

The Danger of Anti-Immigrant Extremism Posing as Environmentalism—and Who Funds It

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With President Joe Biden in the White House and Vice President Kamala Harris providing the deciding vote in the Senate, a range of long-sought Democratic policy goals are back in play, albeit just barely. That includes ambitious agendas on immigration and the environment.

Could this be the administration that pushes through comprehensive immigration reform after decades of failed attempts? Will youth activists and the burgeoning movement for a Green New Deal provide a pathway to major climate legislation? If so, advocates and their funders alike face a tough road ahead, including an obstructionist congressional minority and opponents on both fronts that will look to appeal to the public's darkest impulses to build opposition.

At this inflection point, a report this month from the Center for American Progress, "[The Extremist Campaign to Blame Immigrants for U.S. Environmental Problems](#)," offers a timely overview of the history of how opponents of immigration falsely portray it as a threat to the natural world—a strategy we're likely to see more of in the months ahead. The report offers a valuable review of these efforts, ranging from the past anti-immigrant stances of some of the nation's best-known environmental groups to the funders that have bankrolled the nation's largest anti-immigration groups.

Four years of an administration defined by its opposition to immigration, plus growing attention to climate change, breathed new life into the toxic and racist narrative of immigrants as a cause of environmental degradation. As the report lays out, this argument—often part of a right-wing, white supremacist ideology known as ecofascism, though CAP’s report does not use the term—found allies in the top echelons of government and media, including a former head of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and conservative commentators like Ann Coulter and Fox News host Tucker Carlson.

In contemporary politics, this strategy is mainly seen as a right-wing phenomenon or an artifact of the racist and Eurocentric early history of conservation. Yet the fact that anti-immigrant sentiment found a home within top environmental groups, including Earthfirst! and the Sierra Club, which had a [major faction in support of these ideas](#) as late as 2004, is a reminder that it has found fertile soil in a variety of political camps. That makes the narrative all the more dangerous, and one against which funders working in both immigration and the environment ought to take a firm and vocal stance.

Who’s funding anti-immigration work in the name of the environment?

Although not comprehensive, the report highlights three funders as key backers of anti-immigration groups: [Colcom Foundation](#), [Weeden Foundation](#) and [Foundation for the Carolinas](#). The first two are, in their branding and language, environmental funders—and make those grants in the name of preventing further damage to the natural world.

Colcom, founded by Mellon Bank heir Cordelia Scaife May, is far and away the largest funder. With a roughly \$500 million endowment, it has provided a large share of the support for a network of groups founded by John Tanton, a Sierra Club official in the 1980s, whom the Southern

Poverty Law Center (SPLC) calls “[the racist architect of the modern anti-immigrant movement](#).”

Recipients include NumbersUSA, Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), and the Center for Immigration Studies, which we once called “[Trump’s favorite immigration think tank](#).” The latter two are classified as hate groups by the SPLC, a designation the organizations reject.

In keeping with the bending of reflexive political categories, it’s worth noting that May—who died in 2005—was also a substantial funder of Planned Parenthood due to her prioritization of “population control” as a means of achieving conservation. In 2019, the *New York Times* documented May’s dark journey to becoming a leading funder of the modern anti-immigrant movement, and the millions her foundation continued to move, long after her death, in support of ideas that gained a receptive audience in a nativist Trump administration. May’s wealth came from the Mellon-Scaife family fortune, which yielded several philanthropists, including another prominent conservative donor, Richard Mellon Scaife.

Weeden, led by Don Weeden, has funded a similar who’s who of top anti-immigration groups, as well as lower-profile or regional groups like Californians for Population Stabilization, Progressives for Immigration Reform—which CAP calls the “most central organization in the anti-immigrant greenwashing universe”—and the Rewilding Institute.

Both Weeden and Colcom, as well as the groups they fund, generally say they are neither anti-immigrant nor anti-immigration. Aside from restrictionist policy positions and racist comments by former leaders, it is revealing that the groups they fund are the favored information sources for some of the most virulently anti-immigrant politicians, both historically and among those who rose prominence during the Trump administration.

For a deeper dive on Weeden and Colcom, see my colleague Philip Rojc's [excellent 2019 piece](#) on these grantmakers.

Finally, there is the Foundation for the Carolinas, which in many ways is a typical community foundation, with initiatives on topics from [COVID-19 relief](#) to [local arts](#). But it also hosts a donor-advised fund that has supported several anti-immigration groups, including Center for Immigration Studies, FAIR and NumbersUSA. That fund channeled nearly \$21 million to nine such groups between 2006 and 2018, according to the report.

There's a connection here to a larger problem of private foundations and DAFs, some of which are housed at community foundations, supporting 501(c)(3) nonprofits identified as hate groups, according to a [recent analysis](#) from the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Foundation for the Carolinas also made its list of top donors to these groups.

An ideology funders must fight against

As the debates over both immigration and climate policies move forward under this new administration, and the opposition marshals efforts to defeat them, this report offers a helpful guide to this enduring and noxious myth. It's also an important reminder that if these ideas are not called actively combated, they can take root within well-intentioned efforts. Though it seems only a small number of foundations directly fund groups advancing these ideas, anti-immigrant sentiment is insidious.

For example, while some commentators are suggesting that acceding to Trump-fueled demands for a border wall is how Congress could reach bipartisan action on immigration reform, the report notes how the existing sections of wall are ineffective against furtive crossings, disruptive to species migration, and in violation of Indigenous sacred sites. These facts—and more broadly, the connection to white supremacist and fascist

movements—should put foundations on guard, whether they support grantees pushing for immigration reform, action on climate or both.

With the United States and other nations facing greater and greater pressures from climate change—particularly as it forces migration from regions like Latin America and the Middle East—philanthropy would do well to be proactive now and draw a bright line in countering this ideology's propagation.