



Sierra Club Board of Directors Bitterly Divided

by Matt Kettmann

Kermit the Frog was right: It's not easy being green. And these days, it's harder than ever. Not only are even the most levelheaded activists labeled "eco-terrorists" by seemingly moderate conservatives, mainstream enviros — faced with the nation's most ecologically disastrous White House ever — are growing increasingly inquisitive about the effectiveness of the modern environmental movement. And if that weren't enough, now the Sierra Club — the United States' most recognized environmental group whose decorated history, dedicated membership, and dollar-rich wallet is the envy of nonprofits and even small governments everywhere — is facing a power struggle that threatens to tear the 112-year-old organization through its core.

Longtime Sierra Club leaders claim that a takeover is in the works, an organized coup attempt orchestrated by groups and people with agendas other than environmental protection — animal rights activists, immigration reductionists, and others with controversial support — designed to cash in on the club's massive membership and deep pockets and redirect its resources toward their own goals. Specifically, Sierra leaders believe the takeover is an undemocratic end-around to reassess from the top-down the club's neutrality on immigration, a stance adopted by the club's board in 1996 and maintained through popular vote by club members in 1998.

But despite the straight-forward story of outsiders trying to take over the Sierra Club — a headline

that's appeared in newspapers from Los Angeles to London and a topic in editorials from Santa Fe to Philadelphia — this struggle is far from simple. According to those involved, this year's board election isn't just about aggressive outsiders who want the club to once again address the scalding topic of immigration and wiser insiders who want to remain neutral. No, they say, this time it goes much deeper and comes not from the "outside" at all. It's an internal battle, pitting the old guard, ruffle-few-feathers Sierrans against a new generation of ruffle-feathers-at-will reformers, people who want the successfully mainstream club to take some risks, get aggressive, and bring environmentalism back to the top of the American value system.

Sierra Club continued ▶



Boardmembers Marcia Hanscom, executive director of the Wetlands Network (left), and Captain Paul Watson, founder of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society..

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Democratic Model

With 750,000 members—including some 6,000 in the Los Padres chapter of Santa Barbara and Ventura counties—and nearly \$100 million coming in annually, the Sierra Club is the success story for both nonprofits and environmentalists to emulate worldwide. An organization as familiar to everyday folks as it is to powerful politicians, the Sierra Club's sway in the American mindset is immeasurable, and is undoubtedly in part responsible for our widespread support of recycling, water conservation, pollution reduction, and wilderness protection. Furthermore, when people think “grassroots,” the Sierra Club's model of volunteerism—from activist sects protecting wetlands to outreach coordinators bringing urbanites into the great outdoors—is unmatched. Love 'em or hate 'em, Sierrans are your friends, neighbors, relatives, and—in some cases—your enemies.

But the Sierra Club isn't just a shining star for mainstream environmentalism. Because of its grassroots ideology—a fundamental still in practice more than 100 years since John Muir founded the organization in 1892—the Sierra Club is one of the most authentically democratic institutions on the planet. Every year, usually with little fanfare or outside influence, members elect five new board members to the 15-member board of directors. And members who collect enough signatures are empowered with the ability to put up for popular vote any referendum they like. Where the democracy of the United States government gets watered down with electoral colleges and influenced by moneyed lobbyists, the Sierra Club's 750,000 members enjoy the epitome of voter free-

dom rivaled by few governments or organizations on the planet, big or small.

But much like the lackluster turnout of Americans to the polls, the percentage of Sierrans who participate in their club's democratic process is pitiful, hovering somewhere around 10 percent. Inherent then in the club's open democracy is vulnerability and the scary possibility that the \$95 million spent yearly at the discretion of the board of directors could be commandeered by a well-organized campaign to take over the board. Such an action has been threatened before—most recently by a Disney Corporation-supported group in favor of an environmentally unpopular ski resort. And this year, longtime Sierrans warn, a similar and very real threat looms.

Beginning last week, Sierra Club members from Santa Barbara to New York City, Key West to Anchorage began receiving in the mail ballots for the 2004 Board of Directors election. As with every year, there are five open seats on the 15-member board and more than a dozen candidates running to fill them. But this year, for the first time in club history, the ballot, which must be returned by April 15, is prefaced by an “urgent election notice.”

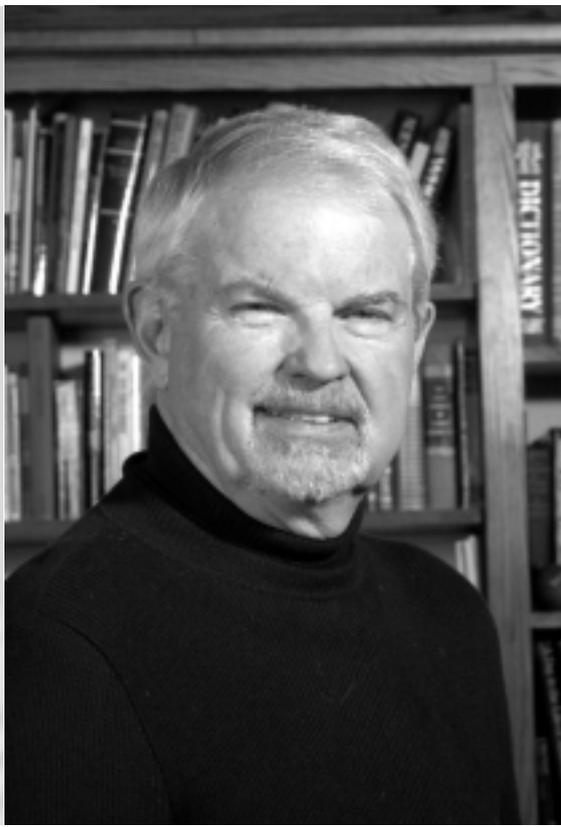
Written by Sierra Club President Larry Fahn and endorsed by 13 past club presidents, the letter cites an “unprecedented level of outside involvement” in this year's election and lists organizations that range from white supremacist and extreme animal-rights groups to marijuana legalization Web sites and civil rights centers. The letter states: “It appears that non-environmental groups are trying to take advantage of the Club's open and democratic nature to influence the composition of our Board of Directors and our policies.”

Without naming the controversial candidates—a move, according to Fahn, that some former presidents desired but which he felt inappropriate—the letter asserts that some who are running for the board position are newcomers set on changing the club's policies, specifically the club's neutrality on the hotbed topic of immigration, from the top down. If successful in both the election and shifting club priorities to “non-environmental” issues, longtime Sierra leaders believe the club's mainstream appeal could be compromised, causing an exodus of both members and money. Also worrisome is the possible resignation en masse of a staff 500 strong, the nuts and bolts of the organization having suggested they may jump ship if the takeover goes through.

But according to those who feel they are targeted by the warning letter—including sitting boardmembers Ben Zuckerman, Paul Watson, and Doug LaFollette, and candidates Richard Lamm, Frank Morris, and David Pimentel—the debate goes much deeper than talk of immigration. The election notice is part of a smear campaign, they say, designed to defame legitimate candidates set on making the Sierra Club a more effective force. And while the candidates understand that some of what they stand for is a matter of debate for Sierrans, all were blindsided by the very public campaign—begun in earnest by a front-page *L.A. Times* article in late January—to discredit their candidacies.

Takeover Talk

The controversy should have come as no surprise, though, as talk of a takeover has been hot for more than six months. Hard evidence goes back to October 2003, when Mark Potok



Candidates David Pimentel, a Cornell University professor (left) and Dick Lamm, Democrat governor of Colorado for 12 years.

of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) — the civil rights think tank and legal arm of anti-white-supremacy crusader Morris Dees — sent a letter to Sierra Club President Larry Fahn. Potok warned that a takeover of the Sierra Club board was underway and being led by anti-immigration groups linked to John Tanton, a man considered racist by the SPLC. Tanton said in 1986, “The Sierra Club may not want to touch the immigration issue, but the immigration issue is going to touch the Sierra Club!” Potok also cautioned that the takeover was supported by sitting boardmember Ben Zuckerman, a UCLA astronomy professor who has defended Tanton in

emails and is closely tied to Sierrans for U.S. Population Stabilization (SUSPS), which helped put the three controversial candidates on the ballot. To increase awareness of the SPLC’s discovery, Morris Dees joined the Sierra Club, became a candidate for the board, and used his ballot statement to warn against voting for anti-immigrant candidates. (The election warning also lists the SPLC as an outside group and Fahn has denounced Dees’ campaign.)

Potok’s warning came soon after another Sierra Club boardmember, Paul Watson, declared at the Animal Rights 2003 conference, “One of the reasons that I’m on the Sierra Club board right now is to try and change

it ... we’re only three directors away from controlling the board.” Watson, who reportedly quit Greenpeace because it wasn’t aggressive enough and founded the Sea Shepherd Conservative Society — infamous for ramming whaling ships — added that it was “heartening” that only 8 percent of members voted, and explained that a few thousand new members who actually voted could “change the entire agenda of that organization.” Such claims alerted Sierrans to the possibility that extreme animal-rights organizations — whose vegetarian policies may offend the tens of thousands of hunting and fishing Sierrans — were also

Sierra Club continued ▶



Candidate Frank Morris, former head of the Congressional Black Caucus, and boardmember Ben Zuckerman, who is spearheading the charge to change the Sierra Club board.

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a threat. (Watson's comments led to the inclusion of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals [PETA] on the urgent election notice.)

Also, in the annual process of nominating members for board positions, the board became aware of those candidates supported by the boardmembers who vote in the minority on split decisions. In addition to Watson, LaFollette, and Zuckerman, that minority includes Marcia Hanscom—executive director of the Wetlands Network and member of the John Muir Sierrans, a group advocating for a more aggressive Sierra Club—and, occasionally, Ed Dobson.

Taken together—the seemingly organized front by a minority party of the board, Watson's bold comments, and Potok's cautionary letter—it's perhaps not surprising the Sierra Club board decided in a split vote that drafting the election warning was necessary. And to ensure that the Sierra Club's mainstream message made it to the voting masses—without breaching bylaws that bar Sierra staffers from discussing the election of their bosses—a group named Groundswell Sierra was also founded to be the online information outpost. Groundswell has since posted its endorsements and vehemently attacked the reputations of the three SUSPS-backed candidates.

Trouble Comes in Threes?

Given the charges of a conspiratorial takeover by white-supremacist-backed, anti-immigration candidates, one might think that the three controversial hopefuls were right-wing wackos, but nothing could be further from the truth. The three, Dick Lamm (Democrat governor of Colorado from 1975-1987), Frank Morris (former head of the Black Congressional Caucus), and David Pimentel (longtime Cornell University professor who began one of the first ecology programs in the world in 1957) are highly decorated, well educated, intellectually strong, and downright friendly. None of them were aware that they were part of an organized Sierra Club rebellion until the *L.A. Times* article hit the stands. While the three confirmed that each of them had been approached by LaFollette or Zuckerman asking them to run—"Doug [LaFollette] apologized yesterday," joked Pimentel—they deny any official relationship with each other. It seems they were unknowing pawns in a much bigger game and were targeted simply because they were not handpicked by the board majority. But none of them—especially Morris, an African-American—expected to be categorized as "racist" for their campaigns.

Lamm and Morris do serve as boardmembers for organizations

that advocate in favor of immigration reductions and have authored numerous papers calling for less immigration; as such, both are aware that their beliefs can attract and be supported by completely distinct and racist groups. And while Lamm is unabashed in his intentions to get the immigration issue to the forefront of the Sierra Club, Morris isn't just running on that platform alone, claiming that he's also equally set on bringing more minorities into the club. "When I ran for the board, I thought [immigration and other issues] were what we'd be debating. I wasn't expecting ad hominem attacks calling me a white racist," said Morris. As for Lamm, he concedes that there are valid reasons to vote against him: "I haven't worked my way up the Sierra Club chain," he said. "I've only belonged for a short period of time. But what really hurts is the charge of racism. . . . why do presumably good people stoop to this level? I've been in a lot of campaigns, but no one has ever said anything like this." The controversy is especially bizarre for Pimentel, who explained, "I don't even think that immigration is that important an environmental issue . . . I've never written or stated anything on the immigration issues because they're so complex. I admit I'm a strong environmentalist, but [immigration] has never come up on my screen."

Lamm, Morris, and Pimentel were so disturbed by the smear tactics they filed a civil suit in an attempt to block the printing of the election notice. The Sierra Club board responded with a SLAPP suit (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), designed to protect the board's First Amendment rights, and the trio dropped their suit, which Groundswell Sierra hailed as evidence of the trio's inability to prove their claims. "They folded like a cheap card table," said Larry Fahn last month. But Pimentel explained that they dropped the case for fear they'd be responsible for tens if not hundreds of thousands in attorney's fees, even if they were largely successful.

So if Lamm and Morris weren't aware of an organized insider takeover and Pimentel doesn't follow the anti-immigration party line, then who is to blame for the plot?

All signs point to the sitting boardmembers who vote in the minority. A bit more digging, and it appears that the alleged takeover is being orchestrated mainly by Zuckerman (who's penned numerous editorials on the topic since the *L.A. Times* article), aided partially by LaFollette and Hanscom, and supported vocally by Watson. So what's the bee in Zuckerman's bonnet? Is there any easy answer? Well, of course not, but an Internet search on Zuckerman's name leads to one common topic—immigration and its impact on the environment.

Anti-Immigration Equation

Crowded schools, traffic congestion, and urban sprawl—the topic of immigration is an obvious matter to debate. But with regard to the environment, talking about immigration isn't, for most people, as clearly related. But soon, argue folks like Zuckerman and Diana Hull, director of the Santa Barbara-based Californians for Population Stabilization (CAPS)—on whose board Zuckerman serves—immigration's toll on the environment will be disastrously apparent. CAPS is considered one of the country's most effective anti-immigration organizations, boasting a plethora of always controversial primetime television

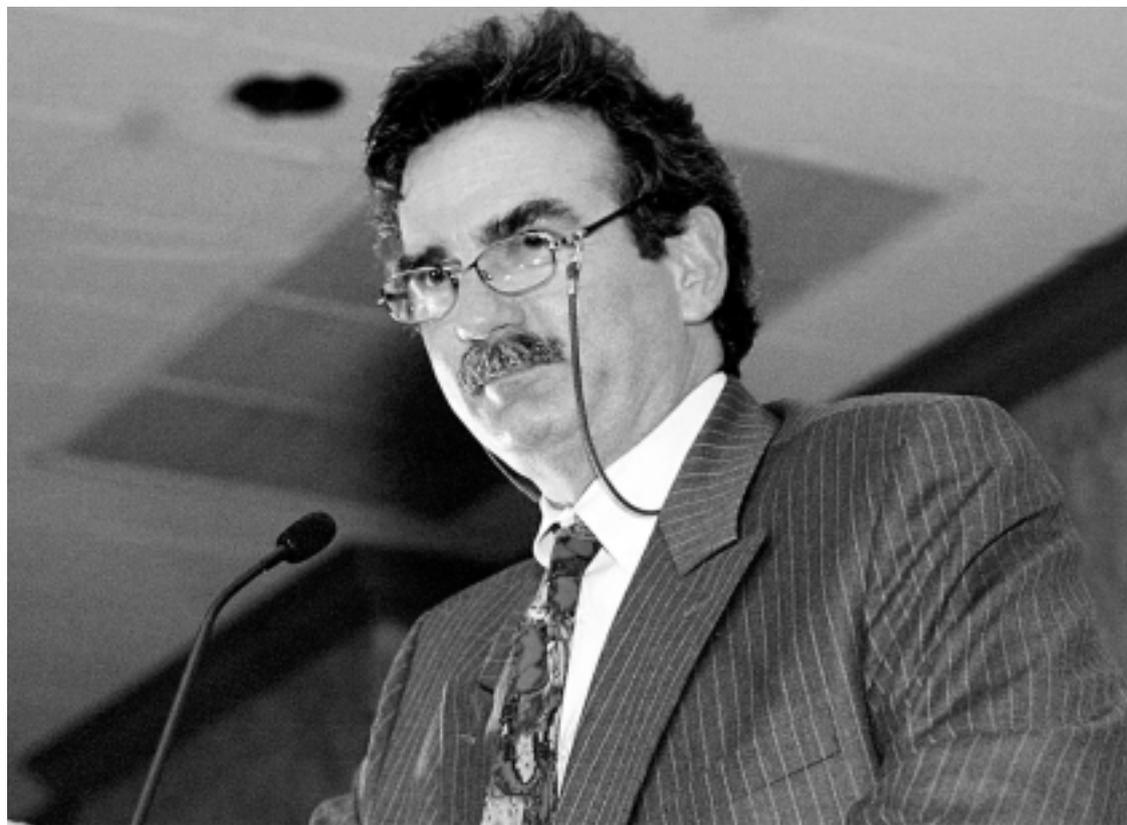
million, due almost entirely to immigration. And it's not just the immigrants; it's the rate at which immigrants have children, she explained.

Like others who study the issue, she initially assumed that environmental groups would be the first to jump on board, but that hasn't happened. Until 1996, when the Sierra Club board voted to stay away from immigration and officially take a neutral stance, the club had a mild policy within its decades-old population committee of addressing the issue as part of its more globally minded population-control program. Most other environmental organizations have also stayed away. In lieu of their help, Hull has herself accumulated scores of information about how America's two million immigrants—half of them legal, the

country. "That's an example of how quickly open space can fill up," he said.

Thirdly, and this is a data point used often by Zuckerman and Lamm, Americans are the grossest users of resources on the planet. Hull explained that an American's "ecological footprint" is many times that of most other countries, and the more immigrants the United States allows, the more that heavy footprint multiplies and affects the world at large. As Lamm posited last month from his Colorado home, "I ask you to write me a scenario where a population of 500 million Americans [projected for as soon as 2050] isn't a disaster to our ecosystem. By 2100, we'll have a billion people. Now is the time to start talking about this."

Hull goes on to cite a number of



Sierra Club President Larry Fahh is afraid the club's vast resources are being taken over by outside interests.

commercials and print advertisements in California's most prominent publications.

"I'm a one-issue person," Hull said, and that issue is immigration. These days, she's not happy with the Republicans, particularly President Bush's recent move to give amnesty to illegal workers. And she's certainly not happy with the Democrats, who generally favor more open borders.

With a background in behavioral science and public health, Hull conducted groundbreaking research in the 1970s that opened her eyes to the dangers of excessive immigration, which wasn't considered a problem until 1965, when a federal bill designed to allow workers' wives and families to enter the U.S. spun out of control. According to Hull, when the U.S. population was at 180 million in the 1970s, it was sustainable, with reproduction going forward at a replacement level thanks to widespread family planning. Now, though American families are reproducing on average right at the replacement rate, the population is eclipsing 300

rest illegal, together four times the number of immigrants the rest of the world takes on combined—are inflicting harm on the environment.

First, Hull points to a Conservation International study that listed the California floristic province, which runs from upper Baja to lower Oregon, as one of the world's most endangered biodiversity hotspots. Because of population growth specifically in California, Hull explained, various plant and animal species are at risk.

Second, if California's population sprawl continues to increase at its current rate, not only will there be more traffic, more crowded schools, and more pollution, but by 2050, the Central Valley—one of the world's largest food exporters—won't even be able to feed itself. If that sounds like paranoia, consider this stat from Zuckerman. From his UCLA office, Zuckerman explained that immediately after World War II, the county that produced the most agriculture in this country was Los Angeles; by 1980, it was the densest region in the

additional, big-picture environmental problems with immigration, from increased pollution to water shortages. Her argument is strong, and unless she's somehow cooking the books—which appears unlikely, for she's the first to admit that numbers can be twisted—the U.S. may turn into an ecological disaster zone sooner than we think. Her answer: 200,000 legal immigrants a year with an increased enforcement against illegal immigration.

For professional environmentalists, these numbers are nothing new, and few disagree that immigration is part of the problem. But according to Sierra Club president Larry Fahh, "We're not saying let's not take a position, but let's get at the root causes of immigration. It's a symptom of a global dilemma. If we just pull up the drawbridge and dismantle the Statue of Liberty, all we're doing is dealing with the symptoms." Fahh doesn't deny that there's some validity to Hull's position, but argues that it's not the Sierra Club's place to

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come out strong on the issue. “We think that staying neutral on the issue and addressing it in a global context is more effective.” As evidence of such, Fahn pointed to the club’s push for “fair trade” legislation — not the free trade that has encouraged more immigration from Latin American countries — and the club’s population committee’s ongoing work to bring family planning to developing countries.

But according to Hull, the Sierra Club is copping out when it comes to immigration. “The motto of environmentalism is ‘Think globally, act locally.’ How is this different? It’s like someone interested in solving world hunger while their own children are starving to death.”

Furthermore, she explained, if you look at the polls — or the votes, for example the easy passage of the anti-immigrant Prop 187 back in 1994 — Americans, recent immigrants included, are by and large in favor of reducing immigration. Frank Morris can vouch for the African-American community, which, from Frederick Douglas to Booker T. Washington, always had a strong stance against immigration. So why are environmental groups, politicians, and pretty much everyone else afraid to talk about controlling immigration?

The controversial board candidates and their supportive boardmembers, however, are willing to talk about the topic of immigration without hesitation. It is clear that, as a group, they have nothing to hide and merely want to bring the topic of immigration back to the Sierra Club debate. While it’s possible that, as this organized slate may be an end-around to take over the board and put in place anti-immigration policies that the membership voted against just six years ago, those maligned by Groundswell and the election warning letter argue that immigration isn’t the only issue here. In fact, they say that the board majority and Groundswell are simply using the topic of immigration as a smokescreen. What’s really going on, they claim, is a coup led by reform candidates and boardmembers — self-described as more grassroots-oriented — to usurp the power from the old guard, a collective of boardmembers who advance the Sierra Club status quo. And according to the reformers, the status quo just ain’t cutting it.

New Blood vs. Old Guard

As a grassroots-based organization, the Sierra Club encourages its volunteer members to rise through the ranks, from outing coordinator, for example, to local election organizer to newsletter editor to chapter leader, and so on. The end of that road, for those who choose to follow the path, is the board of directors. From the very beginning, the 15-member board has usually been comprised of



Diana Hull has evidence that immigration hurts the environment.

people who followed this ascendancy.

But in the last few years, that circle has been breached, namely by Paul Watson, Ben Zuckerman, and Doug LaFollette, all distinguished environmentalists and professionals in their own right, but not a trio who followed the typical route to the board. If anyone could be credited with the current “takeover,” it must be this trio, led primarily by Zuckerman, who has played an aggressive role in calling for changes to the board. And, if he’s to be believed, those changes don’t stop at addressing the issue of immigration.

Zuckerman maintains that these are not “one-issue” candidates. Frank Morris has pledged to bring more minorities into the club. Pimentel, who claims he doesn’t even care much about immigration, has stressed clean air, land, and water, renewable energy, and a whole host of other issues. Only Dick Lamm is an avowed immigration reductionist.

Most agree with Zuckerman that there hasn’t been a strong environmental president since Jimmy Carter, who came from an era when the environment was a bipartisan issue. “Even Clinton was mediocre,” Zuckerman said. And no one disagrees with Zuckerman when he says, “This is the worst president and Congress — environmentally speaking — in the history of the country.” But some might take exception to his notion that “since the Sierra Club is the flagship of the U.S. environmental movement, some blame has to be laid at its doorstep.”

One of Zuckerman’s cohorts on the board is Marcia Hanscom, elected in 2002. Hanscom, the executive director of the Wetlands Network and active in the Los Angeles Sierra Club chapter, ran for the board seat because she felt that the national club wasn’t supporting the grassroots chapters. She wasn’t alone, and joined with others who felt the same, organizing under the banner of the John Muir Sierrans (JMS). As a member of the John Muir Sierrans, Hanscom has tried to redirect the focus of the club back to the down-

to-earth through aggressive tactics that propelled the entire environmental movement into the prominence it has today. Hanscom remembers when the environmental movement began, when it was no-holds-barred and all bets were against it; somehow, due to tenacity and grassroots grits, it prevailed, bringing eco-speak all the way to the Republican White House of Richard Nixon. That reliance on and empowerment of the grassroots has been lost, she believes, especially with the Sierra Club board majority. She cites split decisions of the board—from Watsonville to South Dakota—where the majority sided with the nationally minded staff recommendations while the minority sided with the grassroots groups involved.

Hanscom believes that the national board's reliance on the staff, particularly on the advice of executive director Carl Pope, is indicative of another problem: that the Sierra Club has become too closely aligned with the Democratic Party. Explaining that the main staff is headquartered in Sacramento, other state capitals, and Washington, D.C., Hanscom said, "Whenever you get too close to a political power base, it's difficult to lobby the friend you see all the time. Instead, politicians come to our staff and say, 'Come on, help me with this. Don't push me on this one.' But it's our job to push the politicians." As evidence, Hanscom points squarely to last year's bipartisan-backed Healthy Forests Initiative, regarded by even moderate enviros as a timber bill disguised as an ecologically sound firefighter.

Boardmember Paul Watson of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society agrees that a staff-driven organization is problematic. Before heading out recently to the Galapagos Islands on his latest mission to report and physically stop boats from fishing in illegal waters, Watson said, "If I ever get the votes on the board, I will fire Carl Pope. He's made the club too afraid to address anything." Watson is certainly not afraid of ruffling feathers, adding, "I want a conservation organization, not a conversation organization. I don't want to be in the Siesta Club." His sound bites are catchy, but considering his tendency toward conflict as epitomized by his society's ramming of whaling ships, it comes as no surprise that some Sierrans are wary of his entrenched stances—and by association, the opinions of Zuckerman, Hanscom, LaFollette, and the candidates they've supported.

Sierra Status Quo

Club president Larry Fahn, a Sacramento native who found his environmental calling while cleaning up the beaches of Santa Barbara after the disastrous oil spill of 1969, has heard all the critiques before, but the one that irks him most is the attack on the executive director. "Carl has been the most effective executive director we've ever had. . . . Paul's call

for his ouster is inexcusable. No matter what the outcome of the election, Carl's job will not be in jeopardy."

He agrees that the Bush White House has been an ecological disaster, but points out that Al Gore, who was considered a pretty green candidate, got more votes than the current president and should be in the Oval Office right now. Among other salient victories of the past 20 years, Fahn lists protection of the California deserts, reducing greenhouse gases, popularizing renewable energy, blocking oil exploration in parts of Alaska, and crafting a landmark no-roads policy for 60 million acres of wilderness areas with Bill Clinton (now being ripped apart by Bush).

Fahn also says that the Sierra Club is not a partisan organization, but explained, "Unfortunately, the Republican Party has gone so far astray of being conservationist in the tradition of Teddy Roosevelt that it's hard to continue to have much support for their leadership." The club does, in some cases, support Republicans, and has worked in the past with John McCain on campaign finance reform. Boardmember Chuck McGrady, meanwhile, is running for office in North Carolina as a Republican. Fahn also mentioned that the club had recently been working with the Green Party.

As for the grassroots chapter/national board divide, Ada Babine, the president of the Los Padres chapter for Santa Barbara and Ventura counties, has received nothing but support for on-the-ground issues. As an example, Babine mentions the support this area received from the national board when the Gaviota Coast emerged as a hotbed topic of conservation. "They came forward and gave us a staff person and she's done a wonderful job. The national board is very supportive and Carl Pope is quite accessible." Referring to the rancorous 1998 immigration vote, where members voted to remain neutral, Babine said, "Democracy means that you discuss an issue and you vote on it and there's a decision made and you accept it. But that doesn't happen anymore." Babine wishes that folks like Paul Watson would follow longtime Sierra head honcho David Brower's lead and form his own organization if he can't handle the restraints of the Sierra Club. "We are an organization of people with vastly different opinions," said Babine. "We work together the best we can, but sometimes it's not totally successful."

Despite all the rancor over this issue, Babine, Fahn, Zuckerman, Watson, and everyone else involved agree on one thing: The Sierra Club must play an active role this election season to see President Bush removed from office. With Sierra Club ballots due April 15 and a result to be announced that afternoon, the club will be able to move forward and work on that task. Until then, no one can say when it's going to get easier to be green. ■

