LEADING THE WAY
HOW 5 CHAPTERS AND GROUPS
HAVE BUILT KEYS CAPACITIES

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The day of the hearing was amazing. We organized a demonstration of fifty people at the base of the building. At 10 o’clock we marched up seven flights of stairs, chanting together. We then walked into the hearing room together silently, with our placards raised. The room was packed and we had to rent an additional one hundred chairs to accommodate the crowd. An amazing array of people testified, and we generated a significant amount of earned media.

The Club’s Puerto Rico Chapter won a huge victory the last week of June when Governor Luis Fortuño signed a law protecting 1,950 acres of the island’s Northeast Ecological Corridor (NEC) as a nature reserve, sparing the Corridor from massive proposed resort development in one of the most important nesting grounds on earth for the endangered Leatherback sea turtle.

Victories like this don’t happen overnight. The Puerto Rico Chapter has been working to protect the NEC since the chapter’s inception in 2005—in fact, Sierra Club activists on the Isle of Enchantment have been working to protect the Corridor for more than 15 years, ever since two megaresorts were proposed by Marriott International and Four Seasons Resorts in 1996.
Over this time, Puerto Rico Sierra Club activists collected thousands of petition signatures, put on the Festival del Tinglar (Leatherback Turtle Festival) six years in a row, led tours of the Corridor, lobbied the state legislature, and turned out citizens in big numbers for rallies and public hearings.

Key to the eventual victory was the ability of the Sierra Club and its coalition partners to turn out more than 500 citizens to a critical public hearing on the fate of the NEC in February 2011. (The Sierra Club was a founding member of the Coalition for the Northeast Ecological Corridor.)

We’ll let Puerto Rico Chapter organizer Camilla Feibelman pick up the story:

On Saturday, February 5, 2011 the Sierra Club of Puerto Rico, together with our coalition partners, got 533 people to turn out to the state government’s public hearings on the proposed fragmentation of the Northeast Ecological Corridor. Our goal was to turn out 500 citizens, and we exceeded that by 33 people.

From our database of 25,000 people we pulled names from the towns of Luquillo and Fajardo, two communities near the Corridor, and called as many of them as we could over the course of five or six call nights. We also called people who had received our kids’ presentation on Leatherback sea turtles and the NEC, or who had gone on an excursion in the Corridor.

We invited all of the artisans and businesspeople and schools that have participated in our Leatherback Turtle Festival. In order to populate our call nights with volunteers, we put each of our teams in charge of one particular night. One night was the kids’ presentation team, another night our membership committee, another night was our Sierra Student Coalition group, another night the excursions committee, etc. Then on the final day we called all the “yesses.”

We then held a series of lead-up events to the hearing, including a community breakfast on the street, and excursions to the Corridor with upwards of 80 people. We conducted a morning phone-calling campaign to our local talk radio shows and supplemented them with a couple of purchased radio spots. We paid for a week of announcements on what’s called a “tumbacoco” (so loud it knocks the coconuts of the tree)—a car with speakers on top to announce the event. We also handed out flyers and put up posters in several neighborhoods.

The day of the hearing was amazing. We organized a demonstration of fifty people at the base of the building. At 10 o’clock we marched up seven flights of stairs, chanting together. We then walked into the hearing room together silently, with our placards raised. The room was packed and we had to rent an additional one hundred chairs to accommodate the crowd. An amazing array of people testified, and we generated a significant amount of earned media.

Much more work remained to be done, but this show of support at a public hearing was critical. The following spring, the Puerto Rico House and Senate both unanimously passed a bill protecting the Corridor, with both local parties joining in their entirety as co-authors. And on June 25, 2012, the governor, recognizing the depth and breadth of public support for protecting the Corridor, signed the bill into law protecting 1,950 public acres of the NEC as a nature reserve.

This victory is proof that when people participate in government they can make true change. The people spoke and the governor had to listen.
With our positive outlook, “Let’s make it work” and “We’ll find the money if the project is worthwhile” philosophy, we have developed a successful program.

The 2,200 members of the Marys Peak Group (MPG) live in five counties in the middle Willamette Valley and near the coast. The majority of our members live in Corvallis, with another large group in Salem, the state capitol.

Our Group was resurrected from near oblivion in December 1999 when I, as the default Outings Chair, was informed that unless I became Chair and formed a new ExCom, the Group would cease to exist. Within a few weeks’ time, I had hand picked the best and brightest people I knew that had been hiking with me. I sought out individuals who believed in the Sierra Club, would work hard, had money, and had many connections in the community. They were all professionals, a number of them retired. I promised that we would have few face-to-face meetings, and that we’d always strive to be positive.

To have a successful Outings program, we needed money to train our leaders, both in leadership and in wilderness first aid. To raise money, we produced bluegrass and Celtic music concerts and offered one or two major outings a year to the red rock country of the U.S., and to Hawaii. We wrote some grants, and some kind people donated $5 to $1,000 to help us along the way. By 2010, our treasury was nearly $32,000 and we could boast that we were in the black every year. It was necessary to amass the money, because we were aware that hard times would fall upon organizations like ours in the future -- as has proven the case.

Finding the right people to carry out the many tasks of an organization takes time and energy. There’s a lot of schmoozing involved. The major direct access we had to people initially was on our local outings. I went on nearly every outing and sounded out people. When I felt that someone was intelligent, responsible and available, I would ask if that person would do one small task to help our group. No one has ever let me down.

In the past thirteen years, we have had volunteers come and go for a variety of reasons; but each time a person left, we have quickly replaced them with someone with greater skills. Our chairs, secretaries, treasurers have always had amazing skills and have been empowered to do the task and with the ExCom’s support. Let’s make it fun. Help is always available. We often have assistants -- members in training.
Communication with our members and the community at large was important. Today, our Outings program is recognized throughout the Willamette Valley and draws a fair number of non-Sierra Club members. We feel that if we get them involved, they will become members. We offer about 100 outings a year -- hiking, backpacking, rafting, kayaking, skiing, snowshoeing, and biking. We occasionally offer tours to local mills and industrial sites and these are well attended. The listed time for an outing is the departure time, and we make every effort to depart on time. We often invite local experts along on our outings to discuss particular conservation efforts. Somewhere around 300 different people participate to give us about 1,500 participations. We maintain an active database of all participations. We have nearly 40 outings leaders. One more special element to our outings is that we frequently schedule an ice cream stop on our way home from an outing.

Another important aspect of our Group’s offerings is our winter evening program nights at the Corvallis library. We host six or seven monthly programs each year ranging from hiking or backpacking in some distant country to local or major environmental issues. We typically have 80 people attending from the community. Our Program Chair who is skillful at selecting topics and excellent speakers manages to keep the evening series booked a year in advance.

Throughout the year we participate in local tabling events to bring our activities to the attention of an expanded community. It has taken us nearly ten years to build a successful Political/Conservation team. The challenge was to find the right person who was up to the task.

In an effort to be positive, we have befriended our county commissioners, local state representatives, and Corvallis City Council members. We have worked with the U.S. Forest Service, Corvallis Parks and Rec, and with Benton County Parks and Natural Areas to repair trails. We initiated and have been active in planting six-to-ten-foot-high trees in Corvallis and on school grounds.

You can tell that I’m very proud of our Group. The culture we initiated in early December of 1999 has strengthened and spread to all of our leaders. To sustain this effort, we try our best to get them together several times in the year to exchange ideas and celebrate our success. Each year, we have a potluck December Holiday Party, with a PowerPoint presentation filled with images of group activities. For our members we have a Summer Solstice Gala at a lovely plant nursery, which typically draws about 100 people. It’s a potluck affair and we provide the burgers, hotdogs and the fixings. We have music, a raffle of donated items, and a special speaker on some conservation message. It’s a three-hour affair. We ask for a $5 donation and have rarely lost money.

Finally, let me say that you can never thank volunteers enough. I produce cards with photos of beautiful places in Oregon. I send them as thank you notes and birthday cards to our volunteers. I routinely have morning coffee or a late afternoon beer with some volunteer. And since my wife says, “For better or worse but not for lunch”, I try to have lunch with a volunteer most every week I’m in town. This summer, I purchased two season tickets to the local semi-pro baseball team. I go to every home game and try to take a different volunteer with me each time. Great for schmoozing. I have spoken here of my own contribution. I’m pleased to say that our current chair and a number of our other key volunteers do the same thing. With our positive outlook, “Let’s make it work” and “We’ll find the money if the project is worthwhile” philosophy, we have developed a successful program.
This summer my goal was to have several conservation outings interns working together to outreach to groups, build up outings kits for campaigns, and set up trainings.

The Maryland Chapter and its groups have used outings within conservation campaigns over the years to advocate forest preservation and anti-sprawl development, bring people out to rally and hike, find endangered native species, monitor water quality, and remove invasive species.

Demonstration of the value of campaign based conservation outings originally arose through the Mattawoman Campaign several years ago. The Mattawoman campaign initially aimed to preserve the then relatively pristine Mattawoman Creek Watershed and focus on the wider issue of sprawl and the need to save the bay.

Last summer we recruited our first and very successful general Conservation Outings intern, Michael Hennessey, who was capable and motivated and able to take input and direction without a lot of handholding. His charge was to set up and host an outing for each conservation campaign and in the process to build the outings committee and the groups training and assisting leaders.

He met with our conservation staffers, developed and carried out a Beyond Coal walk along the C&O canal to illustrate a coal plant we wanted retired, led a bike trip in Western Maryland in a proposed fracking area, and went on a Mattawoman trip with local leaders.

The conservation outings internship has support resources with clubhouse based outings leader training, OARS & LEADERS tools -- and that helps make this internship successful. This summer my goal was to have several conservation outings interns working together to outreach to groups, build up outings kits for campaigns, and set up trainings.

We have had seven interns (now five), including interns for Beyond Coal, water, political, admin, and stewardship outings. They have been collaborating with our Conservation Outings Intern to set up and carry out Mattawoman, Beyond Coal, and invasive removal trips. We encouraged all our interns to do the initial Outings Leader Training online. I plan to have another Conservation Outings intern to continue the program with her. I am also talking with the new Mission Outdoors intern to explore setting up a collaborative project that would focus on recruiting more leaders, establishing a media campaign toward getting more kids outdoors, and reaching out to military families in the area.
I feel as though the effort put into the website is paying off. In the first half of this year, the Delaware Chapter has more first-time members than in all of 2011.

The situation could not have been more urgent. I was new to the Chapter’s executive committee and trying to get university students involved in our conservation programs, when one of these students informed me that they didn’t think that the Sierra Club had a Delaware Chapter because the website was “so old.”

Truth be told, she had a point. The Chapter’s website had not been updated in about a year and no one seemed to know how to update the website anymore. Something had to be done.

The launch of the Drupal platform presented itself as an opportunity for a clean slate for our Chapter’s internet identity. Without much web experience, I needed help. I bought a beginners’ guide to Drupal and had a basic training session with Sierra Club webmaster Jason Berry. After a few weeks and a bit of experimentation, I figured out how the system worked.

In developing the new website, I had several goals. I wanted the website to convey a story about what made Delaware’s environment special, and why it was important to protect. Delawareans tend to be state-centric, and I wanted the website to drip with Delaware, while also making connections to national issues and Sierra Club conservation priorities.

I have tried to accomplish this by using photographs of Delaware that would look familiar to Delawareans, and posting about important issues and events in addition to Sierra Club accomplishments. I have been told that the Chapter’s website is now the “go to” place on the internet for finding out about the environment in Delaware.

I wanted the website to be dynamic, creating a unique experience for the visitor each time they came to the site. I have tried to accomplish this by updating the website every few days with new “articles” so that the website always looks current. The site is complex, with multiple pages and “tagged” content, enabling the viewer to browse around and explore the site.

Developing the website has not been without its challenges. Drupal has a steep learning curve. Figuring out how to use it was not intuitive, so I “hit the books” and studied.
Now that I know how to use the basic features (views, articles, documents, blocks and panels), I can arrange the content just the way I want to without much effort. I used the webform to accept resumes when we hired summer interns and the first full-time employee that our chapter has had in many years, and I have experimented with surveys. I feel as though the effort put into the website is paying off. In the first half of this year, the Delaware Chapter has more first-time members than in all of 2011. Community engagement is increasing, especially through connecting the website content with social media (Facebook and Twitter).
This program has resulted in a culture of giving. We’ve even had checks sent to us from members we hadn’t contacted.

The Iowa Chapter has an in-person fundraising activity that enlists the Chapter ExCom to raise funds from members who are able to donate larger amounts through in-person meetings.

The process starts in August when the Chapter Director sends each ExCom member a list of the members living in their area (neighboring counties, cities, Sierra Club group) as well as a list of the previous donors who contributed to the in-person fundraising. The ExCom member is directed to select six to ten people that they will contact to fundraise. The expectation is that the member will be asked to contribute $200 or more. We do have potential donors that we approach for donations of $1,000 or even $2,500.

We raise the ask amount each year as the donor becomes more familiar with our ExCom members. The Chapter Director then creates a sheet with the potential donor’s address, phone, previous contributions, and proposed ask amount.

During the summer, handouts are created that make the case for why we are asking for money and what we plan to do with the funds. We also describe our successes. We have a goal pyramid of how much we hope to raise. We have some flyers or campaign buttons we leave with the donor. One year we left a button that had a drawing of a coal plant and the slogan “We all live downwind.”

In late September we kick off the fundraising by having in-person training. We go through the packets, talk about the process, and demonstrate how to make the calls.

Finally, in the spirit that our ExCom members are donors first before they go ask other Sierra Club members for money, we ask the ExCom members for a donation. The first couple of years, we asked each ExCom members to ask another ExCom member for a donation. That did give an opportunity for...
some role playing, but it was uncomfortable for some of the members. So now the fundraising chair makes the ask to the ExCom members and they fill out their own donation information sheet, they write a check or make a pledge, put the donation sheet and check in an envelope, and give the envelope to the Director.

At first we did not notify our potential donors ahead of time that we were going to call them and ask for their support. Last year we wrote an optional letter that could be sent to the donors and introducing ourself. This year the letter will go to all contacts, along with an address to send a donation should we not make contact with them.

We ask the ExCom members to call the donor three times. If they cannot reach the person after the third try, then they stop trying.

The on-site visit involves going to the donor’s home or office (or even out to coffee). They discuss what the Chapter is working on. Then they make the ask, collect the check, and fill out the donor sheet. Over time some of our donors know why we are calling and just offer to send us a check in the mail. Sometimes the donors will spend a whole evening with the ExCom members, talking about environmental issues.

Finally, for each donation, the ExCom member is asked to hand-write a thank you. The thank you cards are included with the fundraising materials and have the Sierra Club logo on the front.

Throughout the weeks of the fundraising, the Chapter Director puts out a weekly or bi-weekly e-mail newsletter talking about progress and answers questions that come up. The newsletter announces who is first to send a check, make all of their calls, etc. We do not track metrics of things like dollars raised per person. What we strive for is that folks make the calls. It should be noted that the Chapter Director does not make any in-person asks during this time period – the asks are done by the ExCom members themselves.

Most of our ExCom members participate, but some simply do not. The first year is always the hardest to do the ask, but ExCom members say it gets easier each year and they become more comfortable.

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