

The Wild Bunch

Why does the Center for Biological Diversity keep winning?

By SUSAN ZAKIN

Range Magazine, the public relations arm of the cattle industry, called them “manic.” The New Yorker called them outlaws.

Who knows what epithets are bandied about in the cavernous, echoing halls of the U.S. Department of Interior? All I know is that half a dozen federal officials have gotten a tone in their voice that I never expected to hear from complacent bureaucrats when the subject of the Center for Biological Diversity came up. They were just plain old pissed off.

Back in 1995, when the assault on environmental laws by the Contract on America Republicans was at its peak, Washington, D.C. environmentalists were terrified that the Endangered Species Act would be either eviscerated or repealed entirely.

Even Brock Evans, the aging firebrand who had famously pushed the mainstream movement to take on the Northern spotted owl controversy in his beloved Pacific Northwest, was scared. He wrote a letter to the Center for Biological Diversity, asking the group to back off on its endangered species lawsuit over the Mexican spotted owl.

The Center (then called the Southwest Center for Biological Diversity) was a bunch of ragged, no-account hicks by the standards of a D.C. environmentalist like Evans. The group had been founded

only a few years before by a philosophy Ph.D. candidate named Kieran Suckling, a former Earth First! activist named Peter Galvin, and Robin Silver, a Phoenix physician. The center’s budget had only recently reached an unprepossessing five figures.

Suckling was impressed by Evans’ letter. He liked the older man’s eloquence, especially the references to Thomas Jefferson.

He told Evans to take a hike.

The great part of this story is that Evans, in essence, followed his advice. He later apologized to Suckling, saying that the younger man had been right all along. He’s since taken up the fight for endangered species as executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Endangered Species Coalition. Although it is reviled by the old-guard Western establishment, the Center for Biological Diversity is, dollar-for-dollar, the most successful environmental group in the U.S. Most environmental groups win 40-50 percent of the time in court, while the Center’s record is nearly 80 percent.

“It’s not that we’re so brilliant,” says Suckling. “The Clinton administration violated the Endangered Species Act in a consistent and systematic way. So it was all laid out for us.”

In fact, Suckling, Galvin and Silver are all formidable intellects. The culture gap between Gen-X intellectuals like Kieran Suckling and Tucson’s post-

World War II-mentality real estate developers simply cannot be overstated. If there weren’t so much at stake, it would merely be fascinating to watch the interplay of these two generations as the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan unfolds. It is truly a clash of cultures.

A friend of mine who operates a business in Tucson explained it best. He prefers not to be named, so I’ll call him Deep Hammer.

“Neither side understands how the other side thinks,” he said. “The business community is made up of conventional people. It’s considered rude to argue. They look for what, in their minds, would be a reasonable compromise.”

But for someone at the Center, compromise is not part of their vocabulary. They’re looking at what they perceive as the big picture. They’re seeing this huge extinction episode, the global consequences.

“In other words, the house is burning down. Does a fireman stop to cut a deal on his way to put out a fire? Does he say, hey, I’m only gonna put out part of the fire?”

The Hammer also said that the development community isn’t as unified as it looks from the outside. I buy this. I’ve learned over the years that no matter which side you’re on, you always think the other guy is more organized.

To the Hammer, it’s obvious that heavy hitters like land speculator Don Diamond

are already lining up to get more than their share of the perks that the county is willing to hand out to sweeten the potentially bitter pill of the conservation plan. Diamond has certainly had enough meetings with County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry to make his point, like the big dog that pushes the little dogs out of the way to get to the food bowl.

Despite the inequities between the big dogs and the little dogs, some strategies are emerging. The most obvious is the tried-and-true method of divide and conquer. The developers want to “delink” the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, Pima County’s attempt to come into compliance with the Endangered Species Act, from the

planning process required by Gov. Jane Hull’s Growing Smarter legislation.

They’re also trying to marginalize the Center for Biological Diversity.

“The more strident and radical viewpoints do have to be pushed to the side to reach a consensus,” said Tom Doucette, recent past president of the Southern Arizona Homebuilders Association. Doucette also is a member of a consensus group sponsored by Luther Propst of Sonoran Institute, the conservation organization that has Don Diamond on its board of directors.

“I think eventually that more people will find comfort in more moderated positions and less comfort in more--I hate using the word ‘radical’; nothing’s

that black and white--but more strident positions,” he said.

This only buttresses the Hammer’s argument that the developers don’t have a clue about what makes environmentalists tick. Does anyone really think that by ignoring the Center for Biological Diversity they will get a plan that doesn’t meet the test of conserving species? If the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan looks like a loser, the Center will sue.

It’s really quite simple. It’s not about cutting a deal. It’s about saving species.