

Looking Forward

Sierra Club's fight to save the planet



By Mark James Miller, August 24, 2018

When he was 22 years old, in 1860, a Scottish immigrant named John Muir had a life-changing experience, one that echos across the years — he saw a fellow student at the University of Wisconsin pluck a flower from a black locust tree to illustrate that this towering giant was a member of the pea family.

Fifty years later Muir would recall that this “sent me flying into the woods and meadows in wild enthusiasm,” determined to learn all he could about nature and its wonders. Such were the beginnings of a man helping create what would become a worldwide movement.

In 1892 Muir founded the Sierra Club, whose mission is “To explore, enjoy and protect the planet.” It is not the only environmental organization in the United States, but it is the largest and best-known. Directors have included photographer Ansel Adams, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, and novelist Wallace Stegner.

Whether it is fighting to shut down coal-fired power plants or advocating on behalf of clean energy, the Sierra Club can be found in the forefront of the

battle to save the planet. Andrew Christie, director of the San Luis Obispo Chapter, vows the struggle will continue in the Trump Era.

“Trump’s threat to the environment is existential,” he says. “The environmental mantra of this administration is clearly (to) sacrifice public lands for private profit. We will continue to ally closely with organizations supporting the rights of women, workers, immigrants and the LGBT community because we all share the same values.”

Christie said grassroots organizing is the best way to make change happen. It was through local efforts that the Sierra Club stopped 184 coal-fired plants from being built during the George W. Bush administration, and it is through local efforts they intend to keep pushing to replace dirty fuels like coal with clean energy.

The latter is an area where the Sierra Club has been especially successful. Last December, Goleta joined the growing list of cities that have committed to achieving 100-percent clean energy by 2030.

“It was the first day of the Thomas fire,” Katie Davis, chair of the Santa Barbara Chapter, recalls. “You could smell the smoke in the room.”

The inferno raging nearby added emphasis to the need for switching to renewable energy and the reality of climate change.

“Now the count is 77 cities and continues to grow,” says Davis. Cities as diverse as Abita Springs, La., Amherst, Mass., Denver, Co., and Menlo Park, Ca., have all made the same commitment. Nine counties and the state of Hawaii have also committed to going to green energy by a specific date. In

California, legislation that would set a goal of 100-percent renewable energy is under consideration in Sacramento.

But some people see the Sierra Club negatively, believing — wrongly — that environmentalism threatens their livelihoods.

“Sierra Club — Go Hike To Hell” was the message on a bumper sticker I saw recently. The driver said the Sierra Club threatened his work in the building trades. The truth contradicts this.

“There are already 8,763 jobs in renewable energy and efficiency in Santa Barbara County,” says Davis. “That’s more than eight times the number of jobs in the county in the oil industry.”

The fight will go on in the courts as well.

“Our litigation teams are working overtime to defend the land, air, and water from Trump’s all-out assault,” said Christie.

Wherever he is now, John Muir is certainly smiling on the efforts of the club he founded.

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