

Oct. 8, 1984
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Opinions of a branch leader on FOE's current crisis

Dear members of the board of FOE:

I have not yet renewed my membership nor the branch charter of Gunnison County FOE. The acid rain project of our branch recently lost momentum because of FOE's crisis. (Now, it has picked up again.) Whether or not I can continue working with FOE depends largely on the results of FOE's current restructuring, especially on FOE's grassroots orientation.

What is "grassroots"?

Grassroots means working to educate, motivate, and empower the "ordinary," "average," or "common" people. Grassroots organizing means working on a local level to bring groups of people into cohesive organizations that can bridge disparities and unite individuals behind a common, exciting goal. Grassroots means helping people to do the public speaking, lobbying, and arguing themselves.

Grassroots is not researchers or scientists. It is not paid lobbyists at the national or state capitols. Grassroots is not lawyers paid by foundations or tax-deductible donations.

There are environmental organizations like NRDC and EDF where membership buys a service--the good work of scientists, lobbyists, or lawyers. The members are not themselves very active. Such organizations play an important role and have a solid niche in the environmental movement.

Then there are the big organizations like Sierra Club and Audubon Society which are mixtures, having both extensive chapter organizing efforts and also the specialists. People join these both with and without a desire to get involved.

Strictly grassroots environmental organizations seem to exist only at the local level, though some of the state groups (like the Colorado Open Space Council) do try to rely heavily on membership activity.

What should FOE be? What can we be?

To me, if FOE is to be like the first category, the NRDC's and EDF's, then FOE is worthless. That niche is filled by excellent groups already. We don't need more of them.

I think FOE does not have the resources to be the mixed bag that Sierra and Audubon are. So I want FOE to be strictly grassroots. It would be the only national organization with that orientation.