



With “friends” like these, does the environment need enemies?

by Ben Zuckerman

It's astonishing how the press and some Sierra Club members have been stampeded into a frenzy by mostly one-sided stories charging that an army of racist, anti-immigrant, animal-loving vegetarians is aiming to take over our venerable Sierra Club. I've been a target of many of these charges. But this story, like most, has two sides.

For decades, Sierra Club leadership at the national level has been unsuccessful in passing strong environmental legislation or in electing national environmental leaders — in contrast to splendid victories achieved at the local level by Club grassroots activists. The U.S. environmental movement has not managed to elect a good environmental President since Jimmy Carter, nearly 30 years ago. The combination of the current President and Congress may be the worst in history. We will never know if the Sierra Club — with a more courageous national leadership — could have made this history better. But I strongly believe, as David Brower certainly did, that we might have.

Now, with stories in the press of hostile take-overs of our Club by outsiders and right-wing racists, certain Club leaders and their supporters have shown themselves in my view to be more interested in maligning internal Sierra Club opposition than in uniting to defeat George Bush.

In my opinion and that of numerous other Club members with whom I have spoken, the Club has failed for decades to (1) get good environmental Congresses and Presidents elected or (2) advance a suite of solid environmental legislation. Why vote for more of the same?

Etched forever in the minds of persons who dare to challenge the establishment is a vision of Club leaders who have used and continue to use unethical tactics to suppress legitimate opposition by members.

A decade or so ago, a group of “John Muir Sierrans” (JMS), with the support of David Brower, challenged the Club's ruling Directors. These JMS wanted to end commercial logging (ECL) on public lands. They lost a 1994 membership vote;

the JMS argued, both informally and through an official complaint submitted by a JMS leader, that the vote was corrupted by unfair wording (yes meant no and no meant yes) imposed by the Club's controlling Directors. When the JMS managed to get another ballot vote on this issue in 1996, the membership voted strongly in favor of ECL.

1998 saw the membership vote down a proposal by grassroots activists to overturn the Club's “neutrality on immigration” policy. However, as pointed out by Club members on both sides of that issue, the 1998 vote was corrupted by the Board of Directors since the structure of the ballot imposed by the Board violated Club Bylaw 11.3.

Then, in 1999, the controlling Directors placed on the national Club ballot a proposed Bylaw change that would have made it much more difficult for grassroots initiatives to qualify for national ballots. Director David Brower opposed this change which he called a “democracy-killer.” Thankfully, the proposed change was overwhelmingly defeated (2 to 1) by the membership.

The establishment understands it may lose control of the Board if new petition candidates, with national environmental stature, are elected. So, on January 30, 2004, the Board, on an 8-5 (plus one abstention) vote, interjected itself into the Club's annual election with a message on the ballot from the Club President. In my view and that of many other Club members, this is a rash move that overturns 110 years of Club history and is destined to hurt the election chances of petition candidates.

And there's more: to retain power at any cost, certain Club leaders are trying to make you believe that some petition candidates, as well as some other current Directors and I, are puppets of outside groups trying to hijack the Club. Our

vitae and lifetimes of action speak otherwise. We are not the tools of outside groups or anyone; we're all strong, independent conservationists, willing to give our time and experience to try to make the Club more effective.

And, in my view and that of Sierra Club members who have already filed official protests: with ultimate disregard for the Club's welfare, some of the establishment members themselves helped place sham candidates on this year's ballot. Sham candidates — whose desire is only to attack others, not to serve the Club. This move threatens the entire future of the Club's election system.

I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that their attempts to demonize some Directors and candidates remind me of the McCarthy era 50 years ago.

According to Webster's 7th New Collegiate Dictionary, McCarthyism is: “A mid-20th century political attitude characterized chiefly by ...use of tactics involving personal attacks on individuals by means of widely publicized indiscriminate allegations, especially on the basis of unsubstantiated charges.”

And from the American Heritage Dictionary, 1981 edition: “The use of methods on investigation and accusation regarded as unfair, in order to suppress opposition.”

Please feel free to e-mail me (ben@astro.ucla.edu) for more details, for an open letter I wrote to Club members on the truth in election-related matters, or for other published materials.

— Ben Zuckerman, 35-year Sierra Club member, Board of Directors (2002-2005), voted in as a petition candidate with the highest vote total of all candidates in the 2002 election. The views expressed above are the author's own, not those of the Sierra Club. He is a Professor of Physics and Astronomy at UCLA.

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