

High Country News

For people who care about the West

The Shot Heard Round the West

by Marty Durlin

THE SENDER

Richard Moore challenges the big greens

In March 1990, Richard Moore was the director of the SouthWest Organizing Project, a grassroots advocacy group in Albuquerque, N.M. Founded in 1980, SWOP spent the decade conducting voter-registration drives and organizing in neighborhoods contaminated by pollution.

The group had been remarkably successful in its efforts, and Moore was poised to make SWOP a household name, at least in the mainstream environmental community.

So Moore and his colleagues sent out what came to be known as the "SWOP letter." Signed by 100 cultural, arts, community and religious leaders -- all people of color -- and addressed to the directors of the Big 10 conservation groups, the letter charged the organizations with a history of "racist and exclusionary practices," a lack of in-house diversity, and an all-around failure to support environmental justice efforts.

"That letter caught everybody in the mainstream environmental movement off guard," says The Wilderness Society's president, Bill Meadows. "I'm not sure people knew how to respond. Diversity became a pretty serious issue in the green community -- the letter raised the level of awareness and concern."

Moore gives several reasons for the letter. Toxic waste facilities are located primarily in communities of color; this was documented in 1987 by the United Church of Christ's Committee on Racial Justice, led by Ben Chavis. But the big green groups showed no interest in cleaning up those polluted neighborhoods and didn't consider the work "environmental."

At the same time, in the Southwest, the big conservation groups had a history of siding against Chicanos on grazing and other issues. "There were a lot of examples of conservation groups pushing legislation that would impact our life and livelihood without consulting us," Moore says.

Perhaps the final straw came when Moore approached Earth Day organizers to become a part of the event. They told him that the issues he was working on -- groundwater contamination caused by feedlots and other petrochemical facilities, uranium mining, sewage plant odors, sheep and cattle grazing -- just weren't relevant.

"Our definition of the environment is where we work, live and play, where we pray and where we go to school," Moore says. "And we're not about NIMBY -- we're about not in anybody's backyard, or country."

ONE RECIPIENT'S REACTION

Michael Fischer of the Sierra Club takes the lead

Sierra Club Director Michael Fischer was sitting in his office on the third story of a brick building in San

Francisco's Tenderloin district the day the SWOP letter arrived.

"My initial reaction was irritation and resentment. ... I'd never heard of Richard Moore -- he'd never talked to me. Did I feel the charges against me were justified? Hell, no. But applicable to the Sierra Club, yes," says Fischer, who currently directs the San Francisco-based Consultative Group on Biological Diversity, which facilitates grants for environmental groups.

Fischer had been executive director of the Sierra Club for three years. He was committed to civil rights -- he'd fasted with Cesar Chavez to protest the treatment of farmworkers, wearing Chavez's mother's wooden cross around his neck. He believed the environmental movement was flawed because it consisted almost exclusively of white middle-class Americans like himself, and he was trying to convince his reluctant board of directors to create grants for communities of color fighting toxic waste dumps and uranium mining. One Sierra Club board member -- so upset at Fischer's efforts that he was "trembling" -- had complained, "We're a conservation group, and you're trying to turn us into a social welfare organization!"

Once he moved past his initial reaction, Fischer realized that the SWOP letter had given him "a tool to fan the flame."

He attended the first People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 in Washington, D.C. -- a landmark gathering where activists created the 17 principles of environmental justice that underlie the movement. Fischer found himself one of the few "people of pallor" in a room full of 650 environmentalists. He'd never encountered that situation before, and he was excited and a bit stunned to see the level of commitment to the things he really cared about.

Along with John Adams, a white lawyer who was director of the Natural Resources Defense Council at the time, Fischer was asked to come on stage. The two were subjected to three hours of criticism from a panel of attendees -- "incoming rounds of racist, insensitive, thoughtless obstacles to progress," as Fischer describes it.

Then they were given three minutes to respond.

Fischer simply said that he was "proud, and committed, to make environmental justice an integral part of my organization."

At the Sierra Club's centennial in 1992 -- flanked by Native American activist Winona LaDuke and civil rights leader Chavis -- Fischer called for a "friendly takeover" of the Sierra Club by people of color. The alternative, he said, was for the Club to "remain a middle-class group of backpackers, overwhelmingly white in membership, program and agenda -- and thus condemned to losing influence in an increasingly multicultural country. ... The struggle for environmental justice in this country and around the globe must be the primary goal of the Sierra Club during its second century."

But not everyone agrees that environmental justice should be part of the group's mission, let alone the central goal. "The amount of resources we put into preserving wilderness areas is minuscule compared to the enormous amounts of resources we put into human problems," says Kevin DeLuca, associate professor of communication at the University of Utah. "So if a group like the Sierra Club is spending it on urban reclamation -- we don't have it to spend on wild lands in Utah." The planet's situation is so dire right now, says DeLuca, that "ecosystems come first, humans have to come second."

Fischer left the Sierra Club in 1992. In the years since, the organization has diversified somewhat, but its membership and leadership are still mostly white. Outgoing Executive Director Carl Pope acknowledges that the environmental movement still has "a long way to go." Still, in 1992, as a direct result of the SWOP letter, the Sierra Club created the beginnings of an environmental justice initiative. The group's Environmental Justice & Community Partnerships program now has 12 organizers -- mostly people of color -- in communities across the nation, including one in Flagstaff, Ariz. Says Fischer: "The Sierra Club at this date has a staff of EJ activists. That reality wouldn't have happened without my leadership and the kick in the butt the letter delivered."

TWENTY YEARS LATER

Leslie Fields finds a calling in environmental justice

"You have to decide to make the investment," says African-American attorney Leslie Fields, who directs the Sierra Club's environmental justice program, with an annual budget of about \$1 million. Although other big greens have also changed the way they work, the Sierra Club is the only one with a substantial environmental justice staff. "We have done the most, I have to say," says Fields. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't believe that."

Fields came to environmental justice through her commitment to civil rights. After graduating from Georgetown Law School in Washington, D.C., and working for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for a few years, she moved to Texas to become a legislative counsel on environment, health and safety. In 1992, she spent a week researching the Texas Clean Air Act in order to fight a synthetic rubber plant across the street from an elementary school "filled with black and Latino kids. It was ghastly. The kids were sick, everyone's got an inhaler. ..."

To learn more about environmental issues, she began attending the local chapter of the Sierra Club. She enjoyed the work -- battling landfills, refineries, effluent in streams, lead and nuclear waste -- and was eventually hired by the Texas Commission on Environmental Equity. Later, she worked for Friends of the Earth, where she fought Shell and Chevron from Nigeria to Ghana: "the same issues, the same companies bedeviling the same kinds of people."

In 2004, she got the job with the Sierra Club. Fields, who is also a law professor at Howard University, directs her staff from Washington, D.C. In Flagstaff -- the only Western outpost-- Andy Bessler and Robert Tohe work to preserve tribal sacred sites, protect water sources, halt further uranium mining and clean up its legacy. Meanwhile, in New Orleans, Darryl Malek-Wiley works on restoring wetlands, fighting illegal dumping, and cleaning up the 150 petrochemical facilities and refineries between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Other offices are based in El Paso, Detroit, Memphis, Minneapolis, Charleston and Puerto Rico.

"Our prime directive is to work at the community's request. And these initiatives are created by the communities and the local Sierra Club chapters," Fields says.

But what if the community itself is divided? In September, the Hopi Tribal Council voted unanimously to (symbolically) ban the Sierra Club, the National Parks Conservation Association, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Grand Canyon Trust from Hopi land. The council charged the groups with depriving the tribe of "markets for its coal resources" because of their role in shutting down the Mohave Generating Station, which purchased Black Mesa coal from the Hopi tribe. Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley Jr. followed suit. On the surface, it seemed like a classic example of a local community defying outside special interests. But in fact, many of the leaders of the anti-coal movement are themselves Hopi or Navajo, and have long accused the coal mines and power plants of environmental injustice.

It just shows "how tough these issues are," says Sierra Club staffer Bessler. "The Sierra Club doesn't tiptoe around the tough issues. People need to know the intricacies of the problems where there are no easy answers."

"When you work with communities, you can only support and inform, and get their voices heard in the decision-making process," says Tohe, a Navajo and longtime community organizer. "If you bring their voices to the table, that's the best thing you can do, and your time is well-spent."

The Sierra Club won a big EJ victory with the 2008 closing of the Asarco copper smelter in Texas, which released lead, arsenic and cadmium into El Paso and across the border into Juarez -- a bi-national effort that took many people years to accomplish, says Fields. The Flagstaff EJ staff also worked hard on a proposal to create a green economy in Navajoland, approved by the tribal council in July of 2009.

Fields is building on the work of Robert Bullard, African-American author of the groundbreaking 1990 book on environmental justice, *Dumping in Dixie*. He and other scholars had to "invent our methodology along the way, showing this is not an isolated case about one community, this is institutional" as they created a body of scholarly work to measure environmental racism.

The Environmental Protection Agency -- now headed by Lisa Jackson, an African-American -- announced last summer that it would consider the disproportionate impact of hazardous waste recycling plants on people of color, a situation that has actually worsened over the past 20 years, according to a study by Bullard and others released by the United Church of Christ in 2007.

"Environmental justice is in the lexicon, but we're making it up as well go along," says Fields. "It's changing and you can be changing it. It's messy and unstructured, relentless and global. It's really a different animal from 20 years ago, but the systemic stuff remains. People have to get sued to change; that's part of the process."

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