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Photo credit: Impact Visuals

*Savvy environmentalists spot a red herring*

## No borders to justice

by Tarso Luís Ramos

"The Sierra Club cannot protect our environment by building a wall around our borders," declared executive director Carl Pope at an April press conference called to announce that the Club had rejected a controversial membership referendum on immigration policy. "The common-sense solution to reducing our population is birth control, not border patrols." The annual Club ballot offered two alternatives and by a margin of 60–40% the nation's oldest and largest environmental group affirmed its current program of addressing the "root causes of global population problems" (Alternative B) over a proposal to restrict immigration (Alternative A). A slate of board candidates advanced by backers of the anti-immigrant measure was defeated in the same election.

In the months leading up to the vote, twenty-seven of the more than sixty Sierra Club chapters nationwide endorsed Alternative B, including the Toiyabe, Utah, Montana, Cascade and several California chapters. Not a single chapter backed Alternative A.

While these results seem decisive, the outcome was by no means a forgone conclusion. Proponents of the anti-immigrant measure ran a high-profile campaign that included direct mail to each of the Sierra Club's more than 550,000 members and a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*. Additionally, about one third of the Club's members live in California, where in 1994 voters approved Proposition 187, banning social services and public education for undocumented immigrants. Surfacing in the midst of a national backlash against immigrants, the Sierra

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Club referendum sparked widespread discussion about whether immigration is an environmental issue. The conflict consumed board members, staff and activists for the better part of a year and put the Club's population program on hold. Opponents of the measure feared that its adoption by the Sierra Club would critically fracture the organization and set a trend for the entire environmental movement.

Proponents of Alternative A argued that "environmental degradation results from too many people using too many resources," and that immigration is a key factor in US population growth. Supporters of the Club's existing policy argued that population growth is a global issue unaffected by national immigration policy; that militarization, environmental

among environmentalists. ("The Greening of Hate," Winter 1998).

Environmental groups across the country breathed a collective sigh of relief at the vote tally – the movement seemed to have successfully ducked a highly divisive issue. But in reality the conflict may just be beginning. The Sierra Club's anti-immigrant faction vows to reintroduce the measure next year and some heavy hitters within the environmental movement are supporting this effort. Meanwhile concerns about growth have communities across the West and the nation looking for a quick fix. New — especially Latino — immigrants are an easy target.

## Homes on the range

In recent years western states have undergone the most rapid economic growth in the country, accompanied by a swelling population and rapid development. Ours is now the most strongly concentrated, urbanized population in the nation.

Population increase coupled with growth management are producing denser urban zones and inner suburbs that are increasingly mixed racially as well. As communities begin to grapple with pressing issues regarding housing, transportation, education and social services, growing populations of immigrants and people of color are being scapegoated as the source of those pressures. Letters and opinion pages in the region's

newspapers increasingly feature pieces blaming immigrants for lowering the "quality of life." At the same time, both extremist groups and more mainstream politicians use hot-button racial issues to enhance their voting power among constituencies fearful of change.

The backlash against immigrants has focused on the growing number of people of color and especially Latinos in the region, but the conflict extends beyond immigration. In June,



Photo credit: Impact Visuals

California students united against Proposition 187.

degradation, limited options for women and other root causes of migration and population growth are the proper focus of the Club's attention; and that focusing on immigration would alienate people of color and progressives while bolstering the racist agenda of anti-immigrant groups. Indeed, the upstart campaign won the enthusiastic support of hard-core anti-immigrant groups, which have been quietly working to cultivate support

Californians will vote on an initiative eliminating bilingual education programs, while a similar proposal has already been adopted in Kootenai County, Idaho, and may be headed for the statewide ballot in Alaska. This fall Washington voters will decide whether to eliminate state affirmative action programs while Oregonians may get the chance to deny social services to undocumented immigrants.

In rural areas, similar impulses are at work. A few years ago community leaders in Milford, Utah, successfully recruited the nation's largest corporate hog farm to rural Beaver County. Despite the horrendous stench produced by the hundreds of thousands of hogs bred annually and the danger posed to ground water by vast hog waste lagoons, Milford remains bullish on pigs. Defenders of the hog operation point to the hundreds of jobs created and new residents. But even hog boosters express strong reservations over a proposed slaughterhouse that would bring a largely Mexican immigrant work force into the overwhelmingly white community.

Our national immigration policy reflects these same racial biases. Although the majority of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. overstay their visas, the popular image is of criminals — “illegals” — streaming across the southern border. Fewer than 50% of undocumented immigrants enter the country from Mexico, yet over 90% of those arrested by the INS are Mexican nationals. Critics point out that no one is proposing to militarize our northern border or conduct sweeps of Seattle for undocumented Canadians.

### **Green v. Brown?**

Mark Solomon directs the Inland Empire Public Lands Council, which works to protect the forest and waters of the inland Northwest from the destructive practices of timber and mining companies. Despite that focus, in a recent survey Solomon's members ranked population growth as the single largest environmental threat. Solomon wasn't that surprised. “My members by-and-large don't live in the national forests. Their backyards will always be their principal interest.”

Growth, sprawl and, above all, traffic are of enormous concern to their members and northwesterners in general. Coupled with the rela-

tive racial homogeneity of the region, such worries have made the Northwest a logical target for the greening of anti-immigration arguments. “For someone looking for a ‘silver bullet’ to address population issues without having to grapple with the tough issues, immigrants become a convenient scapegoat,” says Solomon.

Much as the “jobs v. environment” campaigns of resource corporations pit environmentalists against workers, this new immigration/environment wedge threatens to divide greens from human rights activists. As the hottest flashpoint in this growing conflict, the Sierra Club ballot measure prompted progressive greens to take action.

“With the ‘wise use’ movement, corporations have tried to appropriate ‘environmentalism’ to mean ‘resource extraction,’ and now the anti-immigrant lobby is attempting its own redefinition,” says Rick Gwynallen, who heads up the forest protection group Headwaters. “These intrusions challenge environmentalists to become clearer about who we are, and how our vision relates to race, class and gender.” Concerned that the Sierra Club measure and anti-immigrant initiatives filed for the 1998 Oregon ballot might divide Headwaters' membership, Gwynallen took the issue to his board and staff. After considerable debate, the organization adopted a policy statement that begins, “Headwaters believes that immigrants and environmentalists need to work together if we are to progress toward an ecologically sustainable and socially just society.”

### **The forest for the trees**

In addition to denouncing scapegoating and, like the Sierra Club, urging a focus on “root causes” of migration and population growth, Headwaters argues that, while “global demographic issues should be addressed in a serious manner, immigration is not a chief cause of environmental degradation in the U.S.”

Sarah Doll, who heads the Oregon Environmental Council's pollution prevention program, agrees. “Immigration is not the problem — it's a red herring. Immigrants from other countries constitute only 12% of our region's growth over the last 15 years, so focusing on immigration diverts attention from the real causes of environmental degradation.”

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*“The solution to reducing our population is birth control, not border patrols.”*

**— Carl Pope**  
*Executive Director  
Sierra Club*

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Doll fingers pollution, consumption and sprawl as the key culprits. In Oregon alone, she notes, the number of miles driven has increased at twice the rate of population growth.

Studies indicate that sprawl afflicts even cities with stable or declining populations, such as Chicago and Detroit. The issue is not just how many of us there are, but how we



Audubon activist and Canadian immigrant, Hazel Wolf

live. The United States alone consumes 30% of global resources, but accounts for only 5% of the world's population, while globally the world's wealthiest 20% consume 64% of our resources. All of which begs the question: Who has the greater impact on the environ-

ment: a poor Mexican immigrant arriving in Washington's Yakima Valley or a computer programmer relocating to Seattle from New York City?

Even the group Zero Population Growth rejects immigration reduction as a means of containing U.S. population growth. In a statement issued in October, ZPG argues that, "the most effective strategy for dealing with immigration pressures on the United States is to relieve the conditions that compel people to leave their homes, which range from population growth and poverty to political repression." On the subject of population growth, ZPG argues that "changing the conditions of women's lives is the most powerful answer to preferences for large families."

## Swimming against the current

"I can't follow their logic," says Hazel Wolf of those attempting to make immigration an environmental issue. Herself an immigrant from Canada, Wolf last year received the National Audubon Society's Medal for Excellence in Environmental Achievement. This honor placed her in the company of such environmental icons as Rachel Carson. The

one-hundred-year-old Wolf has been secretary of Audubon's Seattle chapter since 1962 and has organized more local chapters than anyone in the Society's history.

"Population is a global problem," she offers, "Shifting people from one country to another isn't shifting the global population — it's just saying 'not in my back yard.'"

"Back when I received my citizenship, the presiding judge made a little speech. Instead of telling us, 'you're lucky to be admitted to this great country,' he said how good it was to have wonderful people coming from all over the world to enrich the culture of the United States. Chinese, Canadians, British, Hispanics — we were all there bringing our particular cultures. I'll never forget that."

On the issue of immigration, activists like Wolf, Doll, Gwynallen and Solomon are swimming against the current in hopes of turning the tide. It's tough going, particularly given the degree of misinformation circulating in the environmental movement and beyond. Making proclamations on the issue, they feel, is not enough, so they've been taking their views to their members and the general public.

Rick Gwynallen published *Headwaters'* policy on immigration and the environment in the group's quarterly journal and brought the issue to its members with a workshop at their annual conference. In addition, Gwynallen has made it a point to engage other environmental leaders on the subject and recently authored an opinion piece for *The Oregonian* newspaper.

Unsure how to respond to his members' concerns about population and development, Mark Solomon asked for their help in his regular newsletter column. He received about twenty responses. Most urged the Council not to deviate from its focus on forest and water protection. Some suggested challenging the effects of destructive corporate practices on migration, such as the deforestation and resulting displacement of Mexican communities by Boise Cascade. "That's a great synthesis," says Solomon. "We also need to continue and deepen the dialog because the pressures of growth and sprawl in the Northwest are increasing."

For the last two years, San Francisco's Political Ecology Group has been working to educate environmentalists across the country

about immigration, population and right-wing efforts to co-opt the environmental movement. With a staff of three and a shoe-string budget, PEG supplies groups with information and talking points to help facilitate membership education. In the heated debate over immigration and the environment PEG is one of the few sources of information to counterbalance the propaganda of various anti-immigrant lobby groups.

PEG director Brad Erickson believes that the steps taken by Northwest environmental leaders to educate their members is a significant development. "The sad fact is that groups opposing California's anti-immigrant Proposition 187 in '94 generally failed to engage their memberships in the discussion," he says. While green groups like the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council opposed that ballot measure, it's likely that most of their constituents were unaware of their stands. "As a result, many of their members voted with the majority against the civil rights of immigrants."

"By contrast," Erickson continues, "both during the Sierra Club referendum and since, environmentalists have had the opportunity to discuss the complexity of the issues and, ultimately, reject the simplistic 'solution' of scapegoating. That's an important first step towards developing a unified strategy for dealing with sprawl and environmental degradation."

Still, as the pressures of growth and sprawl increase, so too will the pressure to find quick and easy solutions. For those concerned about human rights, the best defense is likely to be a strong offense.

### Seeking common ground

In Seattle, the Washington Alliance for Immigrant and Refugee Justice (WAIRJ) recently joined with the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice in an effort to build cooperation, and reduce conflict, between environmental and immigrant rights groups. "We saw the Sierra Club referendum as a warning of things to come and we decided to take action locally," says WAIRJ director Soya Jung. "The Seattle City Council has taken strong

stands on both immigrants' rights and environmental issues, so we approached them with a resolution drafted jointly by our two groups."

To some, this conflict may seem like an abstract debate over immigration, population and environmental impact, but Jung is quick to point out the potentially tragic consequences of anti-immigrant campaigns. "Following passage of California's anti-immigrant Proposition 187, reported hate crimes increased by nearly 20 percent, and over 70% of the attacks were racially motivated," she notes.

In April, the council passed the resolution, calling for collaboration among immigrant communities, environmentalists and local government "toward a shared vision of ecological and social justice," and committing the city to "create more opportunities for immigrant and refugee communities to participate as equal partners in environmental decision-making." Jung is hopeful that dialog between environmentalists and immigrant communities will lead to more constructive strategies for addressing the region's growing pains. Let's hope she's right.



*"Shifting people from one country to another isn't shifting the global population — it's just saying 'not in my back yard.' "*

— Hazel Wolf  
Seattle Audubon Society

