

Farewell Speech by David Brower, May 3, 1969

Remembering a long and fruitful association with the club, and a short and shocking campaign, I wrote the Reorganization Committee and the Board from New York on April 25 a compromise plan, putting personal wishes second and unity first.

If the Board wished me to, I might be able to operate under the restrictions I suggested, but I do not really believe I could be effective at a time when a Sierra Club chief of staff must be fully effective to meet conservation goals. I would not wish such restrictions on any other chief of staff. They would decimate his effectiveness. A chief administrative officer must be allowed to be a chief administrative officer, given authority to carry out the responsibilities of an important office in what must continue to be an important force in conservation. Under the broad supervision of the Board, he must be a leader, day in and day out, in and out of the organization. He must make a career out of conservation if the counsel of other career people - the volunteers he both leads and serves - is to be carried out usefully.

Because of my long commitment to the club, I am reluctant to leave it, and will serve it as well as I can as a member of 35 years' standing. Many have urged the setting up of a splinter organization to step up the broadly based, expanding program the club has developed in my sixteen years as Executive Director. But I don't like splinters - dividing what should be unified. This I will not do.

But we feel it imperative to go in the direction implicit in the Earth National Park ad, which troubled many directors. It also aroused wide public support. We feel it imperative to go in the direction Aldo Leopold, Paul Ehrlich, William O. Douglas, Joseph Wood Krutch, and George Wald have been talking about.

So we are today announcing that there will be formed, after careful study, a new organization to augment existing groups. Looking at the whole earth as one ecosphere, we want to work hard toward restoring and preserving it - restoring the major part that has not been treated well enough by man, and preserving the rest - the vestige of wilderness, where the life force is still essentially uninterrupted by man's tinkering. We hope to demonstrate how important that remaining wilderness is, and why we believe, as Nancy Newhall does, that it holds answers to questions man has not yet learned how to ask.

The conservation movement needs organizations in which ideas have a reasonable life expectancy, in which indecision is not rife, in which an ethical sense toward the land, toward the many races dependent on it, and toward fellow members has a reasonable life expectancy too. There is an enormous amount to be done, or the old addiction to growth will grind up our wilderness, our forests, mountains, and streams in a decade. We cannot be dilettante and lilywhite in our work. Nice Nelly will never make it. Nor can we condone conservation as a cosmetic for rapacity.

We have to develop, and soon, a deeper devotion to conservation as an ethic and conscience in everything we do, whatever our field of endeavor. We have to be willing to spend gladly as much on saving things here and abroad as we have been willing to spend, too often without a shudder, on destroying things here and abroad. The war we have to fight is the war against smugness and apathy about what is happening to the land. We cannot go on fiddling while the earth's wild places burn in the fires of our undisciplined technology. We cannot be frightened out of our spirit or counseled out of using our strength, or spend our funds defaming people.

These are games people can no longer afford to play. We are going to build an arena for a better game, a rewarding one in behalf of our one last ecosphere.

For all the difficulties in working for the Sierra Club, I have been rewarded by the strength, the understanding and friendship, and the sacrifice of thousands of others working for the club, volunteer and staff. Much encouragement has come through the years - in discussions with those who have led in conservation, in awards and articles, and in letters from young members as well as old, including a letter I received May 1 from a 17 year old from upstate New York:

"The Earth is in such a state of human calamity and catastrophe now, and more than ever we need a leader to help us see what a beautiful planet we are destroying. But if I may quote Terry and Renny Russell:
'So long as I can see I will keep looking.
As long as I can walk I will keep moving.
As long as I can stand I will keep fighting.'
....Please keep fighting for humanity and nature."

I think that's a good idea for all of us, and I expect to keep doing to with all the voice that is permitted me and will welcome the support of the club's management and members in the new organization. I thank those of you who gave it for all the good effort you put in while I was your chief of staff.

I hope to make many more speeches, praising good Sierra Club achievement. I intend this to be my last speech as a Sierra Club employee, and it has ended.