

Sierra Club at the crossroads

"The greening of hate"

by Cathi Tactaquin

This spring, the Sierra Club will vote on whether or not to adopt a new position on immigration. Many fear that this long-established and influential environmental organization might soon be lobbying to restrict immigration. In the process, providing a so-called "environmental" rationale for anti-immigration and anti-immigrant policies and fueling what some have dubbed "the greening of hate."



Photo credit: Impact Visuals

When the over half million Sierra Club members receive their ballots in February, they can vote for one of two proposals. One proposal, authored by population activist Alan Kuper, would include advocacy for a "reduction in net immigration" in the organization's population program. It was initiated after the Club's Board of Directors last year agreed not to take a position on the issue of immigration to the U.S., following years of discussion and debate.

An opposing proposal for the ballot has been offered by the Club's Board of Directors. It will ask members to reaffirm the present position, indicating that the Club should focus its efforts on addressing "the root causes of migration by encouraging sustainability, economic security, human rights and environmentally responsible consumption."

Club activists are concerned that if the anti-immigration resolution is approved, the Club will lose its credibility and will become

further alienated from communities who will perceive this largely white, middle-class organization as racist. Members also fear that an anti-immigration policy will damage its relations with black and Latino policy makers who have supported many of the Club's environmental positions.

Despite such concerns, no one is laying bets on the vote's outcome. For one, only a relatively small percentage (about 15%) of the Club's members typically vote, and the proponents of the "Kuper initiative" have launched an ambitious supporting campaign.

The lobbying clout of key environmental groups would greatly bolster anti-immigrant proposals favored by groups like FAIR (the Federation for American Immigration Reform), which claim that immigrant numbers and fertility rates are key sources of environmental degradation.

In 1986, the Sierra Club was mentioned by name in a series of FAIR "strategy" memos. John Tanton, a founder of FAIR and a leading figure in Zero Population Growth, asked, "As the people that groups like the Sierra Club represent go into opposition (minority political status), will many of the things they've worked for be lost because the new majority holds other values?" In the same paper, Tanton asked, "As Whites see their power and control over their lives declining, will they simply go quietly into the night? Or will there be an explosion?"

Concerned by the blatant use of environmental concerns to mask a patently xenophobic message, immigrant rights and environmental activists have been coalescing to expose the roots of the population/immigration control movement.

Whatever the outcome of the Sierra Club referendum on immigration, it's unlikely that the debate over the politics of population, immigration and the environment will quietly recede within or outside of the organization. ■

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