

## Election Becomes a Fight Over Sierra Club's Future

Animal-rights activists and anti-immigration advocates are teaming in a bid to control the board, to the dismay of traditionalists.

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January 18, 2004

An unusual alliance of anti-immigration advocates and animal-rights activists is attempting to take over the leadership of the Sierra Club, America's oldest national environmental group, in what is emerging as a bitter fight over the future of the 112-year-old organization founded by Scottish immigrant John Muir.

Leaders of a faction that failed to persuade the club to take a stand against immigration in 1998 are seeking to win majority control of the group's 15-member governing board in a spring election — this time, as part of a broader coalition that includes vegetarians, who want the club to denounce hunting, fishing and raising animals for human consumption.

In response, 11 former Sierra Club presidents have written a letter expressing "extreme concern for the continuing viability of the club," protesting what they see as a concerted effort by outside organizations to hijack the mainstream conservationist group and its \$95-million annual budget.

Some of the insurgent candidates vying for the five available seats on the governing board only recently joined the Sierra Club. If they win, they will control eight of the 15 seats. Members will vote in the board elections in March, with the results tallied in April. People who join the club by the end of January should be able to vote.

The election has attracted the interest of anti-immigration groups, which are encouraging their members to join the club to help elect the insurgent candidates.

"What has outraged Sierra Club leaders is that external organizations would attempt to interfere and manipulate our election to advance their own agendas," said Robert Cox, a past Sierra Club president.

Moreover, club officials argue that members of the two insurgent groups share fundamentally anti-human views, in their opposition to immigration and in their belief that people should take a backseat to other species.

The Sierra Club's "dominant perspective has been to protect nature for people," said Executive Director Carl Pope. "But by pulling up the gangplank on

immigration, they are tapping into a strand of misanthropy that says human beings are a problem."

Pope noted that 18% of Sierra Club members like to fish or hunt, and he worried they could be driven out by the new agenda from animal-rights advocates. "It's important to have hunters and fishermen in the Sierra Club," Pope said. "We are a big-tent organization. We want the Sierra Club to be a comfortable place for Americans who want clean air, clean water, and to protect America's open spaces."

The list of insurgent candidates features some high-profile names, including former Colorado Gov. Richard Lamm, Cornell University entomology professor David Pimentel, and Frank Morris, former director of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. All three have been outspoken advocates of controlling population growth or restricting immigration. Lamm is coauthor of "The Immigration Time Bomb: The Fragmenting of America."

Club officials say the campaign got underway quietly with the recent election of three activists, including UCLA astronomy professor Benjamin Zuckerman, a longtime champion of curbs on immigration; and Paul Watson, head of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, a marine environmental group perhaps best-known for ramming whaling ships. During their campaigns, the candidates downplayed the views they are now advancing.

Club members who support the insurgent candidates accused the organization's old guard of trying to demonize them as radicals to head off the increasingly popular efforts to win a new majority.

"I really think we ought to be judged on our merits and what we've done in the past, and not divide the Sierra Club," Pimentel said.

Political squabbles are hardly new to the 750,000-member Sierra Club, whose members squared off just last year over whether to take a stand against the war in Iraq. But the dispute over this spring's elections is becoming especially rancorous.

Some longtime Sierrans worry that a takeover by the insurgents would brand the organization as bigoted and xenophobic.

"I don't think that Lamm, Pimentel and Morris are racists," Pope said. "But they are clearly being supported by racists."

Zuckerman and Watson call those claims ludicrous. They argue that the club has a responsibility to take strong positions on the issues affecting the health of the planet.

"Everything else the Sierra Club is doing is doomed to fail if the United States continues on its rapid population growth," said Zuckerman, 50, who was the leading vote-getter in the Sierra Club board election two years ago.

"There are people who are being born today who will see a California that has more people than the entire United States when I was born," he said.

Asked what the Sierra Club could do to curb population growth, Zuckerman said the group must "talk about the numbers — how much immigration we should have and how many babies — so the mix of fertility and immigration is debated and we can come to a level where the population will stabilize."

Watson, who was a co-founder of Greenpeace but who broke ranks with that organization because he advocated more aggressive tactics, said he did not expect the Sierra Club to adopt the confrontational methods of Sea Shepherd.

But the club, he said, should promote eating habits that protect Earth's other inhabitants.

"Human beings are literally stealing resources from all the other species on this planet," said Watson, a Canadian immigrant.

In an e-mail response to the letter by the 11 former presidents, Watson wrote, "Is the advocating of low-impact vegetarian diets a cause for concern? I guess it is if you have a vested interest in grazing or the beef or poultry industry. I fail to see how vegetarianism in the age of Mad Cow Disease, *E. coli*, PCBs in fish, etc., can be considered anything but practical and realistic."

Sierra Club President Larry Fahn and the other prior presidents have pointed out that the club's members already voted to remain neutral on immigration in 1998 after a lengthy public debate, and said that revisiting the divisive dispute would detract from what board members have agreed is the most immediate action needed to protect the environment: unseating President Bush.

The presence of the anti-immigration candidates has led civil rights leader Morris Dees of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks what it considers hate groups, to join the Sierra Club and run for its board. Dees said he decided to throw his hat into the ring to generate publicity after his staff found that anti-immigration groups were urging members to join the Sierra Club and help swing the vote.

"I'm not running to win a seat on the board," Dees said. "I'm running to sound the alarm of an attempt to take over this organization by the radical element of anti-immigration people. They are interested in keeping this country white."

Earlier this month, VDare.com, an anti-immigration website founded by former

Forbes senior editor Peter Brimelow, author of the book "Alien Nation," ran an article discussing the Sierra Club elections. The article referred to Dees as a "left-wing smear artist" and urged immigration-control activists to join the Sierra Club and vote for like-minded candidates in its upcoming elections.

The article in turn was picked up by an anti-Semitic website and topped with a homophobic, anti-Semitic headline. The author of the article, Brenda Walker, said she was dismayed at that, but Sierra Club officials cited the recycled article as evidence of extremist support for the anti-immigration candidates.

Roderick Nash, a retired UC Santa Barbara historian who has tracked the environmental movement, noted that since its early days, the Sierra Club has struggled with tensions over humanity's imprint on the environment.

Gentlemen hikers and climbers — who wanted to preserve America's beautiful places so the privileged could visit them — wrote diatribes in the early 20th century about Anglo Americans being overrun by unsavory immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, he said.

Nor is it the first time the Sierra Club has been the target of a supposed takeover. In the late 1970s, when the club was embroiled in a battle with Walt Disney Co. over a proposed ski resort in Mineral King near Sequoia, the ski industry ran a slate of candidates to push for support of more ski resorts, Pope said. Those candidates lost.