

Civic Participation Alive and Well in Today's Environmental Groups

by George Pettinico

Social commentators who have warned recently of declining civic participation in the United States have summarily dismissed environmental organizations, which have swelled in numbers over the past few decades, by claiming that members of these groups do little more than write checks once or twice a year. In "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," Robert Putnam describes the supposed lack of civic participation in national environmental organizations as follows, "For the vast majority of their members, the only act of membership consists in writing checks for dues or perhaps occasionally reading a newsletter. Few ever attend any meetings of such organizations, and most are unlikely ever (knowingly) to encounter any other member. The bond between any two members of the Sierra Club is less like the bond between any two members of a gardening club and more like the bond between any two Red Sox fans (or perhaps any two devoted Honda owners)."¹

Putnam, and others who hold this view, are mistaken. While certainly not all members of environmental groups are as active as others, far more than a mere "few" are deeply involved in their organizations. In fact, a closer examination of the green movement in the United States reveals a vibrant, grassroots culture involving countless individuals who are actively engaged in their communities. On almost a daily basis, a plethora of meetings, social gatherings, hikes, bike trips, clean-up projects, rallies, nature workshops and the like are held in communities across the nation by local chapters of national environmental organizations, as well as ad-hoc community groups.

Sierra Club

The Sierra Club was founded in 1892. It has, however, seen its greatest expansion in membership in the past two decades (see table). Although national in scope, the Club stresses local participation and member interaction. Sixty-three Chapters exist, with hundreds of localized Groups beneath them, organized around counties, towns and city districts. Besides Chapter newsletters and regular meetings held by each Group, numerous recreational and environmental

activities take place within these sub-units on almost a daily basis. For example, the Angeles Chapter of the Sierra Club comprises 16 Groups which cover Los Angeles and its suburbs. Consider the following activities, which were organized by the Chapter for one weekend, May 17-19, 1996: 21 day hikes (including one for singles only), two evening hikes, three bicycle trips (one for singles only), one bird watching walk, four trail repair outings, a nature camera excursion, a wilderness first aid workshop, a nature knowledge workshop, a backpacking class, a camp fund-raiser, two weekend-long camping trips, and one weekend trip to Catalina Island.²

This abundance of social activity is common most any weekend for the Angeles Chapter, according to the "Activities Schedule", and at least 300 events take place each month. To get an idea of the more popular activities, I spoke with Jack Goldberg, a volunteer leader in the Chapter.³ He mentioned short evening hikes in the local mountains ("two or three-hour jobs" in his words) as among the most popular, with "upwards of 300 people often attending." Participants are mainly Club members, but also their friends and relatives (most Club functions are open to the public). Being retired, Mr. Goldberg attends the regularly scheduled Wednesday day hikes, which he says "get about 60 - 70 people, mainly retirees and housewives.... We're getting even more participants lately." I asked him, based on his experience, why people participate in these and other Club events. While they are all united by their love of nature,

“
Consider the following activities, which were organized by the Sierra Club's Los Angeles Chapter for one weekend (May 17-19, 1996): 21 day hikes (including one for singles only), two evening hikes, three bicycle trips (one for singles only), one bird watching walk, four trail repair outings, a nature camera excursion, a wilderness first aid workshop, a nature knowledge workshop, a backpacking class, a camp fundraiser, two camping trips, and one weekend trip to Catalina Island.
”

he admits that these outings are "mainly social events—a chance to make friends, get out."

Most other Sierra Club local units, though smaller, are equally committed to community participation and social interaction. Consider the Austin, TX Group, with about 4,400 members, which is one of the 18 Groups within Texas. The Group's newsletter lists the following activities for May, 1996: a Group monthly meeting, a 35 mile bike ride, four day hikes (2 with "at risk," inner city youths), three overnight camping trips, a service outing (campground repair), and a Mayfest Dinner Dance. In addition, every Sunday the Group holds a one hour running/walking session followed by a breakfast social hour.⁴

According to Leslie Fields, Environmental Director of the Lone Star Chapter (Texas), the other 17 Groups in the state are equally active.

Leading Environmental Organizations General Membership 1970 — 1995

Sierra Club (1892)	
1970	114,336
1980	181,773
1990	629,532
1996	550,000 (est.)

National Audubon Society (1905)	
1970	104,676
1980	311,269
1990	548,523
1996	570,000 (est.)

Wilderness Society (1935)	
1970	N/A
1980	50,000 (est.)
1990	404,000 (est.)
1996	300,000 (est.)

World Wildlife Fund (1935)	
1970	N/A
1985	172,000 (est.)
1991	1,000,000 (est.)
1996	1,200,000 (est.)

Nature Conservancy (1951)	
1978	60,000 (est.)
1980	99,000 (est.)
1990	578,000 (est.)
1996	830,000 (est.)

Greenpeace (1971)	
1971	250 (est.)
1980	250,000 (est.)
1990	2,500,000 (est.)
1996	1,690,500 (est.)

Source: Membership figures received from organizations' headquarters.
Date below name indicates date of founding.

for the environment.

Ms. Pendergast admits that most Connecticut Audubon Society members are not actively involved in regular Chapter activities. However, a large, active minority, which she calls a "core, sociable group" exists. While the active members of this organization tend to be older Americans, she has seen an increase in interest among younger folks in recent years. For the several hundred in Connecticut who are very much involved in the group's activities, she concludes, "...there is a lot of interplay among these members on a regular basis, especially during the springtime [peak bird watching period in the northeast]... There is a real sense of community."

N.I.M.B.Y.

The NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) phenomenon refers to instances of local, grassroots opposition to the construction of various unwanted facilities, such as prisons, mega-malls and garbage dumps. Many commentators have labeled NIMBY movements as narrow, self-interested and shortsighted. Others have praised them as providing "an energetic check against the kinds of projects that many people now regard as absurd maldevelopment."⁶ Whether you love or despise these sorts of movements, it cannot be denied that they represent civic participation in its most dynamic form. Though focused in scope and temporary in duration, such NIMBY activity is exactly what Tocqueville had in mind when he stated over a century and a half ago that Americans had "carried to the highest perfection the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires." Consider the following examples:

Item: In late 1993, the New York Thruway Authority announced plans to build a large off-highway plaza, complete with numerous fast-food restaurants, in the small town of North Chatham, NY. Hundreds of local residents quickly became organized, mounting "a campaign of public meetings, letters, petitions, lawn signs, bumper stickers and skillfully staged media

Audubon Society

The Audubon Society, like the Sierra Club, has been around for some time (established in 1905), yet it too has seen its greatest increase in membership in the past twenty-five years. The Audubon Society also stresses community-based participation, with 518 Chapters in towns and cities nationwide.

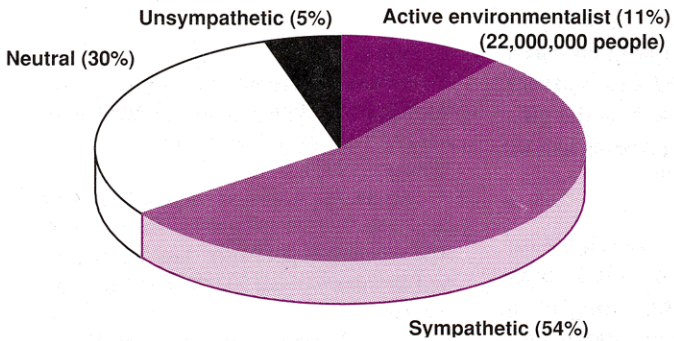
Connecticut, for example, has 14 Chapters, with about 10,000 members. According to Patty Pendergast, the Audubon Society Representative for Connecticut,⁵ every month each Chapter in the state: holds a Chapter meeting, four to ten bird outings (except in mid-winter), and regular educational and outreach activities. Two or more times a year, each Chapter organizes an extended

field trip, usually out of state. Also, at least once a year in Connecticut a multi-Chapter weekend festival is held, which usually draws a crowd of "up to 700 people."

The above listing, however, represents only the *organized* activities of the Chapters. Much more activity exists on an informal level. According to Ms. Pendergast, a telephone network exists among members which they use to share their hobby of bird watching, "If there is a rare bird sighting, there is a whole core of people who call each other to pass on the information.... This is a community of people who know each other, run into each other, rely on each other." Members not only call one another to exchange stories and information, they also tend to carpool together out of concern

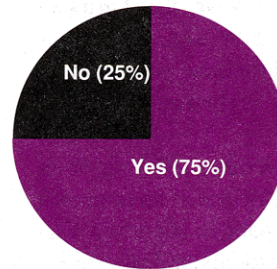
For Millions of Americans, Environmentalism is An Active Pursuit

Question: Do you think of yourself as an active environmentalist, or sympathetic to environmental concerns, but not active, or neutral, or generally unsympathetic to environmental concerns?

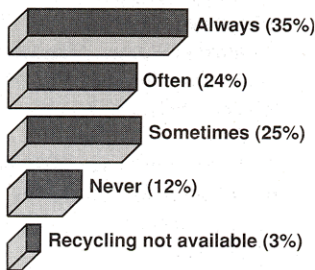


Source: Survey by the Wirthlin Group, August 11-15, 1995.

Question: Does your household sort and separate garbage for cans, bottles, or paper to be recycled?

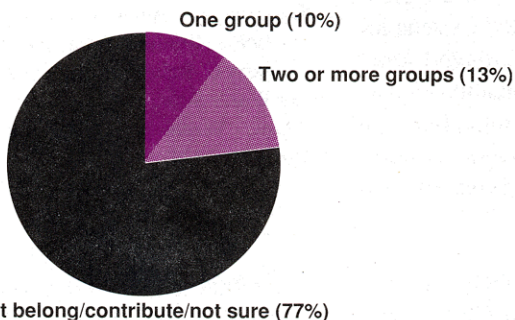


Question: How often do you make a special effort to sort glass or cans or plastic or papers and so on for recycling...?



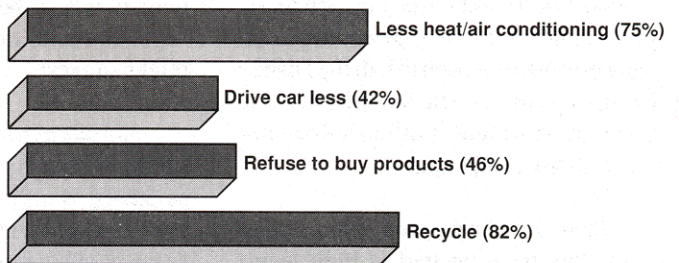
Source: Survey by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, General Social Survey, 1994.

Question: Do you belong or contribute to any environmental or conservation groups? [IF YES] About how many of these groups do you support?



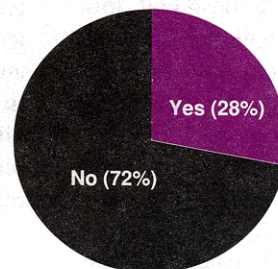
Note: Asked of 1994 voters.
Source: Survey by Peter D. Hart Research for the National Wildlife Federation, December 1-4, 1994.

Question: ...[Do you or any members of your household]... Purposely use less heat in the winter or less air conditioning in the summer; drive a car less often; refuse to buy products because of wasteful packaging or the way they were produced; recycle paper, bottles, or other items?



Note: Adds to more than 100% due to multiple responses.
Source: Survey by Belden & Russonello for the Pew Global Stewardship Initiative, February 3-15, 1994.

Question: In the last five years, have you...signed a petition about an environmental issue?



Source: Survey by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, General Social Survey, 1994.

Civic Participation...

events." The grassroots effort consisted of citizens from all walks of life, "Home-makers, truck drivers, farmers, mechanics and schoolteachers seemed perfectly at ease discussing arcane topics such as environmental impact assessments, endangered species, freedom of information rules.... They mapped strategy, targeted decision makers and prepared sound bites with remarkable *savoir-faire*." The next year, the Thruway Authority scrapped the plan, and a town-wide victory celebration was held in North Chatham's firehouse.⁷

Item: In November 1993, the Walt Disney Company declared its intention to build a theme park in suburban Virginia. Local residents quickly organized against the plan. Meetings were held in churches, firehouses, schoolrooms and homes. Protest marches and rallies of several hundred people were executed throughout the region. Contrary to the allegations of many critics, residents involved were not simply wealthy landowners, "... there were others there [at the meetings], small-town merchants, farmers, retired school teachers, veterinarians, carpenters, electricians—who didn't want Disney in their backyards either." These grassroots groups were powerful enough to halt the Disney Company in its tracks, despite the corporation's multi-million dollar public relations campaign.⁸

Item: For the past few years, casino promoters have wanted to build gambling facilities in several towns in Rhode Island. While the gambling developers have "spent six million dollars on a statewide television and radio advertising blitz," the townspeople have organized together into "a loose-knit, low-budget coalition of volunteers." Bake sales and door-to-door canvassing were used to raise money for the various grassroots organizations, one of which—founded by several concerned mothers—was named RAGE (Residents Against Gambling Establishments). While the promoters pursued an expensive media campaign, the community organizations opted for an affordable, more personal campaign of brochures,

signs, buttons and door-to-door outreach. The results: in 1994 voters statewide rejected every one of the casino proposals.⁹

Item: In the spring of 1995, the Los Angeles County Planning Commission held a meeting in a Santa Clarita schoolroom to discuss with members of the community a local landfill expansion project. The room seated 350 people, yet roughly 3,000 residents attended—most stood out in the parking lot listening via a public address system, strategizing about how to beat the plan. One resident claimed, "It seems like the whole town has come."¹⁰

Although there are no hard numbers, this sort of ad-hoc, grassroots organizing in response to the siting of an unwanted facility has been repeated hundreds of times in communities across the country—and is usually quite successful.¹¹ After researching the phenomenon extensively, Professor Barry Rabe writes, "The nature of NIMBY involvement, in communities of diverse size, economic affluence, and racial composition, demonstrates that political interest and participation may be far greater than surveys and declining election turnout rates might suggest."¹²

Not all environmental organizations stress community participation as much as others. Further, not all members in even the most active groups are as involved as their more participatory counterparts (The same was certainly true of the Elks Club and P.T.A. in the 1950s). However, these organizations cannot be dismissed as mere check-writing organizations. On a daily basis, thousands of environmentally motivated citizens interact with one another through formal and informal green organizations—participating in everything from afternoon bike trips, weekly walk/run sessions, bird watching outings and conservation rallies.

As a final example, this past Earth Day thousands of Sierra Club volunteers distributed 2.3 million doorhangers (information packages hung on doors)

in 100 targeted locations. Only a group whose members are organized, interactive and locally involved—as opposed to a collection of sedentary and isolated checkwriters—could have accomplished this.

While citizen interaction and participation may never be as high as many would like, it is certainly alive and well in the current environmental movement.

Endnotes

¹ Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (January 1995), p. 71.

² Sierra Club Angeles Chapter, "Activities Schedule," #271 (March 1 - July 4, 1996). The schedule is published three times a year and distributed to all 50,000 members of the chapter.

³ Jack Goldberg was interviewed at the Chapter's headquarters (by telephone) on May 21, 1996.

⁴ Austin Group (Lone Star Chapter), *Austin Sierran Newsletter*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (May 1996). Distributed monthly to all members of the Group.

⁵ Patty Pendergast was interviewed (by telephone) at her home on May 22, 1996.

⁶ Langdon Winner, "The Mice That Roared," *Technology Review*, Vol. 97 (August/September 1994), p. 72.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Larry Van Dyne, "Hit the Road, Mick" *Washingtonian*, January 1995. Interestingly, many local residents also organized in favor of the plan.

⁹ John Persinos, "How a Disparate Group of Yankee Rebels Beat Big-Money Casino Operators," *Campaigns & Elections*, August 1995.

¹⁰ Maki Becker and Eric Slater, "Protest of Elsmere Canyon Dump," *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 1995, p. B1.

¹¹ D.L. Mazmanian and D. Morell, *Beyond Superfailure: America's Toxics Policy for the 1990s* (Boulder: Westview Press), 1992.

¹² Barry G. Rabe, *Beyond NIMBY: Hazardous Waste Siting in Canada and the United States*, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 1994.



George Pettinico is assistant editor of *The Public Perspective* and a Sierra Club member