



EJ Activist

The Sierra Club Environmental Justice Newsletter

Volume 4, Issue 1 March 2005

Advancing our mission through race relations

by Rita Harris, EJ Organizer

If we consider race relations in our country today, I think everyone may agree that we have come a long way, yet we have a long way further to go. As a nation, numerous changes have been made, socially and politically, that have allowed us to take a different look at ourselves and others. How we view the world determines how we interact with one another. For example, many of us go out of our way to watch what we do or say for fear of not being “politically correct”. But is that the solution to better race relations, a better world, one that values and embraces ethnic and cultural differences? Will political correctness alone achieve multicultural organizations and a multicultural society?

I don't think so. The problems have deep roots, and so, those of us who want to be agents of change within our communities and within our organizations must get to the root of the problem. Racism is rooted in America and permeates our society. It is no wonder that our way of life and most institutions are tainted with this thing called racism. Some try to choose a decade or a time when they think it all started or when it was at its peak, but dicker-ing over details that are maybe valid and largely emotional is an energy drain that gets us nowhere. While we do need to learn from the past, we must do what we can as individuals to forge ahead and not allow a

cycle of poor race relations and their negative results to continue.

Racism is of interest to our environmental justice program, and environmental activists in general. Why should the Sierra Club be engaging its members in discussions

We pick up a bit here and there, from parents, friends, news media, our experiences, but no one checks to see if it is misinformation or not! Where is quality control when you need it? Some of us find out late in life that some of the things that

“...though it is sometimes very difficult to imagine our nation totally free of racism and sexism, my intellect, my heart, and my experience tell me that it is actually possible. For that day when neither exists we must all struggle.”
— James Baldwin

about racism? After all, we are an environmental organization. Let's look generally at racism as a starter.

Racism manifests in a variety of ways and has to be first identified or recognized in order to get rid of it! Racism is usually put into three categories: institutional racism, cultural racism and individual racism. If we understand how our attitudes and behaviors are affected by racism, this can be a first step to tear down racism's stronghold and eventually destroy it. How we interact with others, how we respond to information, why we do or don't gravitate to people-of-color in our work and social settings, our values, and etc. are all impacted by the information we carry with us regarding race, class, ethnicity, culture and gender. This information we have gathered, sometimes knowingly and sometimes unconsciously throughout our lifetime, may or may not be true.

helped form our belief system are not rooted in fact, but are instead stereotypes. These untrue beliefs cause us to make decisions and react in certain ways in our professional lives as well as our personal lives. To find out that you may have been functioning on bad information for many, many years can be a traumatic experience.

The Sierra Club EJ Grassroots Organizing Guidelines call for us to approach our work in a way that demonstrates our respect for the community we are working with, and a respect and sensitivity to their leadership and cultural norms. This sounds like a simple thing to do, but it can make a beautiful relationship or destroy one quickly if missteps are made. Certainly we all make mistakes, and there is wiggle room for cleaning those up, but without a certain level of understanding,

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“...to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment...”

Sierra Club's Leadership must reflect a diverse society

by Nick Aumen, Activist Editor

Welcome to our latest issue of the *EJ Activist* newsletter. This issue includes four excellent environmental justice perspectives from Club volunteers and staff. Elaine Giessel tells about her experiences at a recent USEPA Hispanic Stakeholders Forum and Training Session. Lydia Fischer celebrates an environmental justice victory against a medical waste incinerator near Detroit. Dennis Plank summarizes work by the Committee of 500 Years of Dignity and Resistance toward stopping racist imagery, human rights abuses, and environmental devastation. In a call to further action by all of us, Rita Harris, an organizer for the Club's environmental justice program, reviews race relations and the need for the Sierra Club to work harder toward diversity.

America continues its shift toward more ethnic, racial and social diversity, no longer dominated by Caucasians of European descent.

Despite this ethnically diverse population, the Sierra Club's membership and leadership remains dominated by older, middle and up-

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per-class whites. For the Club to be credible and relevant to this diverse population, it must be engaged in conservation and outings work relevant to this diverse population. I see

the Environmental Justice program, which supports economically disadvantaged communities suffering a disproportionate share of environmental insults, as a great way for the Club to become engaged in work relevant to a diverse population. Only when we truly are engaged in this type of work can we expect our membership, and our leadership, to reflect the wide diversity evident in today's society. The confluence of the Club's work with society's diversity is the key to credibility and relevance.

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Vote in 2005 Club election

In this year's election, Sierra Club members will elect 5 directors to the 15-member volunteer board of directors. Each will serve a 3-year term on the board, which oversees staff and volunteer activities, sets conservation priorities, approves the annual budget and selects the board's officers. For information on the candidates' positions, check your local chapter or group newsletter or go online to www.sierraclub.org/bod/2005election.

Sierra Club members also get to vote on two proposed by-laws amendments to alter the rules for future elections, and one issue question about changing the Club's population/immigration policy. The board has recommended that members vote "yes" on the two by-laws amendments and "no" on the population/immigration issue question.

Ballots are expected to arrive by mail by mid-March, and you may submit a paper ballot or vote on-line. Please note that completed ballots are due no later than noon, eastern daylight time, on April 25.

Advancing our mission . . . *continued from page 1*

patience and “cultural competency,” environmental justice relationships can melt away. An example is when a Group, Chapter or staff person approaches a working class community with plans to address what the Club feels is an important environmental issue, but the community may not have the same level of importance attached to the issue. The community then feels like they are being driven to do something that is benefiting the Club more than it is them, resulting in resentment. In short, they feel used or that we don't really care. This is not the Sierra Club image we want to portray. Some environmental justice communities have experienced many broken promises, lack of support from government agencies, lack of environmental protection, a feeling of vulnerability and maybe even a little helplessness at times. Our work can serve to offer assistance and give strength and power to a weak community campaign.

Another example is planning meetings and activities where you expect community members to attend, without considering whether you will be in conflict with a religious holiday, ceremonial event or some significant cultural activity. If you were born and raised outside the race or culture you are trying to connect with, you may be unaware of simple things that might bring you closer to a community or push you further away. This knowledge of a race, culture or community group is an example of “cultural competence.” Cultural competence can be acquired if sincerely sought and a deliberate effort is made to sensitize oneself to the underpinnings of the community you are trying to make connections with. When working with Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and numerous others, if you aren't paying attention to details you can easily overlook things that have a great deal of cultural importance.

One way to learn key information about a cultural or ethnic group is simply to interact with them as much as possible. Sierra Club volunteers and staff are encouraged to seek out trainings and discussion

groups that will help them process information and their feelings about race and class. Various opportunities to interact on a regular basis will eventually change our perceptions, dissolve old stereotypes and gradually build genuine relationships of trust and friendship. Your “friends” are probably the first ones you think of when recruiting members, sending invites to Club outings, and filling volunteer and staff positions. If the people we consider to be our friends include people-of-color, we will automatically think of involving them in our various activities, whether business or social. We tend to include those we feel comfortable with and those that we feel we really know.

The work of the Sierra Club's Environmental Justice Program has as a part of its goals, to assist and empower the community it is working with by giving them the tools and support to be successful in their efforts. Therefore, we often use the phrase “leading from behind” to describe how we organize and work with environmental justice communities. Those of us who organize in environmental justice communities are not bent on capturing all the glory, but we instead push the community out front to realize victories. Adding to our membership roster and raising funds are by-products of the relationships we build and not the primary reason we do the work that we do.

With that said, our attitudes and behaviors definitely have an effect on who we choose to interact with or who we choose to ignore in our organization's activities. Some might say we are missing the mark when it comes to inclusion. Our challenge, if we are to be agents of change, will be to overcome this image by making a deliberate effort to include those who are different. Some will say we have people representing all ethnic and cultural groups in our organization. And that may be, but are we truly a multicultural organization that embraces and celebrates differences? Simply put, our words and actions should be welcoming and inclusive. Individuals from low-income and people-of-color com-

munities should feel comfortable and naturally drawn to join us in the work we do. Our commitment to inclusion can be demonstrated by the images we choose on our website, in our publications, as well as by the diversity within our Groups, Chapters, Board, and staff positions. Building a diverse volunteer base and staff must be a priority.

Many Fortune 500 companies also find themselves on the Top 50 Companies for Diversity's annual list because they have discovered the business benefits that are gained by fully embracing diversity. The Sierra Club is comparable to a Fortune 500 company in size and scope. Much can be learned from the business models that show how breaking barriers and dismantling racism can enrich a company from bottom to top. Every top company for diversity has at least three things that distinguish them from their smaller, less profitable competitors. (1) They have a leader or CEO who has expressed a firm commitment to diversity. Top management sets high standards for achieving and maintaining a diverse workforce (volunteers and staff) as well as securing minority contractors to supply goods and services. (2) The best companies have a clear statement, that they share publicly via their printed materials and website that declares their support for diversity. A “diversity statement” serves as a welcome mat for everyone and lays the foundation for broader coalitions, expanding outreach and recruitment, and more effective environmental campaigns. (3) All of the best companies have a diversity manager to ensure their activities, training and support is maintained with a keen eye for inclusion.

It is my belief that we only strengthen our organization when we move deliberately to declare our commitment to diversity and take steps to move aggressively to put in place institutional changes that will set the Sierra Club high on a pedestal as a model for other national and international environmental organizations. Ready – Set – Let's move forward!

Coming together to end Environmental Injustice

The last medical waste incinerator in Michigan near shutdown

by Lydia Fischer, EJ Activist

The Detroit/Southeast Michigan EJ community is on a roll!

On January 24, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) denied a permit for a new co-combustor to a longstanding polluter, the Medical Waste Services (MWS) plant located in Hamtramck, a city of about 23,000 people encircled by Detroit. The DEQ also indicated that, in view of numerous unresolved violations of MWS's current permit and rising public concerns about high rates of cancer, asthma and other illnesses in the community, it's leaning strongly toward outright closing of the facility.

The DEQ denial caps a decade-long struggle by a coalition led by local community activist Rob Cedar of Hamtramck Environmental Action Team (HEAT) that included the Sierra Club, the Ecology Center, the National Wildlife Federation and others. In early December, activists again argued against continuing incineration at a public hearing held by DEQ to solicit opinions regarding whether the permit for the new combustor should be granted.

A large crowd of residents, environmentalists and public officials was in attendance. Testimony showed that the continuing operation of the MWS facility is, unfortunately, a perfect example of a community of color and low income denied its basic right to a healthy, clean air environment. Approximately 4 out of every 10 Hamtramck residents define themselves as non-white — about double the proportion state-wide. More than 4 out of 10 Hamtramck community residents are foreign-born, compared to a 1 in 20 ratio for the state as a whole. The median income in Hamtramck households was \$26,600 in 1999, while it was \$44,700 in the state as a whole. Only 7 out of 100 families in Michigan lived under the official poverty level, while in Hamtramck the fig-

ure was 24 out of 100 — almost one-quarter of the population.

Clearly, the strong opposition to the incinerator voiced by Hamtramck's diverse community and many in the surrounding communities was crucial to DEQ's decision. Long-time Sierra Club EJ activist Anna Holden remarked that, "The public hearing stood out for...the diversity of speakers who came to the podium...leaders from the Islamic, Bosnian and African American communities joined long-time residents, mostly of Polish descent, as well as our good friends in environmental and health organizations." Club EJ Organizer Rhonda Anderson pointed out that testimonies stressed particularly severe family health problems and general health concerns, reflecting the fact that the communities impacted by the medical waste incinerator are also the victims of many other pollution sources, including the nearby Detroit municipal waste incinerator — reportedly the largest in the world.

A big battle has been won, but the war is not over. Another public hearing is scheduled for mid-March, this time to take opinions on whether the standing permit to incinerate should be revoked. Activists are hopeful that DEQ will agree that the answer is yes. When that happens, the only medical waste incinerator in the state will be gone.

Just one week after the Hamtramck victory, the Campaign for State Action on Environmental Justice, of which the Sierra Club is a member, hosted a town hall meeting in Detroit on environmental and civil rights issues. The event attracted more than 200 activists, including representatives from environmental, civil, educational and religious groups and several Detroit and state elected officials. The Sierra Club contingent included Rhonda, Anna and several Chapter and Group leaders.

Dr. Bunyan Bryant of the University of Michigan School of Natu-

ral Resources kicked off the event by presenting research evidence showing that race and income are the best indicators of pollution levels in a community. His conclusion — because Detroit is populated largely by minorities and low-income groups, the area has become a dumping ground for different

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types of contaminants. Metro Detroit ranks third among major US cities in levels of fine particulates or airborne soot, a regulated emission linked to heart and lung disease. Dr. Bryant underscored the urgent need for environmental justice solutions in our state.

Community leaders and activists spoke next, offering example after example of the harmful impact on health and quality of life from exposure to trash burners and industrial smokestacks, high volume of noxious emissions from motor vehicles, emissions of poisonous gases and dumping of wastes on private and public property and into the city's sewers. An initiative to locate a huge truck terminal in the midst of the Latino community resulted in sharp criticism for its potential to disrupt community life and to pollute the air. Several

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citizens testified about government inaction and insensitivity from elected officials. As was the case in the Hamtramck public hearing, testimonials came from a diverse group of community leaders; all minorities in the city were well-represented. The evening ended with a commitment to join forces and grow the campaign that will take our demands for environmental justice to the state level.

Bringing the campaign to a successful conclusion will take time. Urban residents do score environmental victories — as in the case of the Hamtramck incinerator — but these victories are not won overnight. Still, the determination, the enthusiasm, the energy and the connection evidenced in the crowd present at the Town Hall meeting bodes well for this historic effort.



Bertram Johnson (above), aide to Michigan State Rep. McConico, and Rob Cedar (below), Hamtramck community activist, testify at a public hearing held by DEQ. At a town hall meeting the following week, the diverse representation ended the evening with a commitment to join forces and grow the campaign that will take their demands for environmental justice to the state level. PHOTOS; WALTER WASACZ

People, not mascots

Stopping racist imagery in the popular culture

by Dennis Plank, EJ Committee

What is the Committee of 500 Years of Dignity and Resistance working on this year? We are working on stopping racist imagery in the popular culture, human rights abuses and environmental devastation. Why is this important? This is important because the above problems are related.

Here is an example of how they are related. It is hard to forget what Charlene Teters, Ph.D., has been saying at our annual conferences. Charlene is from the Spokane Nation and is an artist, educator, writer and activist who teaches at the Institute of American Indian Art in Sante Fe, New Mexico.

She attends our conferences every year to challenge the inappropriate use of American Indian symbols in sports and the media. She says that whenever she comes to Cleveland, she sees the disembodied heads of Cleveland Baseball Franchise Chief Wahoo all over the city. The red heads with their sacred, spiritual feathers remind her of the genocide, scalping, decapitation and blood of her people. It is a painful reminder that the American Indian people and land were destroyed by Europeans in their search for gold.

Another example of how the problems are related is the recent opening of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. on September 21, 2004. The American Indian Movement (www.aimovement.org) has stated the museum is a magnificent institution connected to the Smithsonian Institution, and it does a good job of displaying the beautiful and great cultures of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas. The American Indian Movement congratulates A. Richard West of the Cheyenne/Arapahoe Nations and others who made the Museum a reality. However, the American Indian Movement Grand Governing Council stated that the Museum falls short in at least one respect. The Museum does not display the tragic history of America's holocaust against Native Nations and peoples of the Americas, thefts

of lands and resources and the destruction of sacred shrines and burial sites. They suggest a better name for the Museum might be the "National Holocaust Museum of the American Indian."

Finally, one last example of how they are related is in the 1999 book by Winona LaDuke called *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*. Winona LaDuke is from the Mississippi Band of Anishinaabeg and Director of the White Earth Land Recovery Project. She documents in her book the Native resistance to environmental and cultural degradation.

It is hard to summarize her 243-page book, but we will try. Winona states, "Somewhere between the teachings of western science and those of the Native community there is some agreement on the state of the world. Ecosystems are collapsing, species are going extinct, the polar icecaps are melting and nuclear bombings and accidents have contaminated the land." She states that, according to Indigenous world views, there is no easy fix for the above problems. Solutions will require patient work like the work done by the many Indigenous Peoples she discusses in her book. Indigenous Nations from the subarctic to the Everglades will have to be involved. Winona states, "There is, in many Indigenous teachings, a great optimism for the potential to make positive change. Change will come. As always, it is just a matter of who determines what that change will be."

In summary, remember that the Committee of 500 Years of Dignity and Resistance works to stop racist imagery in the popular culture, human rights abuses and environmental devastation, and the above problems are related to each other.

Native Americans in Northeast Ohio and from the rest of the United States, the Committee of 500 Years of Dignity and Resistance, the Sierra Club Northeast Ohio Group Environmental Justice Committee, and others are having their Seventh Annual Conference on Racist Imagery in Popular Culture at the Pilgrim

Congregational Church, 2592 West 14th Street, Cleveland, Ohio, Sunday, April 10, 2005, from 2 to 7 p.m. Opening remarks and prayers will start at 2 p.m., followed by updates from activists around the country on stereotyping, human rights, and environmental issues. Also, we will discuss destruction of sacred religious burial sites and sacred environmental sites. We are going to have an open forum town hall style of meeting, so if you have something to say, there will be a sign-up sheet at the registration table. We will end with a pot luck at 6 p.m. Protests are being planned for the next day.

For more information email clementf@ucc.org, www.geocities.com/comm500years, or call 216-736-3725 at the United Church of Christ or Dennis from the Environmental Justice Committee at 216-939-8229.

Websites of Interest

Sierra Club Environmental Justice Home Page
http://www.sierraclub.org/environmental_justice/

Professor Paul Mohai
http://www.snre.umich.edu/faculty-staff-directory/faculty-detail.php?faculty_id=16

Sierra Student Coalition
<http://www.ssc.org>

Black Mesa Water Coalition
<http://www.blackmesawatercoalition.org/>

Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corporation
www.timesunion.com/communities/ahej/

SouthWest EJ Organizing Network
<http://www.swop.net/envirojust.htm>

Hispanic Stakeholders hold forum in the heartland

by Elaine Giessel, EQST Liaison

Elaine Giessel, Environmental Justice (EJ) chair for the Kansas Chapter, recently attended an Hispanic Stakeholders Forum and Training Session sponsored by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in Kansas City.

The first evening consisted of a “Partnering/Collaboration Building Forum.” Rafael De Leon, Director of EPA’s Office of Human Resources, provided an introductory description of the agency’s National Hispanic Outreach Strategy. Several organizations reported on a variety of EPA grant-funded projects, including pesticide exposure studies, lead poisoning prevention, public health issues, advocacy services, science education and economic advancement in Region VII Hispanic communities. The following day, EPA staff hosted a series of training and workshop sessions focusing on federal job opportunities, economic issues, small business contracts and grant writing.

EPA introduced its National Hispanic Outreach Strategy (NHOS) in 1999, to “strengthen its relationship with Hispanic Americans and better serve the nation’s growing Latino community.” Initially, there were four strategy elements or “pillars”: Employment and Professional Advancement; Education Pipeline; Economic Opportunities; and Community Partnerships. A fifth component has been added recently to assess results of the program.

EPA’s National Hispanic Outreach Strategy

<http://www.epa.gov/ohr/hispanicoutreach/strategy.html>

While EPA’s NHOS largely concentrates on economic and employment issues in the Hispanic community, there are goals to facilitate access to environmental information and to improve the delivery of programs and services of particular importance to the Hispanic community.

The environmental goals of the Community Partnership effort include:

1. To build effective partnerships with Hispanic organizations and communities to raise environmental awareness and to be responsive to the environmental and public health priorities of the Hispanic community.

2. To ensure effective communication of EPA program objectives and accomplishments by making widespread use of Spanish language documents and Hispanic media outlets.

EPA has done a laudable job developing Spanish language environmental materials and making them available online at a special Spanish “portal.” The range of topics covered is quite impressive. In addition, the Office of Solid Waste has created several educational packets in Spanish directed at school-aged children. These educational materials should be of great use to EJ activists working in Hispanic communities.



The EPA-sponsored table at the Hispanic Stakeholders Forum showcases some of the agency’s projects and strategies that focus on employment, education, community partnerships and economic opportunities

EPA’s Spanish Language Portal

<http://www.epa.gov/espanol/>

A link to Sierra Club already is posted on the EPA Human Resources Hispanic Outreach Strategy web site. However, according to Giessel, who has also initiated discussion of EJ issues with El Centro, a Kansas City area organization that provides social services to Latino immigrants, environmental issues are seldom part of the programs developed to assist local Hispanics. “Environmental concerns within our growing Hispanic communities are just beginning to be explored. There is an urgent need and an opportunity for Sierra Club EJ activists to engage with EPA and other local Hispanic resource centers to raise environmental awareness. It is critical that we use our expertise to assist in identifying issues of concern, and to help communities develop solutions.”



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