

Editorial Was Unfair Slap at Environmental Groups

By John D. Echeverria

Reporter Tom Knudson recently wrote a series of articles in the Sacramento Bee harshly criticizing the environmental community for a variety of things, including its fundraising practices and its reliance on litigation. The following is an op-ed which appeared in the Atlanta Journal responding to a Journal editorial which lavished praise on the Knudson series.

A May 7 editorial in the Atlanta Journal, "Greening of the greens," inspired by a series of articles by Sacramento Bee reporter Tom Knudson, presents grossly unfair and misleading criticisms of the national environmental advocacy groups.

The editorial endorsed Knudson's argument that the groups operate costly and wasteful fundraising programs designed in part to pay for fancy offices and extravagant salaries. The editorial also endorsed the criticism that the groups too frequently sue federal agencies over violations of environmental laws.

Knudson's not-so-thinly veiled message, strongly reinforced by the editorial, is that members of the public should think twice before sending in another contribution. If this advice were widely accepted, the groups' abilities to carry on their work would be severely undermined.

Unfortunately, the criticism that environmental advocacy groups spend too much money recruiting and retaining individual supporters reflects a misunderstanding of the American political process and these groups' role in it.

For better or for worse, interest group politics reigns supreme in our national political life, and lawmakers feel the greatest political pressure when organized interest groups mount effective campaigns to advance or defend some position.

Environmental advocates face an uphill battle because environmental protection is a benefit shared by all in society. Organizing even some of all the citizens concerned about the environment into an effective interest group presents a monumental challenge.

No similar challenge faces business groups who complain about too much environmental regulation. Because relatively few firms are affected by any particular environmental issue, and each firm has a relatively large financial stake in the issue, creating an effective interest group to oppose environmental regulation is fairly easy.

Against this background, it is myopic to complain that national environmental advocacy groups spend a good deal of money identifying and attempting to retain individual financial supporters. There is no avoiding the fact that it is expensive to reach out to the millions of potential supporters of environmental causes.

At the end of day, would the nation be better off if these groups simply left the political battlefield to industry groups that do not face the same challenges in organizing their supporters? The answer is clearly no.

The related charge that fund-raising by national environmental advocacy groups supports corporate-like opulence is a gratuitous slur. Anyone who has been there can tell you that the headquarters of the Sierra Club, for example, looks like the back office at a YMCA day camp.

The editorial included a table comparing the fundraising "effectiveness" of national advocacy organizations and groups that focus on the business-friendly strategy of purchasing select parcels of land for conservation or recreation. The comparison involves apples and oranges because negotiating a land deal is obviously a lot cheaper than mobilizing Americans to defend the Clean Water Act against industry attacks in Congress.

Finally, environmental advocacy groups bring lawsuits to enforce the environmental laws because Congress has authorized and encouraged them to do so. Congress correctly concluded that agency bureaucrats would inevitably cave in to pressure from the regulated firms unless someone could keep their feet to the fire.

In the face of the unfair criticisms of the national environmental advocacy groups, environmentally minded citizens should consider adding \$10 to their next contribution in honor of Knudson.