

WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS THROUGH LOCAL ACTION

Dear *HCN*,

Sierra Club leader Michael McCloskey was correct when he told his board that community collaboration processes “have the effect of transferring influence to the very communities where we are least organized and potent.” He went on to note that local environmentalists often lack experience, training, skills and money.

So what is the correct response? Opposition to “local control”? No! Instead, the Sierra Club, other national groups and foundations need to focus more of their resources on supporting those local environmental activists. The Sierra Club prides itself on being one of the few truly grassroots national environmental organizations, but too few of its

members' dollars end up in the hands of the club's state chapters and local groups. I still belong to the club because we have a substantial and growing grassroots component, but it's simply insufficient.

I dropped my membership in Natural Resources Defense Council, despite their excellent publication, *The Amicus Journal*, and their solid record of accomplishment. They sent out information about their "new grassroots programs," but I did not believe them.

Opponents of "local control" correctly attack a long history of abuse of land and communities. How much of that abuse was from local people who callously disregarded the needs of the land and communities? How much came from simple, correctable ignorance? And what of the role of colonialism? Wasn't it the big corporations and financiers from "back East" who dealt many — perhaps most — of the serious blows to our ecosystems?

"Local folks" — human individuals — can learn and change because they have multiple values, including morals, ethics, religion, community, family and profit. In contrast, big corporations have only one value. Experience in my community has shown that the most serious threats have come from big interests from outside. Not that we locals do no harm, but it appears here that people with old, local roots have wreaked much less of the harm, and can change. I learned that with rancher Ken Spann, logger Buck Bailey, and motorcyclist Morrill Griffith, I can negotiate and even influence. With AMAX and Louisiana Pacific, I can only fight.

This extends to the government. I don't understand why my colleagues in Denver and Boulder place their hopes for good management with the Forest Service. I can think of only a few examples of wise decisions from that agency

in the past 16 years of the Gunnison National Forest. The agency responds primarily to commands from D.C. And who controls D.C.? Big money. Money has a much smaller role in local elections.

The environmental movement has put too many of its eggs into the national basket, following power to Washington, D.C.

Congress members are not elected in Washington, D.C. They are elected "back home," so lobbying is at best a secondary tactic. National laws and actions are critical, but require state and local implementation. It's a question of balance, and I believe in local influence, not local control.

So we in Gunnison County have devoted more attention to our county government. It's been a long, tough task with limited success. Our commissioners still inadequately protect wetlands, still spend unwisely, still can't get over their allegiance to the ideology of private property. But they have positively evolved, along with our local populace. We are gradually winning the hearts and minds of our people, and the county is slowly reflecting that change. Meanwhile, the Forest Service, well, they still serve up clearcuts to multinationals like Stone Container, despite local governments' opposition to big logging.

Opponents of "local control" seem to hope that the urban majority will eventually trounce the rural minority. But that has not worked and lacks compassion. The urban-dominance strategy legitimately provokes fear among rural people, for it implies that social forces will finally deny them their traditional occupations and pastimes. When the vision of the environmental leadership is simply to kick the commodity interests off the land, then we offer no economic hope to millions of people.

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