



Sierra Club: Pro-Corporate, Anti-Grass Roots

By Jane Hamsher

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There was some lively response yesterday to my post on the Sierra Club and its reluctance to criticize the Obama administration for its handling of the oil spill.

There is no shortage of targets: the Center for Biological Diversity exposed Ken Salazar for granting new drilling permits after he said there was a moratorium. Food & Water Watch filed suit against Salazar to force the shutdown BP's Atlantis, the second largest deepwater rig in the Gulf of Mexico, after a former BP employee warned that it was not fit for operation. Even the National Resources Defense Council joined Jerry Nadler and Jim Oberstar to demand OSHA stop acting as a front for BP and require appropriate protective gear for cleanup workers.

Where is the Sierra Club focusing its attention? Last Tuesday, the Obama administration said that they will proceed with offshore drilling after a temporary ban. The Sierra Club issued a press release saying "It's encouraging to see the Obama administration taking steps to improve safety regulations for offshore drilling." On that same day, they took out a full page ad in the Washington Post, thanking Obama for putting a hold on an Alaska drilling project (no press release).

How this furthers the interests of environmentalism I'm not sure, but it sure helps a White House nervous about Obama's poll numbers in the wake of the BP oil crisis.

Sierra Club loyalists were quick to defend the club, saying that the Sierra Club is a "grassroots organization" and that the article "insults those very volunteers and every Sierra Club member who has ever volunteered to help with an environmental cause."

There was absolutely no insult meant towards those that donate their time and money to the Sierra Club's efforts. Quite the opposite. I respect the work that committed grassroots environmentalists do, and believe it's important to ask if there are other organizations out there more deserving of their support. I do not believe that the Sierra Club, which has aligned itself so tightly with political and corporate interests, is providing leadership worthy of those efforts.

The Sierra Club's alliance with elite interests has turned it into the antithesis of a "grassroots" organization.

According to the Associated Press, in 2002 Sierra Club head Carl Pope threatened to dissolve the southern Utah chapter for "speaking out against the Bush administration's push toward war with

Iraq.” The Sierra Club’s Board of Directors had passed a resolution “supporting efforts to strip Iraq of weapons of mass destruction” (i.e., supporting the war), and at the same time warned that Sierra Club policy “does not authorize individual members, leaders or club entities to take public positions on military conflicts as they arise.”

While I understand the need for the national organization to impose some kind of order on local chapters, it’s quite something to demand that 700,000 environmentalists toe the line and support the Iraq war, especially after the Sierra Club board made the unilateral decision to pull down “all television, radio and print ads, shut down phone banks and removed internet material seen as critical of Bush.”

In an email, Pope said “I would leave dissolving the group as a means of last resort if acting against individuals who won’t adhere to club policy fails to resolve the situation.” It was only after the email was published by the LA Times that the Sierra Club changed its position and opposed the war.

Then in 2007, the Sierra Club board took the unusual step of selling the club’s brand name to a greenwashing campaign by Clorox:

This is the first time in Sierra Club’s 116-year history that it has endorsed a product and even Club executive director Carl Pope, who’s been a driving force in the partnership, admitted that the decision by a well-known environmental group to endorse a company known for its bleach, plastics, and chemical products is “controversial.”

Well, yes, “controversial” is one word. The very same month the partnership was announced, Clorox was fined \$95,000 by the EPA for “donating illegal, mislabeled, Chinese versions of its disinfecting bleach to a Los Angeles charity.”

The Sierra Club Board of Directors overrode the Club’s own Corporate Relations Committee to approve the Clorox deal.

Peter Montague, executive director of the Environmental Research Foundation, said that the Chemical Industry of California “was using the Sierra Club/Clorox deal to try to deflect attention away from a new report showing that the chemical industry sickens and kills thousands of Californians each year, costing the state an estimated \$2.6 billion in medical expenses and lost wages.”

On March 1 of this year, Clorox proudly announced that they have paid \$1.1 million to the Sierra Club to date under the deal.

The Sierra Club should have expected that many of their members would have a problem with a deal to greenwash a company that US PIRG had named “one of America’s most chemically dangerous companies”.

Instead, the Sierra Club Board of Directors voted to suspend the 35,000-member Florida chapter for four years and remove its leadership after they spoke out in opposition to the Clorox deal.

Michael Donnelly has been writing about the problem of the “Democratic/Green revolving door,” and how organizations that add their support to corporate-friendly legislation are routinely rewarded with big foundation grants (and will somebody please do an expose of the role foundations play in laundering money to buy progressive validators for corporatist legislation). It has led to the corruption of progressive groups across the board.

The Sierra Club is now fiercely advocating for the passage of Kerry-Lieberman. But as James Handley says:

In exchange for an energy-giveaway bill masquerading as a climate bill, they’re in effect lobbying for dirty energy subsidies and for undercutting much of EPA’s authority to regulate greenhouse gases — an authority that these same groups once vigorously defended, and which was recently upheld by the Supreme Court.

Carbon cap and trade was a scheme cooked up by BP and Enron lobbyists in the mid nineties. BP has subsequently dropped millions of dollars into the coffers of green groups to pave the way for it. Obama’s cry to pass Kerry-Lieberman as punishment for BP is not only highly ironic, it’s also illustrative of just how broken our national discourse around environmental issues has become.

Until progressive groups successfully address the challenge of funding themselves independent of the elite individuals and institutions that act as enforcers of a corporate agenda, they will not be able to successfully advocate for progressive causes. Any success they might have will mean that their funding dries up, and they will cease to exist.

The Sierra Club is a marquee name that has indeed gone for the green: cash. Environmental activists should carefully examine the way in which the organization is operating, and whether its agenda is worthy of continued support.