hope to attract diverse dropouts to be members.

The organization professes diversity, but only the liberal flavor. A recent edition of its official magazine *Sierra* (a publication devoted mostly to a hip green lifestyle) included an article titled, "Why There Are No Republican Scientists" that concerned politics, not science. How welcoming is that to non-liberals?

The Sierra Club was willing to sell its integrity for \$100 million. Seeing how hard the architects of the sale fought to keep it secret, it's hard to imagine they had any struggles of conscience over the looming moral corruption. The fall away from honesty seems abrupt following

the Gelbaum bribe, but perhaps it was part of a greater drift of the Sierra Club to the extreme left, which is conveniently well funded.

David Brower resigned from the Board in 2000 because the Club leaders had lost their passion to save the earth. "The world is burning and all I hear from them is the music of violins," he said. Evidently the rot was starting to stink then.

Brower was frustrated by the Board's refusal to deal with domestic population growth fuelled by immigration. "Overpopulation is perhaps the biggest problem facing us, and immigration is part of the problem. It has to be addressed," he said.

Another example of the older Sierra Club was conservationist Dr. Edgar Wayburn, a lifelong Republican, who led efforts to preserve spectacular natural wonders, like the Marin Headlands north of San Francisco. When Bill Clinton awarded Wayburn the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1999, the President remarked, "He has saved more of our wilderness than any other person alive." Wayburn also served as President of the Club for five terms in the sixties, which would be impossible for a Republican today.

Wayburn himself believed in the regenerative power of the outdoors, noting, "In destroying wildness, we deny ourselves the full extent of what it means to be alive."

In addition to global warming, the Sierra Club today busies itself with anti-pipeline and anti-fracking protests, even though disconnecting energy needs from the Middle East would bring an improvement in foreign affairs. Energy independence could free up U.S. military involvement in the Middle East, which would allow repurposing of spending on domestic issues.

So did David Gelbaum destroy the Sierra Club as a bipartisan environmental organization? It's hard to say for sure from the outside whether the \$100 million bribe was decisive in the transformation. The Sierra Club seemed ready to be bought and ally itself with the left against conservative conservationists. But Club honchos were ruthless in smearing reputable people to keep Daddy Treebucks funneling millions of dollars into its pocket, so clearly he was important.

From the outside, the Club may appear little changed, but its mission has been reframed according to the leftwing playbook, and David Gelbaum certainly had a part in that. ■