

***Musings about the Current State of the Sierra Club  
for My Oral History***

June 2023

By Lawrence Downing

At the outset, let me express my gratitude for Roger Eardley-Prior of the Bancroft Library of the University of California-Berkley, and those who provided the funding for my oral history. This was a serious undertaking. I appreciate their patience during this turbulent Covid period in all our lives and an especially stressful and trying time in my own and my family's lives.

However, I believe that the unfortunate and sad further decline in the effectiveness of the Sierra Club that has occurred since my extensive oral history interviews were conducted warrants these additional comments and observations. Unfortunately, the Sierra Club has no structure by which the current Board of Directors has access to the many past Sierra Club leaders for advice and guidance, nor any evidence that much, if any, of this occurs informally. But there is plenty of evidence that such looking to past experience for guidance has NOT taken place.

Those who are familiar with me, or who have read my oral history, understand my years of devotion to the environmental movement. During these past 50 plus years it has included a more than a quarter-century involvement with the Sierra Club starting with founding a local group and rising from the "grass roots" through state and regional levels to activism and leadership at the national level, culminating with being elected for two terms as President of the national Sierra Club (1986-88) and as President of the Board of Trustees of The Sierra Club Foundation for two terms (1990-92) during my three terms (9 years) of service on the Board of Directors. During this extended period, among the dozens of committees, task forces, etc., upon which I served or led, I chaired the Planning Committee for the very successful Centennial Capital Fundraising Campaign, the Club's first — and only.

And, ultimately, I discovered and was intimately involved in exposing and repelling the far-right-wing immigration opponents in their abortive attempt to take control of the Sierra Club in its elections of 2003 and 2004, ultimately acting as the spokesperson for "Grassroots Sierra", the rallying group who planned and executed the successful campaign to defeat the takeover attempt.

It is clear to me that the common thread that was essential to the growth in size and environmental credibility and influence which the Sierra Club enjoyed during my years of involvement was the essential nature and continued emphasis upon the Volunteer nature of the Club and its Volunteer leadership, which was able to hire, motivate, lead, and support a very dedicated and effective Staff team, both at the Club and at the Foundation.

My involvement with the Sierra Club, as was the case with most of the Volunteer leadership with whom I served, had its genesis in the writings and actions of John Muir. His birth and strict upbringing in Dunbar, Scotland, his disruptive move in his youth to the State of Wisconsin with his father and brother, his creative intelligence, education and love for nature, his evolving manhood led to and ultimately away from a successful early career as an industrial engineer, his travels after the Civil War ultimately leading him to the Central Coast of California, all resulted in his founding (in 1892) and subsequent impressive leadership of the Sierra Club until his death in 1914. He and the Sierra Club were an essential part of the emerging recognition of the need for National, State and Local Parks and the establishment and preservation of other wilderness areas as well.

John Muir was the classic example of the potential effectiveness and power of an individual who after becoming concerned, was motivated, encouraged, trained, supported, and acknowledged for his or her efforts. In his case, it was about the existential importance to humanity of preservation of all aspects of nature through setting aside areas as parks, nature study areas, and wilderness itself.

As my oral history sets out, my own admiration for Muir and his ideas, led to my being invited in 1988 to speak at a major public celebration of the founding and important goals in the United Kingdom of the John Muir Trust, at Muir's birthplace in Dunbar, Scotland. On that occasion, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Muir, I presented the John Muir Trust with an initial gift from the Sierra Club Foundation to support their purchase of an important area of wild mountainous land in Scotland—an area to be set aside in perpetuity for the public. Scotland had no national parks at that time. I subsequently served the John Muir Trust for years as an advisor, a Trustee, and finally as an Honorary Trustee. (In 2018, I was invited to return to Dunbar to receive the John Muir Trust's Lifetime Achievement award for my environmental efforts over the years in the spirit of John Muir.)

My affection for, and appreciation of, the power of volunteer activism informed my own leadership within the Sierra Club structure. I feel that I was one of the important players in the growth of the Sierra Club not only in membership numbers and financial resources, but in encouraging and supporting a very strong activism structure by members all the way from the grassroots, through groups, chapters, regional councils, task forces, Conservation Issue committees, National Council of Leaders, Board of Directors, Executive Committee, to the position of President and CEO of the organization — all volunteers. The Sierra Club enjoyed national recognition and power as an environment voice at all legislative levels: local city councils, county commissions, state legislatures, and both the House and the Senate of the United States.

Sadly, in the past several years it has been with increasing despair that I and other leaders of my generation have watched the Volunteer support and leadership structure of the Club be slowly dismantled by direct action and lack of funding by subsequent Boards of Directors, generally at the urging of Staff leadership. The Volunteer-led strength of the Club for several years now has been replaced by a Staff-led organization whose ultimate mission is no longer clear, and it has become just one of the many other staff-driven environmental organizations in our country.

For example, one of the Club's Executive Director urged and saw adopted a major cut in the Volunteer conservation leadership structure at the regional level by eliminating the RCCs (Regional Conservation Committees) and reducing staff and funding support for Chapters and Groups, as well as much funding for local and regional Volunteer leaders to attend and participate in meetings at the national level, while increasing compensation and numbers of Conservation Staff. Also, lost in the shuffle were the 17, as I recall, regional conservation areas around which local and regional leaders were engaged with potential major donors during the successful Centennial Capital Campaign. The dismantling of the leadership ladder for Volunteers, along with the elimination of many national conservation issue committees, resulted in subsequent Boards of Directors having increasingly limited understanding of the inevitable changes that would result to the Club itself. One has only to look at the limited years of Club leadership experience or even Sierra Club membership of many candidates for recent Boards of Directors.

Lack of knowledge of Club tradition, history, and experience led to a former Board of Directors acquiescing to the Staff's decision to allow the Sierra Club's

name and logo (and credibility!) to be placed (for a one-time payment) as an endorsement actually placed on a new Clorox Corporation cleaning product container - a subject upon which the Sierra Club had no information or credibility. What a classic error in judgment by an inexperienced Board led astray by an Executive Director of the Sierra Club!

Finally, the ultimate blow to the reputation of the Club was the gratuitous characterization and condemnation by the Club's former Executive Director of the Sierra Club's Founder, an iconic world environmental movement inspiration for over a century, John Muir himself, whom he characterized and maligned as a racist! It is unclear whether he had express Board approval or was supported by Board Executive leadership before making such an impactful, damaging very public assertion. The absence of such is as much a criticism of the Board's ineffectual leadership as it is of the poor judgment used by the Executive Director in making the statement itself. But the repudiation of Muir has led to a total loss of understanding of the essential nature of Muir's message and the Volunteer-led successful efforts he exemplified to achieve those goals.

And, speaking candidly, the actions of the Board of Directors in subsequently trying to suppress criticism and outrage by former knowledgeable and experienced Club's leaders about this existential mistake was not only embarrassing, but it was — and still is - totally disgraceful!

Ironically, and certainly sadly, recent information from the Board indicates that they are just beginning to wonder why the Sierra Club is losing its grassroots support and, yes, even questioning whether it would be worthwhile to make efforts to be more supportive of Chapters and Groups. And one can't help but wonder how the current Sierra Club could actually be effective in coping with the challenges posed by climate change if it does not have strong support from its members, Volunteers, Groups and Chapters, given that the solutions involve not only national policy and legislation, but actual actions at the state, regional, and local community levels.

Moreover, how did an apparently unforeseen budget deficit of approximately \$40,000,000 (!) even arise. Not to mention what impacts would such a budget deficit — or the more than likely drastic cuts that would have to take place — have upon the Club's effectiveness on any environmental issues, or even its own continued existence? (My dear friend Denny Shaffer, former President, and longtime transformative Club Treasurer, would be turning in his grave if he knew of this.) The budget corrections that I have seen proposed in

scant escaping information appear to be more at the expense of the membership, volunteer leaders, Groups and Chapters, than at the Staff level.

For example, we learned that one of those cuts that was under consideration would have eliminated funding and support for the Sierra Student Coalition. It would appear that the Club has forgotten this additional source of Club activists which was another access to the leadership ladder. The Club's youngest President arose from the Sierra Student Coalition.

So, all of this poses an existential question: Can the Sierra Club ever regain its former environmental reputation, impact, and success? Very sadly, I think not. The reality is that few current Club leaders even remember when the Sierra Club was the country's most effective environmental organization, much less the importance of its volunteer leadership in how it got there.

But, in closing, I want to express my gratitude to and for the hundreds of Sierra Club Volunteer Leaders who made it what it once was. They had been identified, motivated, encouraged, trained, supported, and rewarded as they rose up the Leadership ladder, as I had. They were my friends, and many were even like family to me. And, also, make clear my recognition of and appreciation for those many Sierra Club employees and staff who themselves truly appreciated the effective working relationships that existed between Volunteers and staff.

And, lastly, I am hopeful, if not totally confident, that the example, leadership, and legacy of John Muir in the world environmental movement will ultimately not be sullied or diminished in any way by what has happened within the Sierra Club.

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