How the Sierra Club Learned to Love Immigration

by Brentin Mock ColorLines Wednesday, May 8 2013
http://colorlines.com/archives/2013/05/how_sierra_club_learned_to_stop_worrying_and_grew_to_love_immigration.htmlhttp://colorlines.com/archives/2013/05/how_sierra_club_learned_to_stop_worrying_and_grew_to_love_immigration.html

The Sierra Club, one of the largest and oldest environmental organizations in the nation, announced last month its support for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. It was a unanimous decision among the group's board of directors and marks a definitive break with the group's troubled history on immigration—a history that has also plagued the environmental movement broadly.

The arc of Sierra Club's evolution starts with a dubious if not hostile perspective on immigration that the Club carried in the 1960s. The theory was that immigration drives unsustainable population growth, which then drains resources and harms the environment. That perspective shifted to a hard line against immigration in the 1980s, then to a neutral position in the '90s, before finally coming around in the 21st century to advocating on behalf of immigrants.

The announcement was mostly a codification of work Sierra Club had already been doing lately, such as fighting against building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border to block migration to the United States. But by officially adopting a stance that endorses a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, Sierra—like the Republican Party—is recognizing that shifting demographics matter.

Sierra has more than two million members, many of them white and elderly. In order for their numbers to grow, recruitment will have to reflect what America looks like today and in the future, which is younger and more racially diverse. For Sierra to do that, though, they have to reconcile their history, which didn't always endorse open pathways to U.S. citizenship, or even its own membership.

Racists in the Ranks

Catherine Tactaquin, executive director of the California-based National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, sat on Sierra's eight-member committee on population growth in 1994. The organization's general membership was roughly 93 percent white at the time, says Tactaquin, and many wanted Sierra to take controversial positions on immigration and reproduction to advocate for reduced population growth. The population committee had equal numbers, women and men. Tactaquin says that all of the women were pro-immigration and championed reproductive rights, while the men were steadfastly anti-immigration.

"We tried to have Sierra do things that would educate and raise awareness within the Club about the forces of migration [like] trade policy impacts, and to have them support the [United Nation's] Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women," Tactaquin says. "We did that to make the connection that, from a population-growth perspective, we are interested in supporting the rights of women, including better education and healthcare access."

But many Sierra members at the time were more interested in controlling how women reproduced, even urging the club to address teen pregnancy. That interest was more prevalent in the '90s and the decades before, but some of it still exists today. Immediately after Sierra made its pro-immigrant citizenship announcement, commenters reacted.

Said one: "This divisive present stance has no place in the purpose of the club. To state that those voluntarily violating ours [*sic*] laws should be rewarded with citizenship because they voluntarily came to our polluted country and must be protected as such is illogical in the scheme of environmentalism in the United States. … The club has lost my support."

Another added, "Like most environmental groups, the Sierra Club continues to ignore all the problems stemming from overpopulation in the U.S. and many other countries. This is nothing more than a call for amnesty for millions of

welfare-dependent, over-breeding illegal aliens who can't speak English and don't know what condoms are."

These comments reflect what the Southern Poverty Law Center has described as a nativist strain. That strain has a direct theoretical line to environmentalism's origins, as well as Sierra Club's beginnings to some extent. Sierra Club founder John Muir, a nature conservationist, wrote about Native Americans in the late 19th century in ways that many people of color consider offensive, if not racist. Even worse were the people he befriended, like the naturalist Henry Fairfield Osborne, a leader of the racial "eugenics" movement, and Madison Grant, another eugenist whose early 20th century writings were literally the bible for the Nazi Third Reich government.

Grant and his peers believed that population growth—and non-white growth in particular—would lead to an apocalyptic mess, like something out of "Planet of the Apes." Grant—who is also considered the godfather of wildlife management—believed that the white "Nordic" race of the United States needed to be preserved by limiting the reproduction of non-white peoples, and also controlling, if not eliminating, the immigration of non-white people into the country. Grant's ethnic cleansing doctrine was the blueprint for the exclusionary Immigration Act of 1924, an official door closing to Eastern Europeans, Jews, Asians and Indians.

The Blueprint

While the overt use of eugenics theory became unpopular after Nazi Germany institutionalized it, the underlying white supremacy remained. In 1968, Sierra published "The Population Bomb," a seminal text by Paul Ehrlich that advanced the idea of overpopulation and recommended that the federal government put sterilization chemicals in public water sources to destroy women's fertility.

Ehrlich's "Bomb" helped birth the modern environmental movement, along with Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," a critique of over-industrialization and urban renewal. Both books were popular in the first Earth Day gathering of 1970. In his recent book, "The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation," Adam Rome notes that at that event "population was second only to pollution."

As I've previously reported, Earth Day events led to the creation of the strongest environmental protection policies ever created by the federal government, particularly the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1970, which prioritized population stabilization.

Yet the Sierra Club wanted the federal government to go further, particularly by examining the role of immigration on population management. Sierra's National Population Committee was chaired from 1971 to 1975 by John Tanton, who at the time was a liberal activist. He later became convinced that immigration was, in fact, the primary cause of overpopulation. In 1980, Sierra Club officers testified before the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Reform that it is "obvious that the numbers of immigrants the United States accepts affects our population size."

Tanton left Sierra to form a number of radical anti-immigrant organizations, many of which have been labeled as hate groups (most prominently, the Federation for American Immigration Reform) by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Some of Tanton's acolytes attempted to take over Sierra Club's board of directors in the '90s so that they could make anti-immigration an official stance. While these attempts were defeated by a groundswell of Sierra members including Tactaquin, some board directors still tried to keep the anti-immigration fringe in the fold. That was the last straw for Tactaquin, who then left the Club. "It was disappointing," she says. "Our sense was they were trying to keep the peace after the [anti-immigration] defeat by providing an avenue for the dissidents to participate."

At Last

Today, Sierra has formally adopted many of the progressive reproductive rights stances that Tactaquin and her peers fought for in the 1990s. The organization has also dedicated resources to environmental justice, more than any other environmental group of its age and stature. Sierra's historical and recent past is ugly, which makes the announcement such a big deal. She attributes this growth to younger, more diverse leadership in the club, like Sierra president Allison Chin.

When asked why Sierra Club didn't address its race evolution in the immigration statement, spokesman Oliver Bernstein told Colorlines.com that the history is important but the Club "feels that now is the time to look forward, and we wanted to focus on what we could do to move this discussion forward."

Latino organizations such as Mi Familia Vota Education Fund have applauded Sierra's new stance, noting the "the wide array of issues that could be addressed through the passage of reform, such as climate solutions, fixing our nation's healthcare system, educating our future workforce, and fixing our nation's economy."

Other environmental groups such as Greenpeace and 350.org have also come out in favor of immigration in recent weeks. But these are young groups compared to Sierra. Many environmental and conservation groups born in the late 19th and early 20th centuries have similarly racist origins, and a lot worse than that of Muir's. The question is whether they will actually confront those pasts and follow Sierra's lead on immigration—and environmental justice—today.