Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Sierra Club Oral History Series

Michael L. Fischer

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE SIERRA CLUB, 1987-1992

With an Introduction by
Susan D. Merrow

Interviews conducted by
Ann Lage
in 1992 and 1993

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the Nation. Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

****

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Michael L. Fischer, "Executive Director of the Sierra Club, 1987-1992," an oral history conducted in 1992 and 1993 by Ann Lage, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1997.

Copy no. 1

Cataloging information

FISCHER, Michael L. (b. 1940) Environmental organization executive

Sierra Club Executive Director, 1987-1992, viii, 192 pp.

Family and childhood in Mississippi and Texas; M.A. in city and regional planning, UC Berkeley, 1967; work with the California Coastal Commission and in Governor Jerry Brown's Office of Planning and Research, 1973-1985; managing the Sierra Club as executive director: the volunteer board of directors, club presidents Richard Cellarius, Larry Downing, Sue Merrow, Phil Berry, adversarial relationships in the club, budget process and financial strains, fund-raising efforts; relations with the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund; electoral politics; defining the executive director's role as environmental leader: lobbying in Washington, working for environmental justice and diversity, spokesman for the Arctic and the California desert, fostering Sierra Club chapters and groups.

Introduction by Susan D. Merrow, Past President, Sierra Club

Interviewed 1992, 1993 by Ann Lage.

TABLE OF CONTENTS--Michael L. Fischer

PREFACE i

INTRODUCTION by Susan D. Merrow iv

INTERVIEW HISTORY vi

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION viii

I FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY YEARS 1
Childhood 1
First Backpacking Trip: Yosemite National Park (1960) 4
College, Graduate School, and Early Career Choices 5
Family Influences and Mentors 8

II BEFORE THE SIERRA CLUB: THE ENVIRONMENTAL ARENA 12
City Planning Work 12
Coastal Legislation and the Sierra Club in the Late Sixties 14
Executive Director of the North Central Region Coastal Commission (1973-1976) 15
Sierra Club and Coastal Zone Management 19
Regional Coastal Commissioners and Staff 20
Deputy Director of Office of Planning and Research in the Jerry Brown Administration 23
Executive Director of the California Coastal Commission 27
Working with Women on Boards and in Politics 29
Environmental Consulting: Sedway-Cooke (1985-1987) 32
Single Parenting and Remarriage 34

III EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE SIERRA CLUB, 1987-1992 36
The Hiring Process 36
History of Club Membership 40
Understanding the Organization: Two Separate Sierra Clubs 42
The Board and Executive Director Doug Wheeler 46
Replacing Director of Finance Len Levitt 50
Andrea Bonnette: Modernized Financial Controls, Poor People Skills 54
Mike McCloskey's Role 62
Working with Larry Downing and Richard Cellarius as Club Presidents 66
Sue Merrow's Presidency: 1990 to 1991 70
Phil Berry's Presidency: 1991-1992 72
Board of Directors: Culture, Role, Administrivia 77
Budget Process 79
Revenue Ups and Downs 86
Budget Cuts and the "July Massacre," 1991 91
Staff Unionization 93
Fund Raising and the Centennial Campaign 98
Corporate Sponsorship and the McDonald's Controversy 108

A Rocky Relationship with the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund 111

IV THE OUTSIDE ROLE OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR 120
Defining a Role in External Affairs 120
Success in Electoral Politics, Dangers of Working Within the Political System 123
Searching for Environmental Justice 125
Lack of Diversity in the Major Environmental Organizations 133
Firsthand Experiences in the Arctic and the California Desert 138
Memorable Lobbying Experiences 141
Fostering the Strength of Chapters and Groups 146
Leaving the Club 151
1989 Earthquake 153
Centennial Speech 156
Current and Future Plans 157

TAPE GUIDE 162

APPENDICES
A. Evaluation Criteria for Executive Director, July 1987 163
B. 1990 Accomplishments 168
C. Centennial Address, Harpers Ferry, May 28, 1992 169
D. Outgoing Remarks to the Board of Directors, November 14, 1992 178
E. Sierra Club Oral History Series List 182

INDEX 187

PREFACE--Sierra Club Oral History Program to 1978

In fall 1969 and spring 1970 a self-appointed committee of Sierra Clubbers met several times to consider two vexing and related problems. The rapid membership growth of the club and its involvement in environmental issues on a national scale left neither time nor resources to document the club's internal and external history. Club records were stored in a number of locations and were inaccessible for research. Further, we were failing to take advantage of the relatively new technique of oral history by which the reminiscences of club leaders and members of long standing could be preserved.

The ad hoc committee's recommendation that a standing History Committee be established was approved by the Sierra Club Board of Directors in May 1970. That September the board designated The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley as the official repository of the club's archives. The large collection of records, photographs, and other memorabilia known as the "Sierra Club Papers" is thus permanently protected, and the Bancroft is preparing a catalog of these holdings which will be invaluable to students of the conservation movement.

The History Committee then focused its energies on how to develop a significant oral history program. A six-page questionnaire was mailed to members who had joined the club prior to 1931. More than half responded, enabling the committee to identify numerous older members as likely prospects for oral interviews. (Some had hiked with John Muir!) Other interviewees were selected from the ranks of club leadership over the past six decades.

Those committee members who volunteered as interviewers were trained in this discipline by Willa Baum, head of the Bancroft's Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) and a nationally recognized authority in this field. Further interviews have been completed in cooperation with university oral history classes at California State University, Fullerton; Columbia University, New York; and the University of California, Berkeley. Extensive interviews with major club leaders are most often conducted on a professional basis through the Regional Oral History Office.

Copies of the Sierra Club oral interviews are placed at The Bancroft Library, in the Department of Special Collections at UCLA, and at the club's Colby Library, and may be purchased at cost by club regional offices, chapters, and groups, as well as by other libraries, institutions, and interested individuals.

Our heartfelt gratitude for their help in making the Sierra Club Oral History Project a success goes to each interviewee and interviewer; to everyone who has written an introduction to an oral history; to the Sierra Club Board of Directors for its recognition of the long-term importance of this effort; to the Trustees of the Sierra Club Foundation for generously providing the necessary funding; to club and foundation staff, especially to Michael McCloskey, Denny Wilcher, Colburn Wilbur, and Nicholas Clinch; to Willa Baum and Susan Schrepfer of the Regional Oral History Office; and last but far from least, to the members of the History Committee, and particularly to Ann Lage, who has coordinated the oral history effort since 1974.

You are cordially invited to read and enjoy any or all of the oral histories in the Sierra Club series. By so doing you will learn much of the club's history which is available nowhere else, and of the fascinating careers and accomplishments of many outstanding club leaders and members.

Marshall H. Kuhn
Chairman, History Committee
1970-1978

May 1, 1977
San Francisco
(revised March, 1992, A.L.)

The Sierra Club Oral History Program, 1978-1992

Inspired by the vision of its founder and first chairman, Marshall Kuhn, the Sierra Club History Committee continued to expand its oral history program following his death in 1978. In 1980, with five ROHO interviews completed or underway and thirty-five volunteer-conducted interviews available for research, the History Committee sought and received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities for a major project focusing on the Sierra Club of the 1960s and 1970s. In a four-year period, NEH and matching Sierra Club funds made possible the completion of an additional seventeen major oral histories conducted by the Regional Oral History Office and forty-four volunteer-conducted interviews.

Oral histories produced during and following the NEH grant period have documented the leadership, programs, strategies, and ideals of the national Sierra Club as well as the club grassroots at the regional and chapter levels over the past thirty years. The work of the club is seen in all its variety--from education to litigation to legislative lobbying; from energy policy to urban issues to wilderness preservation; from California to the Carolinas to Alaska, and on the international scene.

The Sierra Club oral history program, together with the extensive Sierra Club papers and photographic collection in The Bancroft Library--a collection of 1325 linear feet of archival records, more than 34,000 photographs, and films, tapes, and Sierra Club publications, all with detailed on-line finding aids--make accessible to researchers over one hundred years of Sierra Club history.

Special thanks for the oral history project's later phase are due Maxine McCloskey, Kent Gill, and Elden Hughes, volunteer leaders of the club committed to preserving its history; Susan Schrepfer, codirector of the NEH Sierra Club Documentation Project; members of the History Committee; and most importantly, the interviewees and interviewers for their unfailing cooperation.

Ann Lage, Coordinator
Sierra Club Oral History Program

Berkeley, California
March 1997

INTRODUCTION by Susan D. Merrow

I am honored to have an opportunity to add a personal note of affection, gratitude, and admiration to this volume of fascinating Sierra Club history seen through the eyes of Michael Fischer. Oral histories like this one weave the strands that bind one generation of Sierra Club members to the next. It is so important to remind ourselves that the history of the club is really a long, unbroken line of remarkable individuals. Michael Fischer is just such a remarkable individual, and his ideas, convictions, and style have left an indelible mark on the club. Our friendship has left an indelible mark on me.

The year I spent as president of the Sierra Club was probably the most challenging, exasperating, fulfilling, frustrating, rewarding, and exhausting of my entire life to that point. Yet, I would have signed on without a moment's hesitation to do it all over again, had circumstances permitted. When I look back at the people who made that year what it came to be for me and for the Sierra Club, I think immediately and fondly of Michael Fischer. I am grateful for the alignment of planets that brought each of us, at the same point in time, to leadership positions in the venerable institution which we both so dearly loved.

Very early in our working relationship, Michael and I attended a workshop designed to train the chief staff officer and chief elected officer of an "association" to work effectively together. The premise of that workshop--and one which became the guiding principle of our work together--was that together in our respective roles, Michael and I were the chief executive officer of the Sierra Club. Of course we each had our responsibilities and resources to bring to the table, but each of us would succeed only if we learned to complement each other and respect each other's role. That notion guided us through a remarkable year--one which saw the Gulf War, a deepened energy crisis, internal club stresses and strains, and the beginnings of the recession.

Early on in Michael's and my relationship, I distinctly remember contemplating that Michael and I each had the reputation of being "nice," sometimes "too nice." I actually worried that if it came down to playing good cop-bad cop, neither of us was cut out to be the bad cop. If there was ever a time when that actually became an issue, it has long since faded from my memory. Instead, Michael taught me a lesson that serves me to this day: listen to your instincts to be kind. Err on the side of kindness. You will seldom be wrong.

My most enduring mental image of Michael is of him square dancing in a camp recreation hall somewhere near central Maine. It endures because, not only is square dancing after a long day in the environmental public

policy trenches so much a part of the Sierra Club, but also because it was so "Michael" to reach out and grab hold of club experiences great and small, and to do so with great good humor. Upon Michael's leaving the club, I made him a certificate for "frequent square dancer miles," good for some future opportunity to volunteer time and energy to some environmental cause. I hope that he occasionally looks at those mementoes and thinks fondly of the camaraderie that holds the Sierra Club together. The fact of the matter was that Michael waded into those weekend retreats and into all the club's gatherings and struggles with the aplomb and energy of an indefagitable square dancer. He taught me to be courageous and optimistic when things look bleak. I am grateful for his infectious courage and optimism.

I have tried to take some of Michael's optimism and good humor into my present life as the "executive director" or chief elected official of a small town. Life's square dance has certainly been made richer for me by the time I spent pursuing the cause of a better environment with Michael Fischer.

Susan D. Merrow
Sierra Club President, 1990-1991

March 1996
East Haddam, Connecticut

INTERVIEW HISTORY--Michael L. Fischer

The oral history with Michael L. Fischer, the fourth executive director of the Sierra Club, was undertaken at the request of the Sierra Club History Committee, chaired by Maxine McCloskey. As the wife of Mike McCloskey, the Sierra Club's second executive director, Maxine McCloskey knew how much valuable history of the club and its internal culture resided only in the memory banks of its leaders. She urged the Regional Oral History Office to capture Michael Fischer's memories of his five and a half years with the club while they were still fresh.

The initial two interviews were recorded at the Sierra Club's national headquarters in San Francisco in November 1992. Michael Fischer had given notice the previous May, his successor had been selected, and he was preparing to leave the club at the end of December. The final two interviews took place at his home in Mill Valley in January 1993. This timing undoubtedly contributes to his detailed recall of events and the immediacy of his candid comments on the club and its leaders.

While his oral history reflects his immersion in the club and its problems, at the same time Mr. Fischer brings a sense of perspective, based on his professional training and previous career experience, to the very recent events he discusses. Michael Fischer took the Sierra Club's top staff position in 1987, with an educational background and experience as a city and regional planner and twelve years in California state government. He had served as executive director of the North Coast Regional Coastal Zone Conservation Commission (1973-1976), deputy director of the Governor's Office of Planning and Research (1976-1978), and executive director of the statewide California Coastal Commission (1978-1985). He knew the Sierra Club primarily through its chapters, groups, and members with whom he made common cause in coastal legislation and regulatory action. The sometimes painful process of learning about the unique organizational culture of the national Sierra Club is documented in this oral history.

It is a reflection of the realities of his position that at least two-thirds of his discussion of the Sierra Club is devoted to what Mr. Fischer calls the "inside role" of the executive director: management of personnel and budgetary crises, fund-raising strategies, relations with volunteer leaders, and conflicts with the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund.

In the final interview session, Michael Fischer turned to the discussion of his "outside role"--those too-few moments when he was able to concentrate on the environmental mission of the Sierra Club. He articulates his commitment to promoting issues of environmental justice and increasing ethnic diversity in the major environmental organizations. He speaks of his first-hand experiences in, and lobbying efforts on behalf of, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the California Desert. And he describes his efforts to strengthen the club's local chapters and groups,

the home of the grassroots volunteers whom he considers the source of the Sierra Club's powerful conservation activism.

Once the Fischer oral history was recorded, it was set aside until further funding became available from the Sierra Club for transcription and editing. When he reviewed the transcript in January of 1996, Michael Fischer was happily settled in his current position as executive director of the California State Coastal Conservancy. He made only minor corrections to the transcript and added a note in conclusion: "It was a fantastic honor to have held the position for five and a half years. I'm proud and thrilled to have been at the club--and pleased to be there no longer."

Only a brief treatment of Michael Fischer's career before 1987 could be included in this Sierra Club sponsored oral history. At ROHO's request, the California State Archives State Government Oral History Program funded a second oral history with Mr. Fischer on his work with the coastal commission and the Office of Research and Planning. This transcript of three interview sessions recorded in July and August of 1993 is available at the California State Archives in Sacramento and at the Bancroft Library. Papers relating to Mr. Fischer's state service are at the California State Archives, and papers relating to his Sierra Club service are included in the Sierra Club Records at the Bancroft Library.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to record the lives of persons who have contributed significantly to the history of California and the West. A major focus of the office since its inception has been environmental history. Funding from the Sierra Club and the advice and encouragement of the Sierra Club History Committee made possible this addition to the Sierra Club Oral History Series. (The series list follows the text of this interview.) The Regional Oral History Office is a division of The Bancroft Library and is under the direction of Willa K. Baum.

Ann Lage
Interviewer/Editor
Coordinator, Sierra Club History Series

February 1997
Berkeley, California

Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California 94720

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name MICHAEL LUDWIG FISCHER

Date of birth MAY 29, 1940 Birthplace DUBUQUE, IOWA

Father's full name CARL MICHAEL FISCHER

Occupation EDUCATOR Birthplace KEWANEE, ILLINOIS

Mother's full name THERESE MARIE (STADLER) FISCHER

Occupation SPECIAL ED TEACHER Birthplace LEAD, SOUTH DAKOTA

Your spouse JANE AUSTIN (PUGHE) ROGERS

Occupation FOUNDATION EXECUTIVE Birthplace EL PASO, TEXAS

Your children CHRISTINA MARIE (1965) AND STEVEN MICHAEL (1967)
THEIR MOTHER IS LEILA CLAIRE (STERLING) KNUIST

Where did you grow up? MISSISSIPPI & TEXAS

Present community MILL VALLEY, CA

Education CENTRAL CATHOLIC '57 HS, SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS; ASSOC. IN ARTS, FOOTHILL COLLEGE '61, LOS ALTOS, CA; BA/POLI SCI, SANTA CLARA '64 UNIV; MASTER OF CITY & REGIONAL PLANNING '67, UC BERKELEY

Occupation(s) ENVIRONMENTAL EXECUTIVE (SEE WHO'S WHO IN AMERICA & WHO'S WHO IN THE WEST)

Areas of expertise URBAN AFFAIRS, COASTAL ZONE MANAGEMENT, LAND USE PLANNING AND REGULATION, NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT, SOCIALLY SCREENED INVESTMENTS

Other interests or activities SHIP MODEL BUILDING, PHOTOGRAPHY, READING, HIKING, TRAVEL

Organizations in which you are active YOSEMITE RESTORATION TRUST, NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL, CALVERT SOCIAL INVESTMENT FUND

I FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY YEARS

[Interview 1: November 6, 1992]##[1]

Childhood

Lage: This is the first session with Michael Fischer for the Sierra Club Oral History series, and today is November 6, 1992.

Fischer: Eight-thirty in the morning.

Lage: Right. We're off to an early start.

We want to get background today, to find out how you have developed the kind of interests that you've displayed. Shall we start with basics--when you were born, where you were born?

Fischer: Sure. I was born in Dubuque, Iowa, on May 29, 1940, and lived there for about six months, never to return.

Lage: A molding experience.

Fischer: That's right. It was wartime, and my dad [Carl Michael Fischer] worked for the Merchant Marine Academy and for the USO [United Service Organizations], so we moved around quite a bit. The first ten years of my life were basically spent on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. We lived in Gulfport and Pass Christian and Biloxi.

Lage: What did your father do?

---

[1]This symbol (##) indicates that a tape or tape segment has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

Fischer: Dad was a teacher. He also, during those ten years, taught for a bit down in the Rio Grande Valley, but mostly USO during the war, and then English and history teaching after the war.

Then, in 1950, we moved to San Antonio, Texas, and I lived there until 1960 when the family moved to California.

Lage: Again, to follow your father's job?

Fischer: Yes. Dad got a job working at the University of Santa Clara as a professor and guidance counselor. In that second ten years in San Antonio, he was a guidance counselor and educational tester.

So I went to eight different grade schools, with one little stint there, I guess it was in second or third grade, in Pontiac, Illinois--my folks are from Pontiac and Kewanee, Illinois. So here we were, two midwestern parents living in the Deep South most of the time.

Lage: That must have been an interesting experience.

Fischer: It was very interesting. We were quite poor and tended to live in the black neighborhoods. We were also Catholic, so being poor and Catholic and living in the black neighborhoods in the South was a challenging experience.

Lage: And did you go to public school?

Fischer: No, I went to Catholic schools, with the exception of the first grade, where I went to the Gulf Coast Military Academy where Dad was a teacher. That was an experience in itself. But to be called a nigger-lover, and to be seen as cloven-hoofed as a non-Baptist was, as I say, challenging.

Lage: So there really is that kind of sentiment, the anti-Catholic sentiment, in the South?

Fischer: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Particularly in those first ten years. Then in San Antonio, it wasn't anti-Catholic at all, because San Antonio is more than 50 percent Mexican American.

Lage: Were the Catholic schools integrated?

Fischer: Yes, but just barely. There was a class problem. You had to pay tuition, even though the tuition wasn't very much. My folks basically paid all their discretionary income for tuition for the Catholic schools. So yes, they were integrated, but not very, I guess. I was struck by the fact that even though we had black people over for dinner on Sundays and that sort of thing, and

particularly in Mississippi, we'd go down to the Gulf on the community pier and fish for crabs, and we'd get into somebody's backyard oftentimes, a black neighbor's backyard, and put water in our washtub and build a fire in the backyard, and have a crab boil.

But when I left San Antonio and went to Notre Dame for the first two years, I was unprepared for life in a truly integrated community, where I would actually stand in line for the movie next to a black person. That wasn't done in the South.

Lage: So in the South, you were very much part of the community of the black--

Fischer: In a peripheral way. In San Antonio, our high school and grade school were quite integrated so far as the Latino community was concerned. Very few black people in San Antonio in those times. But in the Mississippi Gulf Coast, yes, I was part of the lower income community.

Lage: And was that a mixed community, or were you one of the few white people?

Fischer: Well, we were one of the few whites. Generally speaking, it wasn't done to mix. You were either "Po' white trash," or you were black, or you were middle income striving to be upper middle income.

Lage: Now, did your parents have a different philosophical outlook?

Fischer: Yes. My folks were from the Midwest, and they were from a couple of progressive families. So those values were taught to me very early. One of the reasons I don't have a Southern accent is that I was taught not to say "ain't," not to say "pitcher," but "It's picture, Son," and that sort of thing. But I can sure pick it up fairly quickly, going back.

Lage: Did you have siblings?

Fischer: My sister is a year and a half younger. She was born in Baltimore. My brother is six years younger. He was born in Pontiac, Illinois. That's the one year, I guess it was second grade, when we went back for a piece of the year to Pontiac.

Lage: And did your mother work?

Fischer: She worked all the time, that's right, because we had to have that money in order to keep the family alive. But basically, as a part-time secretary, or for a while in Pass Christian she ran

the Southern Women's Exchange, a little retail store on Route 90 where women bring their pralines or their stuffed mammy dolls or the Choctaw Indians would bring in baskets that they made. That was for a couple of years, I guess, and that was fun. It was in the front room of our house. We lived right on the highway.

Lage: What an interesting upbringing!

First Backpacking Trip: Yosemite National Park (1960)

Fischer: Oh, it was, indeed. And interestingly enough, my brother is now a professional mountain climber living in Bishop [California]. When John was in his late teens and twenties, he learned mountain climbing at Dave Brower's feet up at Tuolomne Meadows [Yosemite National Park].

Lage: How did that happen?

Fischer: Just by accident.

Lage: So he's six years younger than you, you said?

Fischer: Yes. When we were first out here in California (we moved out in 1960), he and I, that summer, built backpacks ourselves out of a wooden frame kit, and put canvas Boy Scout bags on this handmade frame, and spent a week up in Yosemite doing the high country loop. It was the first outdoor experience really that either of us had had.

Lage: What motivated that trip? Because it just doesn't sound like you'd come out of Texas and discover the Sierra.

Fischer: We came out of Texas and were bowled over by, first, the Grand Canyon, and then as we were moving into our house in Cupertino, of all places, I was flipping through the Compton's Encyclopedia and saw a fantastic photograph, probably an Ansel Adams photograph, of Yosemite Valley. I remember the whole family gathering around, saying, "Wow! Let's go see that!"

That started a family tradition. We were from Texas, remember, so driving long distances was second nature. In the first five years, the early sixties, we probably made, oh, at least a half a dozen day trips a year to Yosemite. We'd get up at six in the morning, and we'd get there by ten. We'd leave there by eight and get home by midnight. That was, hey, that's

what you did when you were in Texas. Four hours one way is nothing.

I remember our first trip into the valley. It was just stunning. And it was because we saw the picture in Compton's Encyclopedia and wanted to see where we were. And then it was fantastic.

John was not a comfortable student in high school, and that week-long trip up into Merced, the little Yosemite Valley up the Merced River, was like a new window into the universe for him. So the outdoors became his school.

Lage: And how about yourself as a student?

College, Graduate School, and Early Career Choices

Fischer: Well, I had gone to Notre Dame and had my choice of many colleges. I was a relatively good student in school, and my folks had this theory that they were responsible for getting me through high school, and the kids were responsible for anything thereafter. So I tried for and won a [United States] Navy scholarship, and I chose [University of] Notre Dame for that. My jobs during summertime had been with a survey party with a civil engineering firm, and I found that enjoyable. For a kid, working outdoors, using both your head and your hands, it was lots of fun.

So I decided to go into civil engineering. Civil engineering at Notre Dame--don't forget, this was 1957, the year of Sputnik--civil engineering was, I learned to my dismay, a training, not an education. Even Notre Dame waived theology requirements, they waived the regular state of Indiana general educational requirements, so my first two years there I had not a trace of history, English, philosophy, theology, or languages. I knew, particularly given the kind of upbringing that I had, that I wasn't there to get a training. All my classmates were these--we didn't use the word "geek" or "nerd" at the time--but they had slide rules on their belts and thought of nothing other than strength of materials and statistics and physics and calculus. I was in agony.

So, after the first semester, I went to the College of Arts and Letters and asked to transfer, and they said, "Sure, great." Then I went to the navy and the navy said, "Wait a minute, it's going to take you an extra semester to get your degree, because

you've missed all these history, et cetera, courses. We need engineers in the navy, so permission to transfer is denied."

Lage: I didn't realize they exercised that kind of control.

Fischer: Sure.

Lage: Was it an NROTC [Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps] scholarship?

Fischer: Yes. So I had the naval requirements; they wanted me out in four years, and they really wanted me to be an engineer. So I did the only sensible thing: I flunked out. [Laughter]

Lage: Did you think of it that consciously?

Fischer: No, I didn't. It was a very, very painful experience for the family and for me. But flunk out I did. Even though I was supposed to go into the navy, there was a very thoughtful chief petty officer there who separated me from the service, so I moved out to California and began life anew.

I had no idea what I wanted to do, and, having crashed and burned, I was still sort of repairing myself. But I went immediately to night school at Foothill Junior College, and like a kid in a candy store, started taking economics and music and history and philosophy courses. Along about that time--

Lage: Where are we now in time?

Fischer: Late 1960. We were still living in this rented tract house in Cupertino, a very new tract house with all these brand-new redwood fences separating house from house, which was a new experience for me. I had just never seen this new--

Lage: Kind of suburban?

Fischer: Yes. Very, very new suburban stuff. My mom found the book, *This is the American Earth*, the Sierra Club's first "exhibit format" (coffee table) book, and gave it to me. It may have been for Christmas in 1960, or birthday in 1961. I read the book with awe and took it to the guidance counselor at Foothill Junior College. She took it home, read it, and then I had another meeting with her. [Her name is Dimi Georgias; retired now, she lives in San Francisco.][1]

---

[1]The preceding bracketed material was added by Mr. Fischer during the editing process.

By this time, I was working for the city of Mountain View on their survey party, civil engineering and surveying.

Lage: [Laughter] So you continued with engineering?

Fischer: Yes, that's right. Like an abused child, all I knew how to do was that. So she said, "Well, you ought to study for political science, and think about city planning." So I targeted those.

Lage: Based on your enthusiasm for *This is the American Earth*?

Fischer: For *This is the American Earth*. You'll read, in the middle of the book, it says, "Hell we are building here on Earth," and it has photographs of tract housing. [Laughter] I was just shocked and reviled by the tracts that we were living in Cupertino, and so that really twanged a sympathetic heart string.

Lage: So it wasn't just nature, but it was also the--

Fischer: Both nature and the urban, human pattern. Because it's all of the same pattern, fabric. So I did in fact think about both. I got my political science degree ultimately at [University of] Santa Clara, while I was working either half time or full time at Mountain View, and I also had a part-time job selling auto parts at Sears. So I was working basically at least forty to sixty hours a week, and going to school full time. But I got my undergraduate degree at Santa Clara.

Lage: In political science?

Fischer: In poli sci. And from the public works department at Mountain View, I wandered down the hall, because she told me to think about city planning, and made friends with the folks in the planning department. They welcomed me in as a part-time draftsman. Then I ultimately got promoted several times, and after my undergraduate degree, was given a full-time assistant planner position at the City of Mountain View.

Worked there for a year before going to grad school, getting my master of city planning degree at Berkeley in '67, I guess it was.

Lage: So you really continued along that course that the guidance counselor had suggested?

Fischer: The guidance counselor looked at *This is the American Earth*, and said, "Do this, young man." I did it. [Laughter] And loved it.

Lage: What attracted you about the planning aspect? I mean, your brother went off and became a mountain climber.

Fischer: That's right. Good question. My brother and I clearly are very different people. But in a way, we took two different careers from the same root course. I think that was a course that was instilled by our folks, the love of sunsets or going out for family picnics, or drives, and looking at the beauties of the hill country of Texas, that sort of thing. My friends and I built a canoe in high school and went down the Pedernales River [Texas] on a week-long trip.

So the outdoors was a bit of my life, but not a lot. My folks weren't hunters or fishermen or anything like that. As a matter of fact, killing things would not have gone down well. Anything having anything to do with guns was forbidden in our family. So appreciation for nature that-- But you asked about city planning.

City planning I found to be exhilarating because it used so many facets of a person: sociology, psychology, architecture, engineering, civics. It was closest to a Renaissance man sort of profession that I could conceive of. And I still think that that's true. I remember wandering through the salt ponds on the shore of San Francisco Bay when I was part of the team doing the first master plan for the city of Mountain View, watching the flocks of birds taking off, and saying to my colleagues, "Oh, we've got to save this the way it is, we can't see this filled and turned into subdivisions," and not knowing exactly why. But then we brought in a biologist professor from San Jose State [University], and he basically taught us why the wetlands were very important. We then taught the city council why that was important.

Lage: So you could see some real benefit to what you were doing.

Fischer: Yes.

Family Influences and Mentors

Lage: Did your family have a particular bent towards. . . . Did they foster ideals of contributing to civic life or doing good for society? Was that something that was part of the family culture?

Fischer: Yes, it sure was, but I can't give you any specifics. I just remember when I was working during the summertime as a soda jerk

at a fountain next to the community swimming pool in the rich part of town, I guess it was in 1956, being glued to the radio listening to the Democratic convention where [John F.] Jack Kennedy was almost nominated vice president, and the sense of civic interest. For a kid nearing the end of high school, that was relatively unique. I think the other kids, who were there enjoying themselves and watching the girls at the swimming pool, thought that I was a real geek, listening to a political convention. So I'm sure that that must have been instilled both by my teachers and by my folks. But no, they didn't run for city council; yes, they did vote.

Actually, Mom was instrumental in trying to get the first public television station established there in San Antonio. I remember the folks thinking that we were kind of pinko-commies for wanting to do something as liberal as that. San Antonio was not a very liberal place to grow up.

Lage: Were your parents--did they belong to one party or the other?

Fischer: Oh, sure, Democratic, no question.

Lage: Strong Democratic.

Fischer: Yes.

Lage: Have you ever wavered from that yourself?

Fischer: Oh, only to go independent from time to time. [Laughter] I've known some nice Republicans. And I've voted for a couple. The first person on whose campaign I worked was [Congressman Paul N.] Pete McCloskey, who was a Republican down in the Palo Alto-Redwood City area. And I'll tell you a story about Pete later on.

Lage: Okay, so we have you almost to [University of California at] Berkeley. Let's talk a little bit about your graduate school experience there. Was that something significant, or were there particular mentors in that?

Fischer: It was. I actually resented going to grad school because it was kind of like going to get my union card.

Lage: You were already in the field.

Fischer: I was already in the field, had a job.

Lage: Why did you go?

Fischer: Well, because in order to get good promotion opportunities, particularly at that time, having a master of city planning degree put you head and shoulders above the competition. I also was not confident that on-the-job training was going to give me the breadth of either opportunity or experience that I really owed myself or the community. So I said, "Well, let's take the two years out and get the master's degree."

I had gotten married in 1964, and by the time I decided to go to grad school, we had a baby. So it was one of these moderately stressful, certainly financially stressful, experiences.

Lage: You had to go full-time?

Fischer: Sure.

Lage: This wasn't a forty-hour-work week.

Fischer: That's right, had to go full-time. And indeed, it was full-time, though I worked part-time at ABAG [Association of Bay Area Governments] during those years.

Lage: Was it a two-year program?

Fischer: Two-year program, with an internship required in between the two years.

Lage: Have ideas on city planning changed since the sixties? I think of stress on urban renewal, for instance, in the earlier years. It's been sort of rejected since then.

Fischer: Well, at the time, there were three paths at the Department of City and Regional Planning at Berkeley. One was urban physical planning, which focused on land-use policy. That was what I was interested in. Architecture, landscape architecture, urban physical planners. The second stress was on housing and urban development, and the renewal types, urban renewal types, were in that specialty. The third was called urban systems, and the computer modeling freaks were in that.

Lage: Even back in '64?

Fischer: Right, '65 to '67, right. So I think the urban physical planning emphasis went into decline at Berkeley, but I was there at the time just before it did. Basically, that's where city planning came from, was the urban physical planner types which sprang from the landscape architecture folks.

And you asked about mentors. Yes, Francis Violich, and Jack Kent [Thomas John Kent, Jr.], and Corwin Mocine are the people that I remember most. Jack Kent is still very active in the Green Belt Alliance here in the Bay Area, and both he and Corwin are active in the Planning and Conservation League [PCL], which was the country's first environmental 501(c)4 lobby, even beat the Sierra Club at that business.

I've retained, oh, let's say half a dozen moderately close friends from high school, and another half a dozen moderately close friends from grad school. None from Notre Dame or Santa Clara. [Laughter]

Lage: Are they people we would know here in the local area?

Fischer: No, I don't think so.

II BEFORE THE SIERRA CLUB: THE ENVIRONMENTAL ARENA

City Planning Work

Lage: Now where did you go from UC Berkeley?

Fischer: Well, the city of Mountain View, as I've said, is kind of woven through the undergraduate period, and then when I left grad school, I got the only job for which I really had to search in my whole career, with the County of San Mateo. Here I was, I had used up all the savings through grad school, really needed a job. So I went to work for the County of San Mateo and hated it. Talk about bureaucracy. The planning director, with every breath he took, screamed out that he wanted to stay there until retirement. He didn't want to rock any boats.

Lage: It was different from Mountain View?

Fischer: Very different from Mountain View; several different planning directors I worked for there.

So I became quite active in the American Institute of Planners [AIP]. I had been a student member. Interestingly enough, that also was unique. My fellow grad students were not joiners. I think there might have been one other member of AIP, but I had become active in AIP, and I was vice chairman of the state housing committee. In that role, without knowing the term, I began to build a network. That has been one of my trademarks throughout my career. I tend to make friends and keep friends. Gregarious person, I guess.

Lage: And are you a joiner?

Fischer: Yes. I guess so. Well, at least I was then. I'm not so much now. The Sierra Club is kind of all-consuming, though even here

I'm now on the board of directors of Friends of the Earth, and before then was on the board of directors of American Youth Hostels. So I guess that's a joiner-style approach.

Lage: Did anything in your graduate school experience change your approach to city and regional planning? Did you feel like a different sort when you came out?

Fischer: No, I didn't. I really ended the two years still thinking that, well, this was an enjoyable--I started by resenting it and figuring I wasn't going to like it, and I was going to suffer these damn two years just to get that ticket so that I could get promotions. And I ended it by resenting the time out of my career, but finding that it had in fact been enjoyable and somewhat stimulating.

Lage: And then you went back to a similar type of job.

Fischer: So I went back to a similar type of job, took a side trip off that ladder, and then went back onto the ladder with the expectation that I would get promotions. The truth is that it was the network building in the American Institute of Planners more than the master of city planning degree that served me well in the career. Because I went to the County of San Mateo, hated it, spent a lot of extracurricular time working on the housing committee and housing legislation, getting to know people in Sacramento, and the outgoing executive director of SPUR [San Francisco Planning and Urban Renewal (now Research) Association], a civic organization in San Francisco, who also was active in AIP, knew me through that, and he recommended me to his successor as a new associate executive director.

Lage: And who were the outgoing and the--

Fischer: John Hirten was the outgoing executive director. He went from SPUR back to [Washington] D.C. to join the Nixon Department of Transportation, and from there went off to be transportation director in Honolulu, Hawaii, and is just back to San Francisco in the last couple of years, as executive director of Rides for Bay Area Commuters. And John Jacobs was his understudy at the time, and John became then executive director of SPUR, years later became executive director of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, is now retired.

But John Jacobs hired me, and for five years, I was John's associate executive director, being a civic activist here in San Francisco. As associate director, I was the person who worked with the volunteer committees. SPUR is very much a volunteer-run outfit, somewhat like a mini-Sierra Club. We had a dozen

committees dealing with housing, and education, and transportation, and parks and recreation, and regional planning, and it was I who staffed each of those committees, helped them write their papers, and helped write editorials for them to record on KNBR [local radio station]. It was I who attended the daytime public hearings of the board of supervisors and testified before the board.

Lage: What were the issues during those five years?

Fischer: Oh, whether or not to build the southern crossing bridge [across San Francisco Bay], for instance, which I was one of the principal spokesmen against back in those days. Sierra Club folks got to see me in that kind of environmentalist role. Whether or not to extend the life of BCDC, the Bay Conservation and Development Commission, which was a temporary state agency.

As a matter of fact, I followed [Joseph E.] Joe Bodovitz, who had been the associate executive director at SPUR. I became Joe's successor at SPUR. Joe left SPUR to become the head of the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission [BCDC].

Coastal Legislation and the Sierra Club in the Late Sixties

Fischer: Then, in the late sixties, coastal legislation became a big deal, and by that time, as well as working at SPUR, I had become the AIP delegate to the Planning and Conservation League board of directors. While in that seat, I was appointed chairman of a mediating board, because the Sierra Club and PCL were at loggerheads over coastal legislation. So I got to be moderately well known and well versed in the details of coastal legislation, and why this direction was a better environmental direction than that one. So I was able to make peace between Sierra Club and PCL.

Lage: Did you reach a middle position?

Fischer: No, I would say the more aggressive position was the one that was--well, let me see. The main issue between us was whether or not there should be any local elected officials on the coastal commission, and yes, we arrived at a middle position saying that half of the commission should be local elected officials, and half John Q. Citizens. The Sierra Club had said no local elected officials, and the legislators were saying all local elected officials, and so we at PCL went half and half. We convinced

Sierra Club to go along with that as the only compromise that was likely to make it through--

##

Lage: The legislature never resolved that issue when it went on to--

Fischer: That's right, it went on to become a citizen initiative, and if I were able to do anything over again, I would have taken that citizen initiative and beefed it up a bit. Because there were compromises made during the three years that the legislature was unable to enact legislation. The state assembly enacted it each of those three years, but the state senate, bunch of old boys from local government and from the development community, killed it each year.

So we then took, we citizens took the draft legislation that had gone through the committee hearing process and put that before the people, basically saying to those who were opposing an initiative process, saying that this was a very unsophisticated way of getting complex legislation. Our rationale was, wait a minute, this has been through the legislative process, and yes, many legislators have looked at it, and we have kept those compromises intact.

I don't know that that was really an important answer to give to very many citizens, and if we had gone back two years earlier and beefed it up again, it probably still would have passed. And I frankly would have preferred to have done that, in hindsight.

Lage: The initiative process was not used the way it is today.

Fischer: That's right, it was not that frequently used. Though, remember, this is called Proposition 20, so that meant twenty initiatives were on the ballot that year. They started over numbering every year, unlike now.

Executive Director of the North Central Region Coastal Commission (1973-1976)

Fischer: So I was active in the Proposition 20 fight, and when the coastal commissions were created, my boss, John Jacobs, said, "Well, why don't you try for one of the regional executive director jobs?" "Oh, no," said I, "I'm not ready to be a boss. I don't have any management experience." "Well, but you've got a lot of civic

experience, and a lot of testifying experience, a lot of political savvy. Go for it!"

"Oh, no, I kind of like working here." And so basically he had to kick me in the butt. So I put my hat in both rings: the region from San Mateo-Santa Cruz-Monterey Counties, and I came in number two there. I put my hat in the San Francisco-Marin-Sonoma County one, and won that seat. I was proud later on, a couple of years later, to have the chairman of the commission down in San Mateo, Santa Cruz, and Monterey say, "Boy, did we mess up; we sure should have hired you." That was nice.

Lage: That's nice to hear.

Fischer: Yes. And those were exciting times.

Lage: So you were right in at the beginning. That must have been exciting.

Fischer: Very beginning. Starting up a brand-new state agency that was created by the people, as opposed to created by the system, and kind of jostling for position with the Department of Parks and Recreation, and the Fish and Game Commission, et cetera, was very interesting. Not to mention the fact that the first day in office, here were one hundred permit applicants wanting to file for their permits, or wanting to file for their claims of exemption from needing a permit, and we didn't even have permit application forms. I mean, we had to start from scratch.

Lage: So you had to learn some managerial ability quickly.

Fischer: Like right away, that's right. How to hire a staff, how to rent an office, how to design permit application forms, et cetera. That was exciting.

Lage: Were they all left on their own, the various commissions?

Fischer: Each of the regional commissions was pretty much left on their own, yes. That was interesting. Probably not the way I would have done it. But the intriguing thing is that Joe Bodovitz now, name that I mentioned earlier, went from the Bay Conservation and Development Commission, becoming the first executive director of the California Coastal Commission. So he and I got to know each other.

Just by happenstance, the day of this interview is the day of the twentieth anniversary celebration of the coastal commission, so I will leave here to go down to Monterey for a day and a half party for all the former staff and former

commissioners. So you can't get me talking on this coastal commission stuff too long, or I'll use up all the stories that I need to tell the folks in Moss Beach this evening.[1]

Lage: That's okay, it will get you thinking about it.

Fischer: That's right.

But the coastal commission was a very exciting time. People who attended the commission meetings were never fewer than one hundred and usually two hundred people in the audience, even if they didn't have any immediate business before the commission. Citizens really wanted to see how <u>their</u> commission was protecting <u>their</u> coast.

Lage: And you were in an area with high environmental interest.

Fischer: Oh, yes. Marin County, the Marin County Civic Center was always overflowing. Or, if we took our hearings up to Cazadero or Bodega Bay or Bolinas or Gualala, we occasionally needed police protection. There were several bomb threats, and there were people who were armed and angry at those meetings.

Lage: My goodness. People on the side of development?

Fischer: That's right. You know, scratch a farmer, find a speculator; scratch a hunter, find a person who's interested in untrammeled liberty to do whatever they want to do with their property. "I want to build a gravel mine on my property, by God, I'll do it. I want to cut all the trees down off my property, by God, this is mine; who are you to tell me I can't? Who are you to say I've got to allow public access over my property to get down to the beach? What sort of commie are you?" And so, very interesting community of environs from southern Marin and San Francisco, and the property-rights--redneck is too strong a word, but close--property-rights activists of the north coast. Very, very intriguing.

Lage: Now, how far north, in Sonoma?

Fischer: To Sonoma County, up to Sea Ranch, which is four hours north.

Lage: Up to, or including?

---

[1]On the ride back home from that party, Will Shafroth, then in Governor Wilson's Resources Agency and a member of the Commission, spoke up from the back seat. "I know what you should do next, Michael: be a fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School. I'll call them and see if they're interested." He did; they were.

Fischer: Including Sea Ranch.

Lage: So were you involved in the Sea Ranch--

Fischer: Oh, yes. I continue to this day every now and then to go vacation at Sea Ranch, and to this day, I must use my wife's name to make the reservation, not mine. The name Michael Fischer is very well known at Sea Ranch. [Laughter]

Lage: You know, when I mentioned that I was interviewing you around the office, I was told by more than one person, "You've got to also interview Michael Fischer on the coastal commission." This would require separate funding--I hope that would that be agreeable to you.

Fischer: Okay, sure. I'd love to.

Lage: We can get some separate funding, maybe from the coastal commission.[2]

Fischer: Sure. I've got--poor coastal commission just really suffered a financial hit from the governor, an unexpected financial hit just about two months ago, so I don't think they have spare change this year, but maybe next year. I've just made notes for two speeches today and tomorrow. I have to give one today and one tomorrow on the coastal commission, so I'll keep those notes.

Lage: Yes, keep those notes, because this is such important history.

Fischer: Well, as a matter of fact, I have all of my files. They're right now in my sister's garage in Sacramento, but I want to put them into the state archives from the coastal commission days.[3] That's where they are now. 1973-1985. I was executive director of the regional coastal commission for three years, then went to the governor's office for two, and then was executive director of the state coastal commission for seven years. So ten years of my life, and while I was in the governor's office making sure the commission was reauthorized and paying attention to the commission. So twelve years out of the commission's twenty, I've been an active participant.

---

[2]Michael L. Fischer, Oral History Interview, conducted 1992 and 1993 by Ann Lage. Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, for the California State Archives State Government Oral History Program.

[3]That's where they now are, 1973-85--MLF.

Sierra Club and Coastal Zone Management

Fischer: The Sierra Club was a very, very active part of coastal zone management. I was not only working in cahoots with them, because it fell to my role to take permit applications and then prepare a staff recommendation, either approval or denial, or approval with conditions. Sometimes those approvals with conditions were denials masquerading as approvals. But we very early on, my staff and I, got to know Sierra Club activists in the different counties of the state, throughout my whole tenure at the commission, and turned to them for advice and suggestions. "OK, here's what the developer's telling us, now, what do you guys say?" So the citizen-activists of the Sierra Club really did become extensions of the wit and wisdom and understanding and process of the commission.

Lage: Did you find them to be well-informed?

Fischer: Oh, yes. Well-informed, courageous, and unstinting with their time and attention. Lucille Vinyard up in Mendocino County, and Bill Kortum and the folks of COAAST, the Californians Organized to Acquire Access to State Tidelands, C-O-A-A-S-T. Big overlap between COAAST and Sierra Club folks. And of course, the Marin County Sierra Club people. Interestingly enough, San Franciscans never played an important role either way, developers or environmentalists.

Lage: Is that because there wasn't as much San Francisco coast to--

Fischer: Well, there weren't very many coastal issues, because Sunset District was developed all the way down to Ocean Beach, but one would have thought that San Franciscans would have cared about the Marin coast or the Sonoma coast.

Lage: Yes, and San Mateo coast.

Fischer: Yes. We would find them as landowners at Sea Ranch, but we wouldn't find them as citizen-activists trying to protect those regional open space values, which has been puzzling and disappointing to me.

Lage: Were you satisfied with the compromise that Sea Ranch--

Fischer: Oh, it was far as we could have gone. They wanted 5,200 units; that's what the county had approved. There were about 700 houses built when we showed up, and about 1,200 lots subdivided and sold when we showed up.

Lage: Surprising that they didn't get grandfathered.

Fischer: Well, they wanted to. They wanted to grandfather the whole 5,200. And they had some arguments that would have justified that sort of grandfathering. But there was an interesting tension there, because the 700 people who had their houses and the 1,200 people who had their lots, they kind of didn't want 5,200 lots to be built. I mean, they had theirs, screw the developer. So the developer had to spend a lot of time and energy fomenting anger and resentment on the part of those 1,200 people against the commission, so that they could stay linked, because they weren't necessarily natural friends. But the developer did spend a lot of time and energy doing that, and they did stay linked for most of the time.

But we cut it back to 2,300 lots, which was less than half. We did the same thing at Bodega Harbor, which was a similar development on Bodega Bay. We cut that from 1,500 down to 500, I think. And a development called Oceana Marin in Dillon Beach, we cut that back. But there were intense fights, and boy, were the lawyers pulling down lots of money trying to fight us for those grandfathering rights.

Regional Coastal Commissioners and Staff

Lage: Now, how about your commissioners? This is just by way of hooking up to the Sierra Club also.

Fischer: Well, exactly. The experience that I had with commissioners I figured was a very good experience in education for the Sierra Club, because by virtue of the way they were composed, half elected officials, and many of those elected officials were tools of the development community--

Lage: As the Sierra Club had feared in the initial legislation.

Fischer: That's right. And because they had to serve their constituency, and many of their constituents wanted to develop, to increase the tax base, if for no other reason, or it's, "Hey, scratch a farmer, find a speculator. Farmer Jones owns land in Half Moon Bay, and Farmer Jones expects to be able to develop his land in Half Moon Bay just like the farmer next door to him did before the coastal commission." And when we would come into town saying, "You bought a farm; you've got a farm, and that's all it's ever going to be," that was pretty un-American sort of stuff for many of our commissioners.

So there were some rancorous debates, and I had to serve at the pleasure of this somewhat fractious organization.

Lage: Because I would assume you were not supposed to be developing policy yourself.

Fischer: That's right. But when a permit applicant would come in, the style that I adopted was to put together a staff recommendation, and then the first public hearing would use that staff recommendation as a foil. The developer would know where I was coming from, and she or he would be able to say, "We agree with that, and we'll take all those conditions," or they would be able to oppose it. Rather than the staff kind of hanging back in the weeds and listening carefully to the commissioners reacting to the public hearing, and then kind of crafting a staff recommendation that would do what the commissioners wanted.

So the style that I adopted, and this was not what all of the regional executive directors did, was one of being up front and more of a leader, or a policy steerer. Of course, the commissioners could say, "We don't like that staff recommendation," after the first public hearing, "come back to us with another staff recommendation, a recommendation for denial instead of approval, or vice versa." And of course, I would do that--

Lage: But you also had the legal requirements of the act.

Fischer: Of the act, that's correct. And I would be able to say to the commissioners, "Sorry, I see, commissioners, that you really want to do A, B, and C, but here's section 102.7 that the law says you can't do that." So yes, I had the statute to fall back on.

Lage: Just speaking of the regional commission, did you have one chair during the period of your term?

Fischer: No. You know, that goes so far back, I can't--I had, let's see, Margaret Azevedo was chair, and Frank Egger was chair, and I'm pretty sure that Brad Lundborg was chair.

Lage: Was that a powerful position?

Fischer: It was more powerful at the state commission level than at the regional commission level. Actually, the more powerful position at the regional commission level tended to be the regional commission representative to the state commission, and that was seldom the chair, because the commission met several times a month, and if you were also on the state commission, that one met several times a month, and if you were also a local elected

official, that meant a lot of meetings. So it was very rare that the chairman was also the regional rep to the state commission.

But learning how to serve through basically volunteers, because the commissioners weren't paid for their service, and the citizens in the room, basically the shareholders, were all volunteers, and they were not unlike the members of the Sierra Club with all of their expectations of staff. So there were very many parallels between the commission and the Sierra Club. It was a citizen-created outfit, the staff was a young staff full of idealistic commitment to the environment, many of whom had worked nowhere else. So the relationship of the staff of the coastal commission to the staff of the Sierra Club is very similar: idealistic.

Lage: So your staff didn't represent--you didn't have any development-oriented staffers.

Fischer: No, heavens, no. [Laughter] Well, actually, you know, a couple of wolves in sheep's clothing did surface. In later years, there were some staff members who went to work for developers or for lawyers, attorneys' firms, and became lobbyists. But the staff member for the Sierra Club who was a very good lobbyist for the Sierra Club turned 180 degrees and went to work as a now very effective, wealthy lobbyist for developers.

Lage: Who is that?

Fischer: Norbert Dall is his name. Several cynical coastal commission staff members, in a lampoon, called him "Snorbert Dollar" [Laughter] later in life. But while he was a Sierra Club lobbyist, he was a dynamic and effective, hard-working lobbyist for the club.

Lage: Maybe it was the lobbying he liked.

Fischer: Yes. Maybe the lobbying. It was the client. He was serving his client, right?

Lage: Okay, let's just move on to--from there, you went to the state government.

Deputy Director of Office of Planning and Research in the Jerry Brown Administration

Fischer: The California Coastal Commission, Proposition 20, was a temporary commission, went out of existence at the end of 1976. In '75, the regional commission had basically given its proposed coastal plan to the state commission. The state commission then took all these regional plans and bound them into a single book, and then was mounting a campaign to get permanent legislation through the legislature. So work at the regional commission became housekeeping, turning the crank on permit applications where we'd already broken ground on the policy.

Lage: We didn't really talk about that, but that was another aspect of your job, developing the plan.

Fischer: That's right, developing the plan. It took a lot of public hearings, a lot of travel up and down the coast. And very satisfying.

But the year 1976 became pretty routine at the regional commission level. The scene had shifted to Sacramento. There was a real possibility that the commission would go out of existence, and all of us on the staff would be out of work. So here I was with these dual tensions, ennui as well as stress, and a young family with two kids by this time to feed.

Along about this time, Bill Press, who had been the executive director at the Planning and Conservation League when I had been a board member there, and interestingly enough, just as I had been named the chair to make peace between the Sierra Club and PCL, Bill Press had gotten into a fighting match with the board president of PCL, so I was named chair of the committee to make peace between the executive director and the president, and succeeded, and earned friendships from both the president and Bill Press in doing so.

So Bill had moved from the Planning and Conservation League to be the head of Jerry Brown's Office of Planning and Research, basically Jerry's chief internal environmentalist, with the secretary for resources being the external environmentalist--in much the same way that the President's Council on Environmental Quality in Washington is the internal White House environmental advisor, [and the secretary of interior is the external environmentalist].

So Bill needed a chief deputy, and he wooed me for about a year. I kept saying, "Oh, no, I don't want to move to

Sacramento." Finally, the combination of ennui and stress got to me and I said, "Yes." That itself was a very interesting period. Jerry Brown interviewed me, and the first words he said, "Oh, you're a planner, huh? Where are your Guccis?" [Laughter] Nice opening. With that opening, I learned to distrust and dislike Jerry over the two-year period.

But before he would agree to my hiring, I had to get interviewed by Jacques Barzaghi. Jacques is--

Lage: It's interesting he didn't leave this to Bill Press.

Fischer: Well, Bill had said, "Yes, this is the guy I want to hire," but I was going to become a part of the governor's family, basically.

Lage: So how did the interview with Jacques Barzaghi go?

Fischer: Jacques, who was Jerry's Rasputin and remains his Rasputin--he was an omnipresent, eerie guy in the recent presidential primaries. Jacques interviewed me for about an hour and a half with his exotic French accent. He goes from having a shaved head to long, shoulder-length hair. At this point, his head was shaved. The room was darkened, and he was facing the wall opposite me. He never saw me. [Laughter] In this hour and a half interview.

Lage: This is very bizarre.

Fischer: It was quite bizarre. I went home and told this to my then-wife, and she said, "You sure you want this job?" And I wasn't! [Laughter] But Bill took me aside and said, "I've got to explain to you about that. It's no big deal. You'll be working with me, not to worry." And so I took the job.

Lage: Did you have a long interview with Jerry Brown also, or just this encounter, "Where are your Guccis?"

Fischer: A very much shorter--longer than that, but shorter than the Rasputin interview. In any event, that was an exciting and hectic two-year period. In that two years, we got the first ever and, to this day, only state plan adopted. It was called an Urban Strategy for California, and that required public hearings in every corner of the state, and lots of work with an advisory council, which also included Sierra Club participation. Dwight Steele was the Sierra Club rep on that. Dwight and I got to be quite good friends.

And damned if we didn't cajole and then finally euchre Jerry into signing the document, after he eviscerated much of its more

courageous and insightful stuff. He was, and he is, a "pol", and his developer friends didn't like much of it. So he took the stuff out that his developer friends didn't like.

Lage: So do you see his speaking on behalf of environmental causes as just kind of overlay, or--

Fischer: Well, let's get to Jerry in a minute.

What I did was skip over the stress and the ennui. I was almost out of a job, because the Coastal Act was passed by a one-vote margin in the state senate in the last hour of the last day of that legislative session.

Lage: Which accepted the plan of continuing the commission?

Fischer: Which accepted the plan and continued the commission, right. Actually, it created a new commission. The California Coastal Zone Conservation Commission of Prop. 20 died, and a new California Coastal Commission was created. Many of the same people, slightly different appointing process. But very, very slim margin. Jerry Brown the next day, according to Bill Press, was sitting at the Holiday Inn in Monterey with his feet up on the balcony, looking out at the waves. Here is this Holiday Inn gouged into the sand dune, a hotel that the coastal commission never would have approved, and Jerry's sitting on the Holiday Inn balcony, loving it, saying, "Well, this is why we passed the Coastal Act, and this is what the Coastal Act was all about!"

Lage: [Laughter] That's funny.

Fischer: Bill said, "Ah, failure to grasp the concept, Jerry! No! It isn't." [Laughter]

In any event, that was a hectic and enjoyable two years, but I hated Sacramento, I just did. I'm not sure why.

Lage: The town, or the political nature of it?

Fischer: The whole thing. The weather, the town, the remoteness from the Bay Area. The old saying in Sacramento was, "Well, we're only two hours from the mountains, only two hours from San Francisco, only two hours from the beach." And my answer was, "Yeah, but nothin's here." Actually, I had little sayings about the town, that "There ain't nothin' wrong with this town that a couple of hills and a good body of water wouldn't fix." But the heat, and I fell into a deep disease of workaholism. Given Jerry Brown's expectations, given the sickness that people get in governors'

offices and in White Houses that what you're doing really is at the center of the universe.

So my work weeks went up to an average of eighty hours a week. Maybe 20 percent of my weeks were hundred-hour weeks. And certainly, no less than sixty-hour weeks. And how old was I then? Thirty-six to thirty-eight? I was early into my midlife crisis, and I basically wrecked the marriage doing that. When I got out of that, I knew that I had really been sick, so I didn't do that anymore, but--

Lage: You learned from the experience.

Fischer: Oh, gosh, yes. But I got some stuff done, and learned some things as well, at Jerry's knee. Learned not to trust the politician.

But, back to your question about Jerry: my heart would swell with pride at his ability to bring strands of thought together from either different points of view or different philosophies and weave them into a golden fabric and lay them out in front of you in just stunningly articulate fashion. The fact that he was able to do that day after day, and no two days in a row was the fabric the same.

Lage: Just the enjoyment of the ideas.

Fischer: That's right. And ultimately, I came to the feeling that he would be a marvelous U.S. Senator, throwing intellectual hand grenades into the debate, and increasing the level of debate quite significantly. But because he's quite inconsistent, and because the fabric of Thursday is quite incompatible with the fabric of next Sunday, you as a staff member or a voter, or as someone who is being managed by this somewhat capricious and inconsistent leader, you're left at sea. And if you act, and I did this on a number of occasions, after a two-in-the-morning meeting, he'd say, "All right, it's agreed, we're going to do A, B, and C, and let's roll with it, and let's get back together tomorrow morning at ten at we'll take the next several steps."

And so you'd work all night, call the secretaries in at six, get it ready for the ten o'clock meeting, only to have the meeting postponed a couple of days, half-day by half-day, by a couple of days, so you'd have to stay up all night each of those days, because his meetings could well just as easily start at one in the morning as at ten the next morning. Three or four days later, he'd look at what you had delivered and he'd say, "What is this <u>crap</u>?" And just rip you up one side and down the other.

"But Jerry, this is what we all agreed on, with some enthusiasm and excitement." "Ah, yeah, that was then." And so he'd basically--

Lage: So did you have the sense he'd talked to his developers--

Fischer: No, it was not clear what might have changed his mind. The more telling point is the quite abrasive way that he was willing to use people up. Use them up, throw them away, and very little thanks, very little respect. And the number of people of quality who stuck around Jerry diminished sharply. His first two years, he had just excitingly intellectual giants surrounding him, and his last two years, he had a bunch of. . . . He had Jacques Barzachi and a few other hangers-on left.

Lage: Because you wouldn't maintain your self-respect too long under those circumstances.

Fischer: That's right. Those are the two words, self respect.

Executive Director of the California Coastal Commission

Fischer: So two years was plenty. But when Joe Bodovitz decided to resign as the first executive director of the coastal commission, I truthfully wasn't ready to leave OPR [Office of Planning and Research] at that time. It was still very heady stuff. However, it was the only train ride back to the Bay Area that I knew of, and so I followed in Joe's footsteps a second time and became executive director of the coastal commission.

Lage: For seven years.

Fischer: For seven years, right. Seven really good years, good years.

Lage: Was [Melvin B.] Mel Lane still--

Fischer: Mel Lane and Joe left the commission at about the same time. The incoming chair that I served with was Brad Lundborg. Brad is an M.D. from Sonoma County, his dad had been the president of Bank of America and president of the state chamber of commerce in earlier years. Very thoughtful, very good head. A little bit tense; not quite as smooth as Mel Lane, but just as principled. Brad and I remain good friends.

Lage: OK. Well, we shouldn't go into those seven years now. On the other hand, I don't want to miss something that's important to

your future with the Sierra Club. Would there be something that stood out in that experience that--

##

Fischer: At the regional coastal commission I learned how to work with grassroots, on-the-ground, local activists. Learned to admire their guts and courage and knowledge and commitment to a sense of place. At the state coastal commission I didn't lost touch with those folks, but I learned another skill and had another venue, and that was Washington, D.C., because the coastal commission operated not only under state law but under the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act. The Federal Coastal Zone Management Act needed annual appropriations, and we had to deal with federal regulations, and particularly when offshore oil drilling came to the fore. We were following federal consistency regulations then. Under federal law, a federal agency could not give a permit--like the Department of Interior could not give a permit to an offshore oil driller unless the affected state concurred and said that that was consistent with their state coastal program.

And the oil companies had very good access into D.C., and so I had to develop that access as well and found myself going to Washington D.C. almost as frequently when I was at the state coastal commission as I have done here at the Sierra Club. Every six, eight weeks or so I would be back cultivating legislators, committee members. And so I learned the catacombs underneath the U.S. Capitol in that job and learned how to deal with the national energy policy issues. Michele Perrault was president of the Sierra Club in those days and there was one occasion, after George Deukmejian came into office, where the state would not pay my way to go back to D.C. So, the Sierra Club paid my way as a state official to go back to D.C. and test--

Lage: Now, was that all above board?

Fischer: All above board, sure. I took vacation time. There was no way that George Deukmejian could fire me, and the question was, was it okay with my coastal commissioners? It was okay with seven of them. There were five of them who wanted to fire me, but those five, actually, from time to time could count as high as six, but they had to get seven votes affirmatively to fire me.

Lage: So, it was close, though?

Fischer: It was close. It was close for about two years after George Deukmejian came in. And actually, the reason I left the commission was another thing that has to do with the Sierra Club,

only indirectly. And that was the Deukmejian appointing authority. Deukmejian appointed bad commissioners.

Lage: He had a third of the appointments.

Fischer: He had four--a third, a third, and a third. Willie Brown, bless his little heart, he said, "Well, Fischer, I'm going to appoint a balance. So, I'll appoint two bad guys and two good guys."

Lage: Just that directly?

Fischer: That's right. Well, that's six. Right? Four plus two is six. That leaves Dave Roberti with no bad guys to appoint. Well, Dave Roberti isn't that principled a legislator, and he had to give some plums to some of his campaign contributors who were not altogether that clean as well. So, the commission became very much a swing commission, and I had to, very much, especially after Deukmejian came into office, there were a number of Democratic legislators who said, "Aha, Fischer, your budget depends on us. Your future depends on us. I've got this developer I want you to talk to." So, more troubling than the Duke boys, I found the Demos who really were looking for some juice.

Lage: Who would really be that up front with you?

Fischer: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And some of the sleaze on the part of some of the Democratic commissioners was frankly too much for me to-- Again, the self-respect word comes into play. I served at their pleasure, and in order for me to serve at their pleasure with pleasure myself, I needed to have some respect for the commission, and it was not possible for me to do so. So, I went--

Lage: Will those be comments you make at the anniversary celebration?

Fischer: I will temper those because some of them will be there.

Lage: Sure. [laughter]

Working with Women on Boards and in Politics

Fischer: But yes, I will say some of that. One of the other interesting things that I learned at the state coastal commission--I'm not sure that this is relevant to the Sierra Club. Well, sure it is. I learned the dramatic influence that women as public policy makers can have because the Ronald Reagan state commission had

one woman out of twelve. For a while, the Jerry Brown commission had five women out of twelve. And then the Deukmejian commission had, for some time, zero women out of twelve. I think it's now one or two. But during those periods, when there were as many as five, the behavior of the commission as a body was sharply different.

Lage: And this was the women, not that they were more liberal minded or a combination.

Fischer: This was the fact that they were women. They paid attention to the law. They paid attention to truth and facts. They tendered respect to all the people who came before them rather than sneering or going to sleep or walking out of the room. They listened to the staff report. They did their homework before the meetings. Dirty jokes stopped. When the women were no longer an active part of the commission, they started again. The log rolling and back scratching--you know, one commissioner saying, hey, I'll vote for your project if you vote for mine, that was rampant before and after women. But when the women were there, it didn't happen. Men tend to revert to being little boys, little irresponsible boys. And when there are enough women around, they don't give them permission to be irresponsible little boys. And so the level of maturity and the whole level of debate and political consideration is significantly higher with women on the board.

Lage: That's very interesting. Sometimes I wonder cynically, or fearfully maybe, if when women become more a part of the political process, they will pick up these qualities, the back scratching, for instance. Maybe not the dirty jokes.

Fischer: I wonder. I don't know. I voted for Dianne Feinstein this last time because she's a woman. But she doesn't act like one, in terms of being a political policy maker. She was one of my regional coastal commissioners. She was a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors when I was at SPUR and I worked with her there.

Lage: So, she was on the regional commission that you directed?

Fischer: That's right. That's right. And she was mayor when I was at the state commission and bludgeoned the hell out of the commission using Willie Brown as her battering ram, to get exceptions for what her city wanted to do. So, I have seen Dianne over the years, and Dianne, in order to get along in a man's world, figuratively now, not literally, took testosterone shots. She decided she needed to be just as abrasive, just as aggressive, just as argumentative as a man, just as wily and just as crafty.

And I believe that that's sad because she denied herself the influence that a woman using womanly skills can have on the body politic. So I can excuse her because she was one of the early women in the movement and there wasn't a critical mass there. And perhaps she did have to go along in order to get along.

So, I would say that the risk of women becoming log-rolling, back-scratching, good old boys is less as the critical mass grows larger, says he, knocking on wood in his somewhat simplistic, naive, hopeful, and superficial understanding of the wonders of womankind. There is a difference. And from a public policy person, so far as I'm concerned, it's almost always a good difference, even the women that I have disagreed with, conservative women legislators. And there are some. Fewer than men, in terms of ratio, but they tend to be more thoughtful, more courageous, more long-range oriented than short-term-gain oriented.

Lage: Interesting. Now you said that related to the Sierra Club--

Fischer: Oh, the majority of the board of directors of the Sierra Club is now women. And my successor, Carl Pope, was chosen from a field of four semi-finalists, which included two women and an African-American man. He was the only white male considered for that post. That's progress. Close, but no cigar, but still significant progress. Most of the senior executives here on the staff that I built are women. And so, learning how to work, with respect, with women intellectual leaders is one thing I did at the coastal commission. And without that skill or that perspective, that ability to understand, I wouldn't have lasted a minute here. Maybe that's one of the reasons I was selected. I don't know. I do recall that Carl, in doing reference checks for me, uncovered the possibility that maybe I didn't know how to work with women.

Lage: When you were being hired?

Fischer: When I was being hired here. And that was something that was, everybody said, oops, if that's true then we can't hire him. And so then they had to do some double checks and check with women with whom I had worked.

Lage: Was this brought up to you or you heard it later?

Fischer: Yes, it was. No, I learned it at the time. "But, hey, Michael, we can't make the decision yet because we've got to make this one further reference check clarification."

Lage: Do you know where that came from?

Fischer: I don't exactly. I think it came from a couple of the Commission staff members who were not in the majority. But, I mean, you can't please everybody, particularly as a supervisor. And so they talked to a couple of people I hadn't pleased, who happened to be women, who rationalized, "Hey, I'm not pleased because he doesn't know how to deal with me. And I'm a woman, therefore he can't deal with women," sort of thing. So, they had to talk to women.

Lage: But they did check further.

Fischer: They had to talk to other people who happened to be women who happened to work well with me.

Lage: Were you given the courtesy of saying,"Talk to <u>these</u> people"?

Fischer: Yes, I was.

Environmental Consulting: Sedway-Cooke (1985-1987)

Lage: Okay, so you left the commission, and I hate to leave the commission myself here, but we will. You had another position in between the commission and the Sierra Club?

Fischer: That's right. The reason I left the commission was the push of the commissioners that I couldn't be proud of and the fact that Deukmejian had slashed our budget. I had taken the staff size from 210 down to 110 in two years. And that's not a happy exercise. Leaves behind a really demoralized staff. And truth is that even though it was Deukmejian who made me do it, it was I who chose which 102 people had to leave. And it's very difficult to be a beloved leader, and it's at times like that that it's time for a new leader to come in.

Well, at that point, Mike McCloskey had stepped upstairs at the Sierra Club, or been kicked upstairs depending upon who's telling the story. And so I tried out for this position then. When Doug Wheeler got it, I was one of the semi-finalists. When I didn't get it, I had mentally prepared myself to leave the commission but I didn't have another place to go. And so my friend, Paul Sedway--back to the AIP [American Institute of Planners] network days, Paul Sedway had been one of my professors at graduate school in city planning, and he's an inveterate network builder, too--and so we had two network builders who liked each other, and so we had remained in close touch. Paul said, "Hey, come to work with me. I'm thinking of retiring

sometime soon, and I need somebody to be the next president of the consulting firm. Come on in and see how you like it." So, I came in and decided I didn't like it. It took about a year.

Lage: What was the nature of his firm?

Fischer: It's an urban and environmental planning consultant firm. And so I came in as a senior associate to do urban physical plans, basically.

Lage: For developers or for cities?

Fischer: No, Sedway-Cooke is a firm of about twenty-five people. And their clientele is primarily the public sector, mainly cities and counties. Mainly in California but not entirely. And for a number of reasons, I had gotten to know Florida somewhat well. There's a growth management statute in Florida, and there's a growth management professor down in Florida I had gotten to know and he had, from my seat at both the governor's office and the coastal commission, had flown me down to Florida a number of times to consult with them. So, with this new growth management statute in place, I was charged with opening up a new office in Florida, a Florida practice for Sedway-Cooke. And also was charged with selling the firm's services to others. So I ended up in those two years doing projects in Honolulu and Iowa and Florida.

Lage: A lot of travel?

Fischer: There was a lot of travel. Not anywhere near as much travel as here at Sierra Club. But enough travel to keep me interested. There were a couple of reasons for my not being thrilled at Sedway-Cooke, however. I'd spent all my career being an advocate. And as a consultant you can't be. You really must put your client's interests first, and if you come out with your heart on your sleeve, they're assuming that you're going to want to push them in front of you but push them in your direction regardless of what they want to have done. So, you're unlikely to get hired and, once hired, unlikely to keep the job if you're an outspoken advocate.

Second, the tyranny of the billable hour I found to be just incredible. Each principal was expected to bill. And bill at least thirty hours, thirty-five hours a week. So, if I was out selling a project, those were not billable hours, and so I could spend most of the week selling a couple of big projects and--

Lage: Oh, I see. They're not billable until you have the project.

Fischer: That's right. That's right. And so if you take an extra half hour for lunch, or you leave a half hour early to get your driver's license or something like that, those are hours that you really do have to make up in real time. And so the work day starts getting longer. And this happens to many attorneys, where the pressure for the billable hour from the partners is very extreme. And so I found that an undesirable way to work, having been a public official, not necessarily a lazy one, but one who was not fettered by this concept of billable hours.

And third was, here I came into this office kind of hired in over the heads of folks who had been there for years. And I came in, it was unspoken but understood, as the heir apparent to Paul Sedway's position, and there was intense resentment. Hey, he hasn't poured all of his heart and soul and life into this firm at the relatively low salaries. And indeed the salaries were significantly low. I took a twenty thousand, twenty-five thousand dollar cut in pay to go to work there--twenty-five percent. No, down from seventy to fifty. So, a significant cut in pay. And that was high pay from their point of view and low from mine, and so it--

Lage: So, that's a mutual kind of dissatisfaction. Were you remarried by this time?

Single Parenting and Remarriage

Fischer: Yes. Let's see, thank you for interrupting me. My divorce was in 1980. And there was an interesting, also network- building experience in 1980 right at the cusp when the marriage ended. I went to Harvard for a month for a course for senior executives in environmental management. Met some friends there who still stand me in good stead, so another network-building opportunity that also helped me in this job. And in, oh, within three or four months of our separation in October of '80, my wife met another fellow and wanted to move down the peninsula with him. We had given my high-school-aged kids assurance that they would continue through high school in that same place. And so, I then, by default, became the single parent, a life-changing experience.

Lage: In Sacramento?

Fischer: No, no. I'm at the state coastal commission [in San Francisco] by this time, living in Terra Linda--north of San Rafael. And so for several years I was a single parent with high-school-aged

kids. That was exciting, let me tell you, and thrilling. And my relationship with both the kids is now close and wonderful.

It was in '81, I think, that I met my now wife, Jane Rogers, who was working for the Federal Coastal Zone Management office in D.C. And she was an urban planner, had been the director of growth management for Washington COG, the council of governments--the ABAG of the Washington area (ABAG being the Association of Bay Area Governments). And so we had a year or so of a transcontinental romance and then finally, claiming that I had the traditional feminine advantage, she uprooted her professional career and moved out here.

Lage: Because you had family.

Fischer: I had family, right. So, she went from having no kids to having two teenage kids, big challenge. That's worked out--

Lage: Yes, I admire her.

Fischer: Me, too. That's worked out marvelously. So, back to Sedway-Cooke, or where, or do you want to spend more time on the family thing, I don't know.

Lage: No, no. That's fine. I just like to mention, often it never comes up in interviews with men, and always in interviews with women.

Fischer: The interesting fillip for this one, which will come up at the end--when she moved out from D.C., we made an agreement that the next move was hers. And here we've got Bill Clinton and Al Gore who are now in office. There are potential job openings in D.C. But it is not time for her to leave the Bay Area. So, we won't. It's her call. And I'm very comfortable with that. That's just fine with me, even though, conceivably, my career could take a very different course were it time for her to move.

III EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE SIERRA CLUB, 1987-1992

The Hiring Process

Fischer: Okay, back to Sedway-Cooke. A year and a half into that job, Doug Wheeler crashed and burned and was fired in a bloody eight-to-seven vote.

Lage: Was all this public knowledge? Well, not public, but to you, did you know the ins and outs of the difficulties?

Fischer: Not the ins and outs, no. I really didn't. But I was enough part of the environmental network to know that he was fired and that Mike McCloskey had been brought in again as the acting executive director. And so I remember saying to Doug at a dinner party that he and I had been invited to over at Marty Rosen's (president of the Trust for Public Land and a Mill Valley neighbor) house, with our spouses, I said, "Doug, I think I'm going to lose my mind and try for your old job." Doug said, "Oh, it's not a job I'd wish on my worst enemy, but Michael, if you're really interested, sure I'll be glad to help you." So, we sat down and had a half a dozen meetings. He was kind of leading me through the ropes. Here are the problems. Here are the potentials. Neat guy, and thoughtful of him to do that.

Lage: So was he trying to prepare you for the hiring process?

Fischer: No, but for what the job was like. To let me--

Lage: So you knew if you really want it.

Fischer: That's right. And not so incidently to help me through the hiring process because the more I knew about what the job was, the more credible I could sound as knowledgeable and a candidate ready to potentially be successful. But they had hired a search

firm and I was never contacted. So, I said to myself, well, they know who I am, and I went through the process only a year and a half ago. Michele's [Perrault] still on the board. And if I don't get a call, then I'll know that I'm not the kind of person that they're really looking for. And I didn't get a call, didn't get a call. And finally, to hear Michele tell it, it got down to the finalist candidates and she said, "Well, why isn't Michael Fischer on this list?" And the search firm person said, "Who?"

Lage: Quite a search firm.

Fischer: Her office was about three blocks away from the consultant's office. So, I got this phone call, "Hey, would you come over and visit with me?" So I said, sure. And I kind of rose to the top of the list and got hired.

Lage: You were prepared.

Fischer: I was prepared, and boy, was I ready to leave the consulting firm. Even though Paul Sedway and I remain very good friends, it was just not the place for me.

Lage: Well, what was the club looking for at that point? Were they looking for something different than they'd been looking for in '85?

Fischer: To hear Ed Wayburn tell the story, they were. That in '85, they laid out what they were expecting. They were expecting a businessman to come in and run the club like a business. And that's what they got, and they didn't like the politics of the person. They didn't like his people skills, or whatever. And when they were hiring for me then, they were hiring for a broad-based person who, yes, had some management experience but maybe not exactly the business, the environmental business management experience. And they were looking for somebody who could testify and who could give public speeches, who had people skills and who could work with volunteers. When they started getting dissatisfied with me from time to time, Ed would say, "Wait a minute, now you're reverting back to the 1985 expectations. What are you looking for?" You know, what kind of executive director?

Lage: Ed would say that to the board?

Fischer: Right. Ed, on administrative things, is not very effectual, and so he would say it and they would choose not to listen. But, it was instructive to me. At least it gave me a little bit of context on what's going on here. He would say that--oh, that's what's going on. But, I remember when Larry Downing gave me the call saying that we want to unanimously offer you the job of

executive director I said, "Sounds great. Let me talk to Jane and think about it." Ten minutes later I got a call from Michele Perrault saying, "I'll bet he told you, I'll bet he told you that it was a unanimous vote of the board, right?" I said, "Yes, that's really great." She said, "It wasn't. It was an eight-to-seven vote. Are you really sure you want this?"

Lage: Oh, so she kind of warned you?

Fischer: Oh, yes. She did warn me. She was part of the eight-to-seven. But when Doug Wheeler had been hired, I suspect he was hired on an eight-to-seven vote. The eight-to-seven then flopped. And then when I was hired, the eight-to-seven perhaps had flopped again, I don't know. It was a very fractious board at that time. It is no longer a fractious board. But, it's nowhere near as good a board either, in terms of the intellectual standing of the group as a whole.

Lage: Were they that clear? I'm not clear, I guess, on how the eight-to-seven lined up, what they were looking for that you didn't fulfill.

Fischer: No, they were not at all clear.

Lage: It seems to me that you had management as well as environmental expertise.

Fischer: They were not at all clear. And it was very early in my tenure that I prepared this memo[1] for Larry Downing, then president. Neat guy, I like Larry an enormous lot. Basically, this is an evaluation criteria. And it goes from communication with the board and staff administration to fiscal management, to inter-organizational coordination with--

Lage: To how they should evaluate you?

Fischer: That's right. Which is basically me drafting a job description for them--long range planning; communication with members, chapters, and committees; public spokespersonship; and conservation program and campaign strategy. Basically running the whole breadth. And my rationale then, as well as for this iteration, when they were thinking about what they wanted next, since I had now served under five presidents and since the board has changed from fractious one direction, to fractious another direction, to not fractious at all, to at sea, to not knowing what they're going to be--what I've said is that the job

---

[1]See Appendix.

description of executive director has got to be broad so that she or he can contract or expand the job as necessary given the strengths or weaknesses or the expectations of the sitting president and the board of directors. So, you better hire somebody broad who can be flexible.

Lage: Broad and flexible.

Fischer: That's right. Broad and flexible to be able to contract and focus when the board expects focus and to get broad again when the board expects that. Or when she or he leads the board to expecting either focus or breadth. Now, what the board is expecting now--they are saying that they expect more outside and less inside. The faction of the board that said, well yes, broad, but we really want somebody to manage the store. We want somebody with business acumen to take us through some fiscal hard times and to do some reorganization and to get control over the staff who have developed these little individual fiefdoms. That's what we really want is a manager, an administrator. They're telling the truth when they say that, because that's what they expect of themselves. That's the way the board of directors spends most of their time, on management and administration.

Lage: And yet if they had a strong manager, they wouldn't have to do that.

Fischer: Well, it's a chicken-and-the-egg thing. Is that true? I don't know. I don't know. Because there are all sorts of things to dream up to manage and to administer here that go well beyond the job description of the executive director. You know, chapter relations and sexual harassment between a volunteer and a volunteer or, you know, that sort of stuff. And I just assumed I'd get involved in those sorts of things. But because the fiduciary responsibility rests with the executive director, I've got to. I mean, I don't now. But up to ten days ago, there was a living and breathing sexual harassment problem between two volunteers that I had to get involved in and make sure that people were dealing with it and to avoid the Tailhook scandal sort of syndrome. So, as long as the senior volunteer leaders have established a culture which spends most of their time on administrative matters, they're going to, regardless of what they say they want of their executive director, they're going to trap the executive director in budgetary management things.

The treasurer is a very powerful position in the club and whenever the treasurer says, "Oh my gosh, here are these details of the financial picture," everybody pays attention to those details. They shouldn't. They should satisfy themselves that someone is paying attention, but the whole board shouldn't go

chasing after the rabbit. And that is a problem, that the board of directors has developed a culture where if you put a rabbit down in front of their table, ten out of the twelve will thunder after that rabbit. Two of them will say, "Wait a minute, guys. Come on, wait a minute. Here, keep your eye on the ball. Here's where we ought to be going." Those two aren't listened to, by and large. And they're not the same two from meeting to meeting or issue to issue.

##

History of Club Membership

Lage: I think we talked about your perception of the club based on your dealings with them in other jobs. Is there more to say about that? And also your history of club membership I wanted to review.

Fischer: Oh. Well, on that latter, on the club membership, when my mother gave me a copy of *This is the American Earth* back in '60 or '61 I joined the club. I've forgotten who I'd got as my sponsors but I did have to get sponsors back then. It may have proven to be moderately easy. Dave Brower tells me that whenever somebody would write in asking for a sponsorship, he said that was real easy. They would just simply sign it.

Lage: Yes. He'd already sort of changed that.

Fischer: Right. But then along came the Diablo Canyon brouhaha. And I, frankly, wasn't pro-nuke or even very aggressively anti-nuke but I was just absolutely bewildered by the internal controversy. So, back in the sixties, I saw a club that was ripping itself apart over this Diablo Canyon issue. And it was because of my repugnance for that institutional behavior that I said, hey, I don't need to be a member of this.

Lage: Was it going back on their word that disturbed you or just the fight?

Fischer: The fight. Yes. The conflict, friends shooting at friends sort of thing. And it just didn't feel comfortable to me as an institution that had its act together. So, I said, I don't need that.

Lage: And then that was followed by the Dave Brower, the election and the ouster of Brower.

Fischer: That's right, his being fired. Right.

Lage: Were you not a member--

Fischer: I was not a member then. I was out of there at that point. And then I joined again because when I was at the city of Mountain View, I was, particularly in the last couple of years when I was in a more senior position, I was working on doing the first ever urban general plan for Mountain View, and public involvement was a nascent enterprise then, and I learned about public involvement from a Sierra Club activist, Claire Dedrick, who ended up being on the board of directors of the national club and later on was secretary for resources of the State of California. So, I joined the Sierra Club as a way of getting into the public interest community and seeking their involvement and stayed in until I went to grad school and then I had to quit, because I couldn't afford it.

And then after grad school, when I was with the county of San Mateo, joined again and attended the meetings of the Peninsula Regional Group of Loma Prieta Chapter as I was doing long range planning for the county of San Mateo. And kept that up through my work at SPUR.

Lage: Was this a networking kind of effort?

Fischer: Yes. And no, I was not active in the club but I wanted to be there <u>of</u> the club so that I could learn of concerns that they might have that would deal with the bay front or coastal open space, that sort of thing. And when I went to SPUR, that was a good way of learning of issues that we at SPUR were going to have to address from a slightly different perspective. SPUR is a broader based civic organization looking at economic problems and had a significant amount of downtown support. But during my term there, we changed very much to neighborhood support. I was at neighborhood association meetings two to four evenings a week and kind of projecting SPUR's image into the neighborhood like Sierra Club would.

And I stayed a member of the club until I went into Jerry Brown's office, at which point I dropped off of the board of PCL and dropped my Sierra Club membership. And actually, I think I dropped the Sierra Club membership as soon as I got to be at the coastal commission so that I would not appear to be biased. You know, the Sierra Club was going to appear and the developers were going to appear. If I were a card carrying member of the club then the commission would sense that, aha, you know, this is not an unbiased--

Lage: He's on one side or the other now.

Fischer: That's right. And didn't rejoin the club again, interestingly enough, until I became a candidate for the job when Doug Wheeler was chosen. When they didn't choose me, I quit. [laughter]

Lage: Gee, I hope you don't quit now.

Fischer: I have a life membership. I don't think I can quit.

[Interruption--someone enters room, speaks to Fischer]

Fischer: Maybe I can quit, but I don't want to. [laughter]

Lage: Oh, good. Let's get that on the tape. [laughter] I think people have resigned their life memberships, over various things.

Fischer: I guess they have, yes. I think you can still resign your life membership. Yes. But there's no mileage in it. Besides, the club is strong, powerful, effective; it's at the heart of the environmental movement, to which I have devoted my life's work. I'm proud to have been a part of the Club's history. So I agree with you: this is it for quits.

Understanding the Organization: Two Separate Sierra Clubs

Lage: Right. Did you feel--I think it was Larry Downing who said they were looking for someone who understood the unique nature of the organization. What did you understand about the unique nature?

Fischer: I understood half of the organization. And the half that I didn't understand was the half that I was expected to manage. The half that I did understand, I find that this office has very little to do with.

Lage: Which half is that?

Fischer: There really are two separate Sierra Clubs. One is the national club that's focused on Washington, D.C., and the United Nations and the World Development Bank. And that's the club that I'd had absolutely no connection with. I had never heard the name Doug Scott before I got the job. I had heard the name Carl Pope, but that's because Carl was very active in California politics. But the Sierra Club that I knew and the Sierra Club that I still love the best and believe is the most effective part of the club is the chapters and groups, the grassroots, the volunteer-driven--

Lage: The ones that go to the commission meetings.

Fischer: The people who have the courage and knowledge and the love of sense of place. And the club that I didn't know was the club of the, as Doug Scott used to call it, the club of the mandarin class. The institution that now has a $50 million a year budget, almost double the budget than when I came. The club that is the mini-conglomerate with an outings program and insurance problems and real estate problems and the details of telemarketing versus major giving versus foundations versus direct mail.

I knew about foundation fund raising and had been successful in getting a couple of grants when I was at the coastal commission and on the board of the Coastal States Organization but I hadn't ever had anything to do with direct mail or telemarketing or individual donor solicitation. Yes, I knew about lobbying in D.C. I knew how to do that, and I had seen the Sierra Club, of course, lobby in Sacramento. But Sierra Club's lobbying in Sacramento had always been done by John Zierold, who was somewhat unplugged from the national club, or Norbert Dall.

Lage: Did he go about it a different way from the national club?

Fischer: He went about it in a very different way than the rest of California. He was basically a lone wolf. So was Norbert Dall. And so if you got to know Norbert or you got to know John, then you knew the club and their lobbying approach. Well, that's not really the way the club's national lobbying works. So, I found that there was a part of the club that I really didn't understand. I didn't understand the length and sharpness of the knives that had in fact gotten Doug Wheeler.

Lage: Even though you'd had these six conversations with him?

Fischer: Well, I came to learn about that sort of stuff, through him, but not through anybody else. And I think actually, that I've been moderately successful in that part of the club, learning that part of the club and handling that part of the club. As a delightful letter that I've had--

[Interruption]

Fischer: My two most recent letters said, this is from the Vice President for Regions, Jerry Tiniano. "I know you've had to deal with some difficult personalities at the top of our volunteer structure. However I've never heard anyone who's had any contact with you at the grassroots level say anything negative. Instead our volunteers have told me again and again how favorably they were

impressed." So, that's the one club that I know and love. He is speaking from there.

Here is the chapter staffer from Michigan who says, "Pushing the Sierra Club is like pushing a mountain of jello. One must be sure not to break the surface tension that maintains the integrity of the organization but must continuously apply gentle and firm pressure to move the mass in the correct direction. Somehow you manage to make the mountain move, slowly, gently." And she remembers particularly when I raised a heretical hypothesis that the Sierra Club's support for statehouse lobbying ought to increase--

Lage: Was that one of your initiatives?

Fischer: That's right. That and the other one she mentions here was my pressure on the club to become more relevant and to upgrade service to people of color. And those are the two that Ann mentioned, Ann Waiwode, from Michigan. I found those to be both not only the most recent letters but the most insightful letters about what I think I've done here.

Lage: And maybe what you care about.

Fischer: Yes, yes. And the club that I thought I understood was the club I didn't have to do anything about. Because one of the things I learned very quickly was that in this job I didn't do windows and I didn't do California either. Dianne Feinstein, bless her heart, when she was mayor right down the street and the San Francisco group of the San Francisco Bay Chapter of Sierra Club would do something that would tee her off and so she'd pick up the phone and call me. And I said, "Dianne, I don't have anything to do with that." She said, "Well, aren't you the head of the Sierra Club?" I really hurt her feelings once. I said, "Dianne, if you were the mayor of Dayton, Ohio, and the local group of the Sierra Club angered you, would it even occur to you to call the executive director in San Francisco?"

"Well, of course," she said. I said, "I never get calls from mayors of any cities," because what happens at the chapter and group level is totally independent of what goes on at the national level.

Lage: Even the board tries to keep their hands off.

Fischer: That's right. To a fault, unfortunately. And as a result, the board, I guess about ten years ago--and Mike McCloskey and I have had long discussions about this--adopted a policy saying that place-specific issues never come to the board. They are always

delegated to the chapter or if there is a chapter problem, they are to be resolved by the regional vice presidents' forum. And well, when you take place away from the board, you've taken the soul right out of their reason for being. Diablo Canyon would never come up. You know, Glen Canyon would never come up. And when you've got chapters in the southwest saying, "No clearcutting at all," and chapters in the northwest saying, "Clearcutting is a legitimate way of minimizing the impact on the forest." And those two folks shoot at the board. The board says, huh? You know, not our job. Well, gee, that's got to go through the RCC's and then the regional vice president. It's got to go over to council.

Lage: Well, but that is a broader issue than place. That's clearcutting.

Fischer: That's right. And it ultimately did come up to the board, but after all the discussion by those other entities, the board of directors would have the temerity to then change their proposed policy? No. I mean, they know a tar baby when they see one and they're not about to kick it. They simply pat it on the butt and say, fine, that's not a policy and don't get intellectually engaged. But you say something about, well, the budget might be off by a half a million dollars. Whoops, they're all intellectually engaged.

Lage: This might be a good place to wind up today. And start afresh.

Fischer: Great. Thank you very much.

The Board and Executive Director Doug Wheeler

[Interview 2: November 17, 1992] ##

Lage: We're continuing with our second session of the oral history interview with Michael Fischer.

Fischer: And you're Ann Lage.

Lage: Oh, right. I'm Ann Lage. [laughter] Thank you. We want to kind of set the scene. We talked a little bit last time about what you had walked into. What was the club like when you got here? More or less the legacy of Doug Wheeler is what I'm thinking of.

Fischer: Well, and I wonder whether it's Doug Wheeler's legacy as much as just what was going on in the club. And I can't put a real good timeline on this, but I recall very clearly the day that Mike McCloskey and I were chatting when he said to me that he was thinking of moving on from being the executive director of the Sierra Club and becoming something called the chairman. He and I were below decks on the Balclutha, which is an old three-masted ship down in the waterfront. It was nighttime and it was quite dimly lit and it was wintertime and somewhat stormy and so the ship was creaking. And you could smell the saltwater and the musty old timbers.

We were down below decks for a Whale Center fund raiser because Maxine [McCloskey] had been on the board of directors of the Whale Center. And here was Paul Horn, who's this wonderful saxophonist, going to play whale songs. And at a break during the whale songs below deck, Mike was telling me about his plans to move on.

And I subsequently learned, years later, that it was not entirely Mike's idea to move on but that particularly the treasurer at the time, Denny Shaffer, had played a key role in kicking Mike upstairs and out of the executive director's seat. And indeed I was a candidate. Mike was telling me about the position because he thought I might want to be a candidate. I was a candidate that first time around and made it to the semi-finals. Didn't quite make it to the finals. At the time I was executive director of the California Coastal Commission. And I did go through the interview process talking with Doug Scott and Joanne Hurley and Sue de le Rosa and Ophelia Alayeto.

Lage: So they had some of the staff do the interviewing for the new--

Fischer: That's correct. As well as members of the board of directors. As we've done in this last go around with Carl and as was done the next time. In any event, I didn't get the job that first time. Doug Wheeler did. I went on to become an urban and environmental consultant. Actually, I had kind of mentally cut the cord with the coastal commission while I was excited and enthusiastic about the prospect of coming to the club that first time. And so when I didn't get the job, within weeks I resigned from the coastal commission and joined an urban planning consultant firm. Did we talk about that at all last time?

Lage: We did go into that. Sedway-Cooke.

Fischer: Yes. Paul Sedway and I had been friends since he had been one of my professors at Berkeley years before. And so my path went not only away from the Sierra Club but also much of my work was outside the Bay Area so I didn't see a whole lot of what was going on in San Francisco. My consulting work took me to Iowa and Florida and Hawaii and southern California, that sort of thing. So, I had not been paying much attention to the club until I learned that Doug Wheeler had been fired. I don't even recall how I learned that. I mean I wasn't in a memorable situation as I was earlier, below decks in the Balclutha.

Lage: And it was less than two years?

Fischer: It was about eighteen months later. And Michele Perrault had been very welcoming to me the first time because Michele and I had done some ocean and coastal work together when I was at the coastal commission. Did we mention that last time?

Lage: Not in detail.

Fischer: I recall very vividly the time in Washington, D.C., when Deukmejian had come into office in California and Jim Watt was in office back in D.C. and the Reagan administration was trying to dismantle the coastal program and allow offshore oil drilling everywhere. And Deukmejian had frozen all out-of-state travel, particularly for liberals like me who didn't want to have to go to D.C. And so Michele said to me, "Well, what if the Sierra Club paid your way?" And I said, "Oh, sure. I'll just take vacation and I'll go testify." So, I remember testifying in particularly aggressive tones in the House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee room and having Michele come up to me and give me a warm hug and say, "Oh, Michael, you're a national treasure." So, that was nice to hear and kind of a friend at court.

The second time around I knew Michele was still on the board. I knew that they knew who I was and was in San Francisco. So, I talked to Jane Rogers, my wife, and said, well, I'm not going to put my hat in the ring because they know me and if they were interested in me they'd whistle me out. Well, they didn't, as I think I told you last time. And the way I heard it told was that when it got down to the three semi-finalists, Michele said, "Well, did Michael Fischer get screened out?" And the new search firm lady said, "Michael Fischer? Who's he?" And so Michele said, "Well, give him a phone call." And so in any event, I came in the second time around.

And I learned about the status of the club, again from Doug Scott, who was then the conservation director. When the history of the environmental movement--and certainly the club--is told, Doug Scott should be portrayed as a major figure. He, more than David Brower or Mike McCloskey, designed and honed the art of successful national environmental legislative campaigns. He interviewed me in Mill Valley. He and I spent a couple of hours downtown at a bar. And I learned also from Doug Wheeler because I had seen Doug at a party in Mill Valley and said, "Doug, I think I'm going to lose my mind and go after your old job." And so Wheeler took me aside for a number of visits. And I learned from both Wheeler and Scott, antagonists, that there had in essence been a palace revolt and that the senior staff had basically gone to a number of the board of directors members and said, "Look, we can't live with this guy. We simply can't work with him. He's not our style. We don't trust him. We don't like him. We don't feel good around him." And that the board of directors at the time had an eight-to-seven split.

There were two factions. The leader of one of the factions was Michele Perrault and the leader of the other faction was Denny Shaffer with his close friend, Larry Downing, who at the time was president.

Lage: And which was the eighth?

Fischer: Denny's group was the eighth, and they voted Doug Wheeler out of office. Larry Downing loves to tell the story of getting David Brower as the swing vote. He was the eighth.

Lage: And was this based on supporting the senior staff or were they unhappy with Doug Wheeler themselves?

Fischer: I think some of each. Doug Wheeler had made the tactical error of admitting early in his tenure that he had voted for Ronald Reagan. And, boy, did that put him against the mainstream of Sierra Club, to admit to something like that. Also, relatively

early in his tenure, Doug committed the error that I've actually seen two other executive directors commit, this error, anyway, of taking a look at the club's logo and saying, "Oh, I can streamline that." At his first board meeting he shows up and says, "Here's the new logo." Well, the Sierra Club is so tradition bound that to have somebody, an outsider, a newcomer have the temerity to say, "Well, okay. Here I've changed the logo. Here's the new image."

Lage: It doesn't seem too sensitive to the organization.

Fischer: Very insensitive, yes. And as I say, it's not unique in many other organizations, particularly those that Doug Wheeler would have been associated with, the executive director really is the organization. He is the heart, the soul, the image that sets the tone and the tempo of the organization. Doug came here from the Conservation Foundation and that's certainly true at that kind of an organization. But the Sierra Club is not at all staff driven and the executive director is seen as "staff", unlike many other organizations where the executive director is seen as a member of the board and indeed the executive director usually sits to the right of the board chairman and kind of coaches the board chairman through the meeting. But not in the Sierra Club, oh no.

In other organizations, the nominating committee is an extension of the executive director. The executive director goes out and recruits and finds the members of the board of directors and builds a board which is supportive of him and his vision of the organization. Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund is a perfect example of that where Rick Sutherland basically built that board to his vision. So, Doug came in doing what came naturally for him, as an executive director. But what came naturally for him didn't at all fit with the culture of--

Lage: It seems as if they failed to induct him into the culture of the club too well.

Fischer: Well, I fault both Doug and the former board of directors for the marriage, or for the match. It was clearly not a right match from either his personality or the club's needs. So, that's a long way of setting the groundwork. It wasn't just a staff revolt. It was a failure to make a good match. And the--

Lage: I'm surprised Michele continued to support him.

Fischer: Well, Michele and Phil [Berry] evidently had a very good friendship relationship with Doug as well. And so they gave him loyalty and Doug Wheeler fought the firing very aggressively and he and Phil and Michele kind of orchestrated the campaign and

they lost. But it was his choice to make it a very vigorous, very emotional, very tension-filled thing. In his place, I think, and indeed I have been in his place, I would choose quite another tack. If it's going to be bloody, why stay? I mean, even if you win this battle, there's going to be another one and another one and another one. The Sierra Club is very good at being dogged in that way.

Lage: And then you have the problem of working with your senior staff.

Fischer: That's right. That's right. A number of them, actually, who were involved in the coup, took off voluntarily, interestingly enough. They figured that they had burned their bridges. John McComb, who had been the head of the Washington, D.C., office, and the director of development, Audrey Rust; those two participants in the mutiny left very shortly thereafter. Doug Scott and Joanne Hurley, however, didn't leave. They were very aggressively active in the denouement.

So, in any event, I walked into a situation where the two sides, the two factions, were still shooting at each other, Denny and Larry on one hand and Michele at the other. And board meetings would be quite fractious with staff members kind of warily circling around me. You know, who is this new guy, because my experience with the Sierra Club had been entirely at the group and chapter level, in Sacramento and in the Bay Area primarily or with the coastal commission, the different chapters up and down the coast.

Replacing Director of Finance Len Levitt

Fischer: So, I came into a quite stressed organization and also an organization whose fiscal management was back in the green eye shades era. The director of finance had been with the club for eight or nine years. I think he had come to the club when it was less than a hundred thousand members.

Lage: And who was that?

Fischer: Len Levitt. Len Levitt had come to the club from being the general manager of the Berkeley Co-op, a grocery store over in Berkeley, and was quite a straight-laced fellow in his sixties when I met him. Came to work late, left early. Did not at all fit in with the younger, more exuberant crowd of the rest of the staff members. And at the same time, wasn't up-to-date, modern--he didn't know from computers. And some of the books down in the

accounting department were still being done by hand as opposed to on computer.

And so I had Denny as the treasurer, a guy who had not voted for me and I don't believe was ever committed to see me succeed. Though he said so, said that he was. But here I had Denny as the aggressive, sharp-shooting kind of critical treasurer and Len Levitt who couldn't give me backup, the backup I needed. So, I remember saying to Doug for the first year or two--

Lage: Doug Scott?

Fischer: Doug Scott. Both when I first came on board and in his performance evaluations. I said, "Doug, save room for me at the environmental table. But for the next year I'm going to have to dive into the administration of this organization and bring it up into the modern era and work on contractual relationships, work on our accounting system, work on our computer system and--"

Lage: Were those things that you'd had to do at the coastal commission?

Fischer: Not so much, no. No, I had very good backup at the coastal commission for all that, though I was a hands-on budgeter at the coastal commission and, particularly in Deukmejian era, I had to fight for our budget with the state department of finance and with the legislature. And at the coastal commission I'd had to take the staff from 215 down to a 110, basically cut it in half. So, administration and management in stressful times was something that I'd done for several years before coming to the club.

Lage: So, were the times stressful? I remembered as I looked at the minutes it sounded as if they were very glowing reports on the financial situation when you first came in.

Fischer: The truth is they were not stressful. Excuse me, they were stressful, but there was very little reason for them to be stressful. They were stressful because of the two things that I mentioned. First of all, Denny wanted them to be stressful. He's a very high-stress person in any event. His life runs on high stress. And so he would worry over details. If things weren't known or things weren't certain then he would go into hyperspace.

Lage: Did he recognize the need to modernize?

Fischer: Yes, oh yes.

Lage: I'm surprised he hadn't pushed that earlier.

Fischer: Yes he had. And evidently my predecessors just hadn't grasped that nettle. And indeed it took me a year to grasp the nettle and say, "Len, goodbye." (a) I wanted to learn as much as possible from Len, (b) Len was not a terrible person. He was very close to retirement. And I wanted to see if we could keep him on board until retirement. And we couldn't. So, he left a very embittered and unhappy person at my direction. We did make a severance program for him to try to keep his retirement whole. In essence, the club had gotten what they had bought years earlier in hiring him. And he simply was unable to grow at the same pace that the club had grown in size and in complexity.

But as Denny and I kept saying to each other, we just don't have an altimeter. Revenues have an up-and-down cycle during the year. Until I came, there really had been little culture of central control of expenses. And Len Levitt had learned, to his pain, years earlier, that when he tried to exercise central control, he got punished for it because many of the department heads, Doug Scott, key among them, but also Jon Beckmann at the books department, had developed their own relationships with their own cadre of directors. And, actually, the spoken reason that the board had asked Mike McCloskey to move on was that he too had learned, as had Len, that when you try to control it, you're going to get punished. So, he became like a willow. You know, the board would develop their own relationships with the fiefdoms in the different departments and then the key board members would cut their deal, and Mike would say, "Okay, I was told, fine." Then they'd cut the deal.

So, the board basically woke up one day and found that they were being the executive director. That it was they who were balancing the competing tugs and pulls of the different, very strong, department heads, and they wanted somebody strong enough to control the department heads. That's why they got Doug Wheeler. Then they also got me. They thought I was strong enough to control them without sitting on them.

Lage: It is a balancing act, isn't it?

Fischer: Yes, that's right. Indeed, Len Levitt had been burned so many times that he didn't want to step in between me and the department heads, even when I told him to do so. So, when I found that he was forcing me to basically be both chief financial officer and executive director at that time I said, "Len, goodbye." That happened within the year of my coming.

And I then went through a process of hiring Len's successor. And I knew I was looking for a strong person.

Lage: And were you the one to make that hire. Or does the board step in on those top levels?

Fischer: Well, isn't that an interesting question, yes. I followed the normal rule of thumb with senior staff people and that was to make it clear to the board that this was my call, that this was my hire. And that it would be my fire if it needed to be but I wanted to consult with them so I brought in two members of the Sierra Club Foundation Board of Trustees who had experience in managing businesses of their own, Maurice Holloway from Corn Nuts and Allan Brown, who was an industrial developer down in Palo Alto. They and Denny and there may have been one other member of the board of directors, I've forgotten now, and a number of the staff. So, yes. It was a collaborative process for screening the candidates.

Same search firm who almost failed to include me in the pool of candidates actually brought in Rosemary Carroll, my first hire. Within the first month of coming on board Rosemary Carroll was hired as the director of development. And I'm really proud of that hire. She's worked out quite well, fit in with the culture of the club enormously, and she's still director of development. Very proud of Rosemary; a strong, sensitive, effective, flexible pro.

But I am not so proud of my hiring decision of Andrea Bonnette to be the new Director of Finance and Administration. I knew we needed a strong person and I was delighted to be able to hire a strong woman. Actually, the two finalist candidates were both women, MBA and CPA with years of experience in management. It was interesting that there was only one person who disagreed with hiring Andrea Bonnette versus the other person and that was Len Levitt, who I had also involved in the process, wanting to have some overlap and a transition period. Len was horrified at the prospect of Andrea Bonnette coming in, coming aboard. And in retrospect, boy, was he right.

Lage: It was this picking up of personal quality that--?

Fischer: I think it was, yes. No, it was the personality. The strength that she brought, the imagination and intelligence that she brought to the club was outstanding. But the personality traits that she brought to the club were extremely destructive. She played to the worst instincts of the club, which are anger and mistrust and personal vendettas. And all of which still exist in the club, I think always have. Or at least in the club of the second half century. They sure existed. If you look at the minutes of the David Brower era, you know that they existed then. And I think they've existed without break since then.

[Interruption]

Andrea Bonnette: Modernized Financial Controls, Poor People Skills

Lage: Okay, we're back on.

Fischer: We've jumped to Andrea Bonnette. I don't know whether you want, is now the time you wanted to cover that one and just get that out of the way?

Lage: Okay. It seems to be a key thing, Andrea Bonnette.

Fischer: Well, yes, very much so.

Lage: Let's try to get some examples. When you talk about playing to the worst instincts, you understand what that means, but are other people going to?

Fischer: Well, the Sierra Club expects of its senior executives a very unique skill. And that is the skill to be effective members of competing teams at the same time. They expect of their senior executives that they will work as a team themselves, among themselves, the executive director and her or his colleague director. And they also expect each of those senior managers to be open and candid and forthcoming members of a volunteer team.

Let's take Rosemary Carroll, for example. She's not only a member of the senior staff team but also is the staff member who is part of the development advisory committee team, is the staff member who is part of the membership committee team. I think she had four or five such teams of volunteer club members. It is the instinct of such committees, let's say the membership committee, who has a charge and has a mission and has some objectives to ask of Rosemary Carroll, "What's Andrea been out doing that's making it impossible for us to get our job done? What's Michael Fischer doing that's making it, or doing or not doing, that's making it difficult to get our job done?" And if--

Lage: And how can we get more support for this particular mission?

Fischer: That's right. And if Rosemary were to say, "Oh, wait a minute, I can't respond to that." Or if they give her a what if and say well, knowing that Fischer's opposed to one direction or another, they'll say, "Well, Rosemary, we'd like you to go in this direction anyway." "Oh, well, I couldn't do that because--" And

then they will jump on, or pounce on, a difference between her and me, say--And then she would become a battering ram against the senior staff team. Or maybe it's not against me. Maybe it's against Doug Scott or something like that.

So, there is the instinct to look for blame, or to look for problems and then to search for blame. And then to bring those problems not to the executive director, but instead to use e-mail and send it to the world and then the members of the board of directors see a big problem, maybe even before Rosemary saw a big problem, or before I would see a big problem. And so, then we'd have to spend lots of time and energy pouring water on the problem.

So, here are two teams, or different competing teams that the senior staff are expected to be members of. Now, it is possible to be effective, open, candid, forthcoming members of more than one team. Particularly if the teams aren't kind of instinctively looking for problems and searching to place blame.

Lage: And if everybody has a sense of restraint and proper roles--

Fischer: That's right. And propriety and that sort of thing. And the club as an institution expects that our senior executives possess this unique skill. Most other outfits don't. And here comes Andrea Bonnette who's more than willing to say, "Oh, that Carl Pope, he's a fool," or, "Oh, that Doug Scott, he's engaged in blue smoke and mirrors. You can't trust him." Well, if there's one thing that each Sierra Club leader has both on their bumper sticker and emblazoned on the inside of their head, it is mistrust authority. Both terms. Mistrust is high and any authority figure, any power center is also to be mistrusted.

Lage: This might be the type of person that the club attracts?

Fischer: I think so. Sure.

Lage: They are willing to challenge--

Fischer: Challenge authority. Challenge the government. That's right. In protection of Mother Earth. Now there is a self-selecting process here and hey, I got it, too, right? All staff members do and many volunteers do.

Lage: I think if you can be specific without, you know, getting too personal or going beyond your sense of restraint, why did Andrea find it necessary to do this, to operate in this way?

Fischer: Well, what I'm saying is she didn't possess the skill of being a credible member of both teams. It is a skill. I don't think she consciously said, "Oh, I must be a bad girl." Instead, when the committee expected her to deliver dirt, she did.

Lage: Why did she mistrust, or was this not a true example--did she mistrust Doug Scott and Carl Pope?

Fischer: Yes. Yes, she did. Yes, she did. And there's only one human response that one can give to a person who expresses distrust for you. And that response is to distrust in return. And so with a senior staff that patently, openly mistrusted each other--

##

Fischer: Senior staff mistrust inexorably sent the signals of mistrust among the rest of the staff. And again I don't think that this was something that she was capable of doing. It was just an absence of having that skill and an absence of restraint and propriety on the part of senior volunteer leaders. They were looking for dirt, and she was willing to give them dirt.

Lage: Now were you aware of this from the beginning or was this something you caught up with later?

Fischer: No, it took about a year into her three-plus year tenure.

Lage: When did she come on?

Fischer: A year or so after I came; she left last January [1992].

Lage: And was that at the time when you reorganized the staff?

Fischer: No. I'd reorganized the staff several years earlier and made her associate executive director for finance and administration.

Lage: No, I mean, when she came, is that when you reorganized?

Fischer: Oh. No, no. It isn't. When she came she was one of the ten or twelve people who directly reported to me. But shortly after her coming, I collapsed some of the reporting to her and then I did a more extensive reorganization a year or so later and created two associate executive directors and kept only the director of volunteer services and director of development, and then subsequently the director of the Centennial Campaign, as direct reports beyond the two associate executive directors.

Lage: And Doug Scott?

Fischer: Doug Scott became associate executive director for conservation and communications. So Joanne Hurley, the director of public affairs and Jonathan [King], the editor in chief of *Sierra* magazine, reported to Doug Scott. They had earlier reported to me.

Lage: And then Andrea was associate executive director for--

Fischer: Associate executive director for finance and administration. And she got books and outings and human resources, general services, accounting.

Lage: Now how did she do in the role of overseeing that end of the club?

Fischer: As a professional financial person, extremely well. She brought experience, knowledge, insight, decisiveness to the organization. She brought exactly what I needed. But in terms of people skills, she did poorly. She was a battering-ram style administrator, did not communicate easily or regularly with her staff members. I regularly counselled her to do so. But she found that kind of a crashing waste of time or at least boring. Like the proverbial girl with the curl: "When she was good, she was very, very good. When she was bad, she was horrid."

Lage: She didn't have what you described as the woman's approach?

Fischer: That's correct. She denied herself empathy, the understanding, the openness, the thoughtfulness, the vision of the woman's approach and was quite a domineering, threatening, male-type administrator and wounded people, hurt people. And I tend to be very trusting by nature, and I trusted her to a fault and was patient with her foibles to a fault. I should have terminated her within a year and a half or so of her arrival. I was wrong--very wrong--not to have done so.

Lage: But she was effective in charge of the financial affairs? Is that correct?

Fischer: That's correct. She helped modernize--

Lage: Was that one reason you held with her?

Fischer: That's right. Absolutely. I knew I needed it. And I knew from the Len Levitt experience that here was an organization that had grown quickly, and was growing quickly. And she did have the skills to bring the altimeter in, to use the phrase that Denny and I gave to each other for--

Lage: Now what does that mean? I don't know what that means.

Fischer: An altimeter is a meter or a dial on an airplane which tells you what your altitude is. It tells you whether you're going to crash into the mountains that are coming up. And if you can see, imagine the mountains being expense increases, and you're going to want to fly your airplane revenue so that you can go over those mountains and not crash into them and go into red ink. We could see out there mountains of expense coming up, but we didn't have the altimeter needle to tell us how the revenues were doing on a real time basis. Our computer is quite archaic. And we can tell two or three months later whether we had run into them but we can't tell that week what kind of revenue we're--

Lage: Now is that still the case today? Or did Andrea put this altimeter into effect?

Fischer: Andrea began to put much more modernized approaches into effect, in the year since she's been gone we've made much more progress. But yes, she put into place some control measures that had long been needed. So yes, her professional contributions to the club were quite significant. It was her personal destructive contributions that frankly made it impossible to lead and to manage.

And the interesting thing, just to put a capper on it, I had told Richard Cellarius, when he was president, that a termination was likely in the future. I had told Sue Merrow that a termination was likely. Indeed I had intended to end her service to the club in January of '91. And then Desert Storm came and the revenue fell out from under us. I needed her. I needed her professional contributions. And Doug Scott concurred that we needed her. And so did Rosemary. I collaborated with the senior staff people in a transition. You know, when are we going to say to Andrea, "Thanks, your contributions are now over." And indeed I was able to retain some of their loyalty by saying, "You know, this is not forever, guys. She's giving us contributions." And they recognized them. "In January we're going to say goodbye."

Well, that January came and went. We had to keep her professional contributions during a very, very difficult year where indeed we laid off ten percent of our staff. So, the next January came--January being a window of opportunity to transition from one chief financial officer to the other, given the closing of our books at the year's end and the hiatus between building up the budget for the following year. So, the next January came and in December I had alerted Phil Berry that this termination was going to occur. He got very alarmed. He was blind to the

negative effects of Andrea, he being a moderately insensitive human being himself. I talked with him and the executive committee again in January about my intention to do so.

By that time, Carl Pope had replaced Doug Scott as Associate Executive Director for Conservation. (Doug had left to run a community theater in Friday Harbor on San Juan Island in Puget Sound, of all things--quite a change.)

Early that January, Carl insisted in the strongest terms, that the time to act on her separation could be postponed no longer. Knowing of Phil's opposition, Carl and I talked to Ed Wayburn, the vice-president and member of the executive committee, to seek his advice on whether I should act on my own or should seek one more time to get Executive Committee approval. Both of them urged me to act on my own. As it turned out, they were wrong. Several months later, after the dust had settled, Carl said simply, "Sorry, Michael, I gave you bad advice that time."

I knew I had two choices, both difficult. I could either talk to Phil or not before firing her. Phil would have ordered me not to do so. But the club's best interest required her departure--indeed, she had already irreparably damaged the internal morale and trust among the staff. So I would have had to act against his directive, which he would have seen as insubordination. Either way, I knew that my action would lead to an initiative on the part of some board members to fire me. Ed and Carl even counted the votes, should such a reaction be made. They thought I would be okay, but I thought their count was unrealistic, since it would require several relatively passive directors to stand up to the more aggressive antagonists. Again, they were wrong. But it didn't matter, because the firing was so clearly necessary and it was fully within my authority. It did cause the lump in my stomach, though, to be a heavy one when I called her into my office.

So, I think it was the first week in February, I fired her. And as a result, the executive committee was angered, particularly Phil Berry, Tony Ruckel and Ann Pogue, who depended on Andrea to "give them the straight scoop." You know, they wanted to dig for dirt. Andrea was more than ready to give it to them. They were at a loss; even though I had given them warning, they felt that my action was just dreadful.

Ironically, after her departure, Lou Barnes, Chris Thollaug, and I were able to give the Finance Committee and the board more solid information (without all the static) than Andrea had provided. Their calm competence, their personal loyalty and

support, provided the brightest relief for me in the ten months between resignation and departure. Together, we maintained a steady course.

Lage: I'm trying to sort out the feelings that she was needed for the financial control, and the feelings that she worked well with them, or some of them. Did she work well with the finance committee that she was a part of?

Fischer: Yes, to a fault. That's right. No, in this double team challenge, she chose which team she was going to be a member of. It was going to be those volunteer leaders that she could relate to and give strength to. She chose not to be a trusted member, or a trusting member, of the senior staff even though she reported to me. In my absence, she would call me endearing terms like "pantywaist" for failing to make Carl (or Doug) make budgetary cuts. I was guilty of "waffling," in her world, when I sought to protect the substantive conservation work of the club. But the buck stops here and I, not she, is responsible for the fiscal management of the club and for the motivation of its staff.

The club leaders, unfortunately, were blind to the importance of the executive director's need to have whatever she or he says is needed in order to motivate and manage a staff. And when I said I needed somebody other than Andrea around, almost any other board of directors would have said, "Okay, well, were we in your seat, we might disagree with you, Michael. We might come to a different conclusion but it's your call. Whatever you say you need, that's what you need." That's what most boards of directors would say. Not this board of directors.

So, as a result, the hullabaloo was so great at the board meeting after I terminated Andrea that, unlike Doug Wheeler's reaction, which was to mount a campaign to keep his job, I said, "No. I've been here long enough. And if that's the kind of blindness that the board of directors has to the responsibility that they have to build and keep a strong relationship with their executive, then adios." Instead of fighting, I negotiated a departure settlement that worked for the club and for me.

Andrea's firing was, I think, not the cause, but a spark or a catalyst for my own departure.

Lage: Or a symptom, perhaps.

Fischer: And a symptom, no question. My heart goes out to Carl. Had I been successful in hiring a strong woman financial administrator who had the skill of working with a double team, things might be

just fine. That's right. Things might be just fine. We might have been able to train this board of directors to develop the relationship, to develop a new cultural reality, vis-à-vis the relationship between the executive director and the board. And Carl now has the opportunity to hire a new chief financial officer.

Lage: And he certainly knows what he's in for.

Fischer: That's right.

Lage: And you haven't hired a new person?

Fischer: No. No, we haven't. So, Carl has the opportunity to make that hire and there is one other hire as well, his own successor as conservation director. So, he does have the ability to hire the two top people and to build his own team. In a way I didn't because I didn't have the ability to replace Doug Scott who was quite a powerful, even historic figure. And in his interesting way, that at-first divisive person later on became quite a team leader. I guess the other indicator--

Lage: Well, he had such political skills. I think of that among the staff, too. You've talked about it among the volunteers. But somebody as politically astute and enjoying the politics as much as Doug Scott must play at--

Fischer: No, he's the guy basically who was the power center that the board of directors and others saw Mike McCloskey as unable to deal with. And then he became the power center who killed Doug Wheeler. So, yes, he's quite political.

But another little indicator of the dysfunctional relationship between senior staff and the senior volunteers, whom Doug Scott used to call the mandarin class, is the high level of anger and animosity that Martha Scott, Doug's wife, holds for the club. What she saw them do to him caused her to be extremely angry.

Lage: Over a period of time or from a particular thing?

Fischer: Over a period of time. So, in a way, perhaps this powerful, wonderful institution of the club, maybe it's just the way it will always work that people get plugged into the senior executive positions and they get burned out. If even Doug Scott --the powerful, strong character that he was--could be so affected....

So, you replace them like fuses. And burned out also has a psychological connotation. I don't feel burned out in terms of commitment to the environmental movement or need to take a break and worry about what to do about my mental health at all. But I do feel a need to focus more on the work of the movement and less on, you know, cooling the fires, that internal friction caused in this Rube Goldberg machine of ours.

Lage: And the larger the club gets, the more complex it becomes. You saw a lot of growth during your period.

Fischer: Yes, indeed. And that's one of the things that I am proudest of.

Lage: Didn't it almost double?

Fischer: Well, from three hundred and sixty-five thousand members to a peak of just over six hundred and fifty. It's just under six hundred right now. And from about twenty-five million dollars to about forty million dollars, so not quite doubled, but quite rapid growth.

Lage: And that could be part of the problem.

Fischer: Sure, sure. My own view is that the club is far stronger now in virtually every measure, every way, than it was when I came. It doesn't mean that there aren't problems. There are. It doesn't mean that a transition from me to Carl isn't called for. I think it is, for a variety of reasons. But the fact that the institution is still very effective and working very, very well toward its aims and has gone through so many growing pains, and that happened on my watch, I'm proud of that.

Mike McCloskey's Role

Lage: Okay, let's see. We got quite a bit covered with that discussion about Andrea Bonnette. This is off the general topic but I want to cover what Mike McCloskey's role has been. We talked about it off the tape but we have not talked about it on the tape.

Fischer: Well, Mike is wonderful for what he has not done just as much as for what he has done. It's an administrative rule of thumb that having the former executive director remain is a recipe for disaster. Well, not so here. Mike has taken great pains to stay out of Doug Wheeler's way and then out of my way. Interestingly enough, Doug Wheeler's debacle came as an extraordinary surprise to McCloskey. He had no idea it was happening, which is an

indicator of how far out of the loop he had chosen to take himself. I asked Mike not to take himself quite so far out of the loop next time but he never got in my way, never second guessed me, was always there.

Lage: Did he advise you about particular board members or dealings?

Fischer: Oh, he was always there to give me advice and suggestions. He and I have very different personalities but he didn't try to force me into his mold. And yes, if I needed a sounding board, I'd call Mike. And whenever I was in D.C., I would borrow his office or be in a place close to his office and have dinner or lunches with him. Mike is just a delightful, delightful human being.

Lage: And what is his contribution to the club now? What is his job?

Fischer: As chairman of the club, his job is nebulous. He has no administrative responsibilities but his turf is international and I very consciously cut that deal with him early on. I said, "Mike, you do international and I won't." And he was also supposed to be building bridges to other interest groups like labor and religious. And he started doing some of that but it just really didn't pan out. So, he no longer does much of that. He is also a face card in Washington when I couldn't be there; he'll attend meetings at the White House or get a lobbying meeting with the senators.

Lage: What about with other environmental groups?

Fischer: Yes, he is currently the chairman of the Natural Resources Council of America, which is kind of the congress of environmental organizations. He's on the board of directors of the independent sector, which is a coalition of not-for-profits. So yes, he is, I think a very valuable asset to the club. Unquestionably a valuable asset to the club and to the movement. And he's in heaven. He's got a position and an opportunity to contribute with none of the heartache and responsibilities of a CEO. He can kind of float above all of the maelstrom.

Lage: And do the things that he really enjoys.

Fischer: Do the things he really enjoys and get kudos for doing them. He's got a very, very rare position, an historic position within the club. And he's carrying it off marvelously.

Lage: That's great. And he did have to come back and take the helm in between you and Doug Wheeler.

Fischer: That's right.

Lage: I also have a note to ask you about use of consultants. Did you use more outside consultants for various tasks than had been done before?

Fischer: I don't think more than had been done before.

Lage: When do you see a time to bring in consultants? Or when did you? Let's try to be specific.

Fischer: I have, as a matter a fact, at the coastal commission used a management consultant on a regular basis just kind of as somebody to be a sounding board and someone with whom to be as open and candid and vulnerable and all those sorts of things in a way that you can't do with colleagues inside an organization. They think through alternatives, even stupid ideas. And for instance, in my reorganization scheme we brought in a management consultant. I had very early on brought in management to talk about the fractious behavior of the board and Larry Downing was very interested in that.

Lage: Was this to talk with the board, not just with you on how to deal with them?

Fischer: Right. And he interviewed all the board members and a number of senior staff.

Lage: Was this person somebody you dealt with before?

Fischer: Yes. He was the management consultant I had used at the coastal commission. It was the one time, and the only time, I used him here.

Lage: Tell me how that worked out.

Fischer: He gave a very brief, oral report. Declined to make his report in writing, and said to the board, "You know, the Sierra Club is expert and adept at the use of the adversarial process in protection of Mother Earth," and I remember his report almost verbatim. And he said, "For that, I salute you, I congratulate you, I thank you." But he said, "When you have differences among yourselves, you use the same techniques. You cut each other's guts out, and that's stupid. It gets in your way and you will fail to achieve your objectives unless you learn to change your dysfunctional internal processes." And the board of directors kind of nodded at each other. "You know he's got something there." And I think that lesson lasted for about a week or two.

Lage: But there was no follow through, it sounds like.

Fischer: No follow through, and the board was uncomfortable with getting that straight-between-the-eyes sort of advice.

Lage: Was this under Larry Downing's presidency?

Fischer: Yes, yes. Larry Downing and I were, I think, a terrific team together. I admire, appreciate, and am enormously fond of Larry. So, that was the first consultant. The second management consultant, Jim Edgar, I brought in because shortly after I came, it was clear that the catalog department, which is a business enterprise that we had entered into, was on the rocks and I didn't know exactly how to deal with that. So, I brought in a management consultant with experience in for-profit businesses, more than anything else. Jim Edgar, of Edgar, Dunn, and Conover, whom I had known only slightly in the past, basically became our in-house management consultant. We would turn to him on occasion when we needed further advice. And I'd usually turn to him only when the president and I together said, "Gee, let's turn to the management consultant."

Lage: But mainly dealing with the for-profit operations, the marketing and--?

Fischer: Not only, no. No, we shifted, we used him once in talking about board development and the role of the board of directors. And they had a full-day session once that did not include me for much of that day. And most of the board members at the time indicated that they thought that was pretty helpful. He, in a variety of ways, was able to win their confidence and trust. He's slightly older than I and quite avuncular in style and so if I needed to make a recommendation and wanted to add a little bit of oomph and credibility to it, Jim and I would make it together.

A plethora of consultants I did not bring in. But the development department regularly depends upon consultants and the public affairs department does and so does, well, that's the way *Sierra* magazine and the books department work, with authors brought in under contract.

Working with Larry Downing and Richard Cellarius as Club Presidents

Lage: Okay. You've mentioned Larry Downing. Would it be helpful to review your relationship with different presidents, or were there vast shifts when you went from one president to the other?

Fischer: Well, vast, yes, sometimes, but shifts in style more with the first three, with Larry Downing, Richard Cellarius, and Sue Merrow. Each has a very different personality. Each has--

Lage: What did you find about Larry that was so good to work with?

Fischer: Larry was warm, friendly, trusting, outgoing, had imagination and took initiative, but he and I were on the phone all the time. Though he was ill some of that time, he and I very quickly got on the same wavelength together. And so I would be able to think and do things sometimes even without touching base with him after learning that, hey, these are directions that Larry would be fine with and then get back and tell him about it and indeed he'd be fine with it.

Lage: What kinds of things does the executive director need to consult on with the president? Can you remember an instance?

Fischer: Well, truth is I can't right now. But the kinds of things, well, all the way from the very difficult thing like we had already explained about a termination or a hire of a senior staff. You'd want to consult there without giving them the authority or responsibility of consultation. There's a management rule of thumb and that is that your subordinates never surprise you, and the executive director has that same responsibility with the president here. And so you always want to keep the president apprised of what's going on so that she or he isn't surprised by whatever it is, whether it's a financial matter, or an internal controversy with a sexual harassment charge between volunteers in the XYZ chapter, or a lawsuit that might be filed against us, or relationships with the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund. That was a big deal, continuing with all of the presidents, actually. Relationships with the Sierra Club Foundation was a big deal with all the presidents. The establishment of the Centennial Campaign fund raising effort was something that--

Lage: So, any major thing.

Fischer: That's right. Any major initiative. A workshop that Sue and I went to was put on by the American Society of Association Executives. In this job, I am an association executive, and

there are literally tens of thousands of us around the country. And there is a skill to being an association executive. Anyway, the ASAE regularly gives a two-day course for what they call the chief elected officer and the chief staff officer, "who together comprise the chief executive officer of a non-profit". So, the CEO position of any non-profit is very much a teamwork proposition. It's the establishment of that teamwork relationship and--

Lage: It may not be unique that the club has some conflict?

Fischer: Oh, heavens no. In volunteer-staff conflict, oh, no, not at all unique. I think it's simply honed to a fine degree here and is at the dysfunctional end of the scale, oftentimes. Not always, but oftentimes. But no, not at all unique. This two-day course that Sue Merrow and I took had forty organizations, eighty people, and we were the only advocacy organization. There was the American Steel Fence Manufacturers Association and the International Dance Exercise Association. You can imagine two foxy young women who were in that position and two portly guys were steel fence manufacturers. And then optometrists and chambers of commerce, that sort of thing.

Lage: Any organization that was similar to the club?

Fischer: No.

Lage: I'd heard that League of Women Voters is somewhat--

Fischer: They are very similar but no, there was no other advocacy organization in this meeting and yet eighty-five percent of what we covered there within two days was entirely germane and relevant to our work, including board relationships with the executive director.

Lage: Did it open up new business for you or were these things that you had--?

Fischer: It was extremely helpful. It did not open up new business, didn't give me new lessons because I've been an executive director serving at the pleasure of boards and commissions for many years, even changing boards and commissions and presidents. But the thing that was different was for the two of us together to go through this exercise and be kind of looking at each other and saying, okay, partner, this is your job as opposed to the on-the-job learning thing. Very, very positive experience.

Anyway, Larry and I did that automatically. It was easy to learn and that's why our relationship, I think, went just fine.

Unfortunately, the relationship was only one year long. He was half-way through his two-year term when I was hired.

Richard Cellarius and I count each other good friends. He and I, too, learned how to work well and trustingly together. Richard, however, didn't have the thickness of skin Larry did or Sue Merrow did. You know, I think I've mentioned to you the rumors, oh, not the rumors, but the motto that some have said that the Sierra Club has. It's a triple motto that goes: "Find a power center and attack it." The second one is, "Find a vacuum and fill it." And the third, kind of cycling back to the first is, "It you can't find a vacuum, make one, then fill it." And so, Richard found himself in a power center. And Richard found himself under attack. And when incoming rounds would fall on the president's office, they would hurt him grievously. And he would go dark for a while, particularly when his incoming rounds came in the vicious style that Denny was likely to couch much of his criticism. And so--

Lage: He was getting, from the volunteers, a lot of flack?

Fischer: Oh, that's right. Sure, that's right, which is the normal course of things inside the club. The fractiousness and the friction inside this Rube Goldberg operation isn't entirely staff versus volunteer. Far from it. There is staff versus staff friction, but not very much given the size and the dispersed nature of our staff. But there is certainly fractiousness volunteer-to-volunteer.

Lage: Would there be an issue that that would revolve around? You mentioned Denny Shaffer in particular, but what was Richard under attack for? Were they substantive issues or management issues?

Fischer: Management issues. Level of communication with the "outer ten". There was this "inner five" of the board of directors (the executive committee) and then the outer ten. And if the inner five doesn't communicate enough with the outer ten then they start to-- As Ann Pogue, one of our current board members, said to one of our senior staff, "Well, if we don't hear from you for a couple of weeks, we'll just assume something's going wrong."

Lage: There's so much mistrust.

Fischer: Yes.

##

Fischer: We were going through presidents, weren't we?

Lage: Right.

Fischer: Richard Cellarius is just a delightful guy.

Lage: You said he went dark, you mean he became depressed or he just stopped acting or--

Fischer: Well, I use it in a theatrical sense, when the theater "goes dark," it just isn't open. When a light bulb goes dark--

Lage: So, he didn't control the board, in a way?

Fischer: No. And the level of confidence that the board members had in him, that he was really on top of things, was relatively low. I think unfairly so. He really was doing a good job but he would be rattled by attacks and therefore unable to present his best side. Also, Richard is not that skillful a public speaker and didn't like to do that so much. So, unlike Larry and Sue Merrow, his predecessor and successor, he was not out doing the chapter visits and giving the motivational speeches that they did. And that itself raises the level of stature and credibility of the organization.

Lage: Did that leave it to you to do more of that?

Fischer: Yes. Richard is very much a detail person, strong on the internal administrative details of the workings of the board; the larger environmental picture was not his forte. So, yes, the normal shift that an executive director here would make between presidents would be, you know, which presidents really do want to be put up front as the person to lobby the senator or give the speeches or to be invited to the White House, and which presidents do better inside, and then the executive director would go to the White House and give these speeches.

Lage: And were you comfortable with switching back and forth there?

Fischer: Oh, sure. Yes. Absolutely. And for instance, when Jesse Jackson gave me a phone call and said, "Michael, I need you to be with me up in Seattle," I called Sue and said, "Sue, can you be with Jesse Jackson up in Seattle?" "Oh, sure, I can do that!" she said. And went.[2]

---

[2]Read her book: Susan Merrow and Wanda Rickerby, *One for the Earth: Journal of a Sierra Club President*. (Champaign, Illinois: Sagamore Publishing Co., 1992)--MLF; and her oral history: Susan D. Merrow, *Sierra Club President and Council Chair: Effective Volunteer Leadership, 1980-1990s* (Regional Oral History Office, 1994)--ed.

But now, Richard wouldn't have been the right person to be with Jesse Jackson in Seattle. But Larry Downing would have been. Yes, very comfortable with that. And I'm sure Carl will be very comfortable with that. And in a way, what's necessary is for the president, and then the board of directors, to be explicit about, all right, in this range of things that the executive directors could do, or should do, during this president's term, here's what you do, executive director. And then during the next president's term, well here's the palette of things that you do, and just make it explicit so that everybody's comfortable with that. Yes, I mean that's one of the things that wasn't done very much.

Lage: Oh, it wasn't. You had to figure it out for yourself?

Fischer: That's right. And even if the president and I would figure it out together, only some of the rest of the board would know about it or trust it. Others of the board would be criticizing either Richard or me or the two of us.

Sue Merrow's Presidency: 1990 to 1991

Fischer: Now, Sue Merrow, what a delightful person.

Lage: She mentioned [in her oral history interview] that she felt the board was afraid before she was elected that she wouldn't be strong enough to be president, was too nice. Was that--?

Fischer: I think that was true but that was an unnecessary fear. You can be good and still be nice. And perhaps that's one of the, this male dominated set of expectations. If you're a "nice guy" person, and Denny hit me on this regularly, "Oh, Michael, you simply want to be liked by everyone. Therefore you must be some sort of wishy-washy useless person. If you're going to be tough, you're going to be tough. And if you're going to be nice, well you're going to be nice. But the two don't come together." Well, the two do go together. But he would try to rip them apart. And Andrea didn't understand that either. You know, if you're going to be tough, well, you're going to be tough. None of this nice guy stuff, none of this trusting stuff, you know, sort of thing.

Lage: Did Sue end up being tough?

Fischer: Sue was just fine. Sue was perfect. Sue was wonderful except for one problem. She was only a one-year president. And she was

just hitting her stride as a one-year president. Had she stayed for another year, I think the relationships with the Legal Defense Fund would have worked out far better. I think I would have stayed on longer as executive director, which is not to say that everything was sweetness and light. Perhaps only during her tenure, I kind of let my hair down in saying, "Sue, I'm a person who needs motivating, too. I'm a person who needs strokes and help. And sure you give it to me just fine, Sue, but it's the rest of this board of directors that over-expects and under-rewards. So, I can't say that her year was kind of a shining year for all of us, but the relationship between the president and executive director couldn't have been better, with her.

Lage: Was she able to keep the board under control?

Fischer: Yes, because she, to a fault, was communicating with them. She was on the phone to board members. I doubt that two weeks would go by that she wouldn't talk to every single board member. And sometimes, at critical periods, she'd be talking to directors every day.

Lage: She said she used e-mail a lot.

Fischer: Used e-mail an awful lot. E-mail and the telephone. She basically was a full-time president. She stopped all of her other work. And that level of communication which Richard was unable to undertake basically gave her the stature, the credibility, and her ability to be a substantive person. I mean, she and I went lobbying with the Clean Air Act together. And she knew her stuff. She could give speeches and she could make people cry. I mean, she's just super. And working together with her made of this altogether too often administrative job of executive director, she didn't shut me out of the outside stuff. She brought me into it as well. So, I'd bring her into the Jesse Jackson stuff. She'd bring me into Washington, D.C., stuff. It was a very good teamwork relationship.

Lage: And what about, did she have a sense of restraint about interfering with your turf, should we call it?

Fischer: Yes. Very much so. She did not go around me to deal with my staff members in a way that confused them. And that's a matter of nuance, rather than substance. Every president ought to be able to have direct access to senior staff members or even junior staff members. But if it's done in a way that confuses the junior staff members so that they think they're getting a boss telling them something, and yet it isn't what their direct boss says, then confusion and demoralization and lack of trust can occur. Sue just had that instinctive way of dealing with people.

Lage: And we should mention she was a one-year president because her term on the board expired.

Fischer: Right. Yes, she was in the third year of her second three-year term and by bylaws was required to sit out for a year, darn it.

Lage: Anything else about Sue that you'd want to mention?

Fischer: Oh, just read her book.

Lage: Okay, I've done that, but maybe not everyone else has. I'm going to back up one second here. I noticed that Denny Shaffer retired or resigned as treasurer in the middle of a year, it looked like.

Fischer: Right.

Lage: Was that a particular issue?

Fischer: Oh, it was. It was a very painful time when in the middle of the year the revenues looked like they were down. And he stood up at an executive session of the board meeting and said that he simply could not work any further with this executive director, didn't trust him, didn't have confidence in him and so, "I hereby resign," slamming on the table.

Lage: This was in '88.

Fischer: Yes. Oh, no, Denny's a wonderful man. And interestingly enough, Andrea Bonnette and I just locked arms as a team, kind of fighting against that outside evil. And she and I together had the credibility to live through that. She was horrified by that evil person's statement. So, that was another contribution that she brought beyond her substantive work: when there was an external challenge that she saw as unfair and unjust, she jumped into the fray very appropriately and energetically. Denny's a real nice guy, right; he's quite a piece of work.

Phil Berry's Presidency: 1991-1992

Lage: Now, after Sue, we have Phil Berry.

Fischer: And when Phil, I'm told, I wasn't there--but I'm told that when Phil was making his statement of candidacy as president, he said in a somewhat sneering tone, "And I'll be damned if I'm going to go to any two-day training session with Michael Fischer to learn how to be a president." That I think was a very clear signal to

the rest of the board members that they were considering a president who wouldn't necessarily work very closely with the executive director. I seriously fault the board for that vote. In essence, that action was irresponsible and disloyal--not to me but to the position I held. I think that any board who elects a president who doesn't have the stated desire to work closely with the executive director is a board that's irresponsible. They do have this team of two leaders (president and executive director) that they need to have confidence in. And if the two don't work well together, that's a very high risk thing.

But that is not the culture of the club, as it is in almost every other institution that I've been involved with, even a very political outfit like the coastal commission. When the commissioners would be thinking of a new chairman, the commissioners would say to the executive director, to me, "Can you work with this new chairman? Which among the candidates would you prefer?" And while that's a very sensitive and fraught-with-danger sort of conversation, it's an entirely appropriate conversation because the teamwork is critical to the success of the institution.

Lage: But that question wasn't raised with you at the Sierra Club?

Fischer: No, that part of the culture at the Sierra Club does not exist. And no, that issue was not raised.

Lage: But I wonder if they raise it at the other end. When they're choosing a president, do they ask the president?

Fischer: Clearly they didn't.

Lage: Not in this case.

Fischer: Right. Right. And indeed, Phil Berry's subsequent communication with the board was far worse than even Richard Cellarius's. But Phil said, "Look, I'm coming in as a one-year president." Indeed, Tony Ruckel was the person who was at first slated to succeed Sue.

I was in Phil's living room when we were talking about the relationship with the Legal Defense Fund, which was probably the most important item on Phil's agenda. And Tony made some relatively aggressive statement that, "By God, that Legal Defense Fund was going to have to shape up or ship out," or something like that. At which point you could just see Phil's switch flip. And he said, in that meeting, "Tony, I don't think you're the right person to be the president of the Sierra Club during this critical time when we're establishing a relationship with the

Legal Defense Fund, and therefore I'm going to run against you." At which time, Tony, who very much looks up to Phil, pulled himself out of the race, said okay. So, Phil came in as a one-issue, one-year president to "fix" things with the Legal Defense Fund.

Lage: Because of his unique history with both organizations.

Fischer: That's right. He proved to be exactly the wrong person to fix things with the Legal Defense Fund. But he thought he was the right person. And he was also the wrong person to work with the executive director.

Lage: Do you think the board chose him basically to fix the relationship?

Fischer: Oh, he's such a historic figure and a person with a forceful personality and when he said, "I'm the president," and there really aren't other vigorous, forceful leaders on the board, they said, "Okay, fine." People just fell in line behind him. I don't think there was anybody really willing to run against him. And yes, I think the truth is that the board, at least a year earlier, had said, "All right, whatever Phil says on the Legal Defense Fund is what we're going to back up." So, when he came and said, "I've got this vision and I will make it work with the Legal Defense Fund," they said, "Okay, fine. Let's make that happen."

Lage: Now didn't Tony Ruckel used to work for the Legal Defense Fund, but he doesn't anymore?

Fischer: Rick Sutherland fired him, as a matter of fact. He was a field attorney in Boulder, I think, the Boulder or Denver office of the Legal Defense Fund. And so there was some bad blood there. And some good, I mean, Tony has a lot of love for the Legal Defense Fund as well but he was being very hard edged about it. Legal Defense Fund relationships is probably something that we ought to talk about in another session, if you put that on your list. I'm candidly very proud of that.

Lage: Okay. Do you want to say anything about how the relation with Phil Berry went? Did you talk with him on a regular basis?

Fischer: No. Very infrequently. I would place calls to him and he wouldn't answer them. He would not be accessible to me, in stark contrast with the others.

Lage: Had you sensed before he was president? Was there animosity?

Fischer: Not animosity, but the chemistry was not right. I remember saying to Steve Stevick, executive director of the Sierra Club Foundation, more than a year before Phil's election, "If Phil becomes president, I'll be gone within a year." Turned out I was right. But I don't think there is animosity to this day. I just think that he's one kind of person and I'm another kind of person. Phil Berry is the kind of guy who takes unilateral action, even in another's field of endeavor.

Lage: He's not consultative?

Fischer: He's not consultative. He doesn't, I mean, he's not malevolent, he's just blind to the need to involve others. And even in the area of business law, if he would hear of a case, say in a chapter that required a business lawyer, he'd pick up the phone and call the club's business lawyer, hire him to do something with this chapter, never consulting either Andrea at the time or me. And we're responsible for business law. So, we'd have to train our business lawyer that, when you get a call from Phil, your next phone call is to us to get the permission from us to do that work or not.

Lage: Did you have any conflicts over that kind of thing where you had to deny--

Fischer: A couple of minor situations where I've had to call Phil back and say, "Phil, we're already working on that project, and here's how--"

"Oh, you are? Oh, well, gee I didn't know that," you know, click. [laughter] You know, well, "What are you doing involved in that?"

"It's my business, Phil. I've been working on that one for a couple of months now."

"Oh, well." You know, kind of a, "You jerk." Because something would come onto his radar screen and he'd deal with it, without any appreciation that others might be working on it or that the way he dealt with that might have ramifications on something else.

Also, I knew that, before he was elected president, Phil had made an offer to the board of directors that he would be willing to be the general counsel for the Sierra Club but if and only if the general counsel reported directly to the board and not through the executive director. So, he and I had argued that at a budget meeting where I said that that was unacceptable to me. The general counsel, if we were to have one, would report to the

executive director and we didn't need two senior executives in potential conflict before the board.

Lage: Now the general counsel is not a position?

Fischer: We don't have any such position, no.

Lage: Would that take the place of the Legal Defense Fund or would this be for internal?

Fischer: Well, this would be internal, for both business and conservation law. The Legal Defense Fund does less than half of our conservation law cases. And we deal with many other attorneys for the other half. So, he and I both knew that there was a potential self-interest conflict there. (Business at his law firm had suffered a sharp drop). Interesting man. Interesting man, but as you say, not consultative at all. And quite abrasive, quite abrupt, quite decisive, even with limited facts. Even the-- "Don't confuse me with all the facts, this is what we're going to do. I know how to do it best." And that's a macho way of leading that has been successful in many parts of the world.

Lage: Maybe in an earlier time when the club was less complex, it worked, but maybe not.

Fischer: Yes, that's right. I would say certainly not now. And Tony Ruckel, now, came in as the president after I had tendered my resignation and he saw relatively little reason to spend a lot of time cultivating the relationship between the two of us. I had urged him to go to that ASAE course with me and he agreed to go. Probably half a dozen times, he cancelled out the day before. Interesting guy, but very much an understudy for Phil Berry in approach as well as substance. But, at the same time, his light doesn't shine quite as brightly so he's not as destructive as Phil was.

Lage: Was Denny Shaffer the same type of operator, the loner type?

Fischer: No, not at all. Much more manipulative. I don't think Phil Berry is very manipulative. He would have you believe that, boy does he steer things through a very complex route in order to get there but Denny's more manipulative than Phil. Phil's just more blunt edged. Crafty, but blunt edged.

Board of Directors: Culture, Role, Administrivia

Lage: I had questions here about the board but I wonder if we should move on to topics and bring the board in as it goes, unless you have a general remark about whether the board changed over the years?

Fischer: Yes. The board is quite a changeable body. And expectations of the executive director change along with the board.

Lage: A lot of new people came on the board during your term as executive director. Completely new to the club leadership, or top leadership.

Fischer: Right. And the culture of the board expecting that board members will spend so much time on administrative affairs is one that I think really stultifies their effectiveness and their role with the executive director. When the executive director is off doing speeches on substantive conservation campaigns, or leading major players through the Mojave Desert, say, he's not doing board of directors' things, oftentimes. So, I'd say the relationship with the board generally was okay. The board was busy doing their RCC [Regional Conservation Committee] liaisons, or attending their committee meetings, and even somebody wonderful like Kathy Fletcher, who is a very visionary person, was instantly captured in reviewing stuffed animals for the licensing program. Spent a lot of time, invested a lot of time and energy on that.

Lage: Now is this a structural problem?

Fischer: I think so, yes. Because, I mean, here's Jean Packard, who's former chief elected officer of, is it Fairfax County, Virginia, and totally passive on the board. And Kathy Fletcher, former White House senior aide, captured in administrivia. The board, years ago, delegated all place-related conservation matters to the chapters and to the regional vice-presidents. And in doing so, took the most substantive of the environmental issues off of their own plate. Well, there's nothing to fill up the plate other than administrative stuff and, boy, they sure delight in it.

Lage: I noticed in the minutes, or it must have been one of your reports, you specifically mentioned several conservation campaigns that were going on that you'd like the board to help you with.

Fischer: Right.

Lage: Was this a calculated request?

Fischer: This is a test, or a jog. Let's see, okay, guys, can you do this? And they didn't.

Lage: You have someone like Ed Wayburn who seems to see that as his role.

Fischer: Oh, Ed is such a wonderful guy. He's an anomaly within the Sierra Club. Ed too, like Phil, doesn't involve others. But unlike Phil, he's not a brusque or abrasive or kind of capricious person. Ed has his issues: population, international, Alaska and national parks. And you know that if it's one of those issues, Ed is going to be there. You need to work with Ed on those issues.

Lage: And also, he works on it.

Fischer: Oh, he's in the office forty hours a week. Ed Wayburn is a friend. He's wonderful. Nearing the age of ninety, he's one of the biggest strengths of the club.

Lage: But you can't get the other board members to--

Fischer: Emulate that. Well, actually, if you had that emulated, you'd have a bunch of lone rangers wandering around because Ed is not an involving person, and the club revolves around involvement. Alliteration intended. Or is that a lot of--

Lage: Well, I'm thinking more of taking a role with issues, a strong role with issues, conservation issues. More than style of operating.

Fischer: Yes, I wish they were emulated much more.

Lage: Is that what you see more as a proper role of the board?

Fischer: Yes, yes. The board needs to have shorter meetings and more focus on environmental affairs. But with Doug Scott's leadership, when the board focused on environmental issues, it was a dog and pony show. Doug would pull in all these vibrant speakers and give them a slide show and a rah-rah, and they'd all feel great and say yes, go for it. Well, but that's all they could do was say yes, go for it. And then they'd go back to worrying about the council or the committee on committees or the finances and planning committee and that sort of thing.

Lage: Now, Sue Merrow's been very involved with internal workings. Is it of a different order?

Fischer: Yes, but Sue basically was an alternate face card to me. My shortcoming, one of my serious shortcomings was not being plugged enough into the congressional schedule or the details of conservation issues. I would basically be a face card played by Doug Scott or one of the lobbyists in D.C. They knew the issues that I was most conversant on and most interested in, like Alaska or like offshore oil or like the California desert or like working with people of color. And when they saw an issue that needed that kind of face card, they'll pick up the phone and say, Michael, we need you in D.C. And they'd set up the meetings and I'd go do them. Wonderful, and I loved doing them. But the strategy was not crafted by me. The policies were not crafted by me. I helped implement them.

Same with Sue. She would be a face card to be played when called upon to play it, which is nice, wonderful. I mean, I'm not denigrating that but simply saying that I think the board has even a deeper role, like Ed Wayburn, who does, in fact, craft the strategy and the policy. And then the staff follows his lead pretty frequently. So that we do need to get the board to emulate. But think back to the David Brower era, he would formulate the policy. But, a much more quiet era, the era before faxes and e-mails and even before airplanes.

Lage: That's right. And where two or three major campaigns were about it.

Fischer: Right. That's right. Nationally, two or three, as opposed to the two or three thousand that we have going on at any minute these days. And his campaigns were place-based ones you could stir souls over.

Lage: Okay, I wonder if we should break now. The next thing is finance and budget. You talked about it a little bit, but it is a big issue. And we're at a logical point to stop.

Budget Process

[Interview 3: January 14, 1993] ##

Lage: Today is January 14, 1993. This is our third session with Michael Fischer and we're continuing with internal affairs, the interminable internal affairs of the Sierra Club. I wanted to start with trying to understand the budget process.

Fischer: Sure. Okay, the budget process, interestingly enough, changed radically, for the better, during the six budgets that I put together. When I arrived, the budget was the big *sturm und drang*. It was known at the club that, oh my God, half the year is spent on budget. And the budget is the way we plan. And the budget is the hub around which power centers whirl and fight, and it's just going to take so much of your time. And by the time you get it adopted, why, give it a month or two and you've got to start up the whole new budget process for the next year.

And indeed it was, the first couple of years that I was there, very emotional, very stressful. And I think there were two reasons for that. Number one, we didn't have a professional financial leadership of any stature within the club. The director of finance who was there when I came--Len Levitt--Len's capacity for bringing financial information to bear and for dealing with the warring factions among the volunteers as well as the staff was not up to the task. And the second, I think, factor that was in operation was that the treasurer was and had been Denny Shaffer. And before him, the treasurer had been Phil Hocker, that's right.

Both of those people are very hyper, very type-A and very control oriented, and they felt a great deal of stress and tension about the budget, and so they maintained a very hands-on approach to the budget process's detriment because other volunteer leaders knew that this treasurer, whether it be Phil or Denny, was exercising far more power than any of the other directors and even the president. And so, there was a lack of trust and confidence or just a "what's he doing now" sort of thing on the part of other directors.

So, over the course of the six years, at one point, gosh, I guess it was about a year into Andrea's tenure, Andrea and I had formed, I think a very credible executive team, and had gotten financial affairs under our belt. And we knew what we were doing, leading Denny to feel kind of left out. Oh, he didn't have to be asking all the questions. We were asking them ourselves and answering them. And so, at a meeting over at the Marines Memorial Center on Mason Street, Denny makes his big pronouncement, "I have no confidence in the executive director. I'm unable to work with this executive director. I hereby resign as treasurer."

Lage: Did that come out of the blue for you, or had he expressed it personally?

Fischer: No, it came pretty much out of the blue. As much as any of those things from Denny could come out of the blue. Very early in my

tenure I recognized that when Denny walked into the room, it was 50 percent odds that it was serious trouble walking into the room. The instant cause of his saying that was that our revenues, contrasted with the budgeted revenues, had a gap of a million dollars or something like that. Well, it was an interim gap. It was a matter of timing and as a matter of fact was one of the final stutters of our improved financial management system. And it was quite normal for the graph to flip-flop during the year. And Denny knew that very well. But he saw the graph flip-flopping and attacked me for it. Well, he, I think, was expecting other volunteer leaders to rally to his cause and this to be a serious problem in my tenure. It turned out not to be.

The board of directors was on the way toward getting tired of his "the sky is falling, the sky is falling" thing. And both Andrea and I were able to very aggressively and pointedly say, "Look, there isn't a problem. Here's the process." I think that was a watershed in the board developing more confidence in the professional financial management of the outfit.

And with Denny gone, we had a couple of treasurers. Dick Fiddler was treasurer for a while. Dick is a very friendly, very constructive, very thoughtful volunteer leader. And so with Dick taking over, that watershed was cemented. To the extent that even though the current treasurer, Ann Pogue, shares some of Denny's foibles, she having said to not only myself but other staff executives that, "If we don't hear from you guys for a two week period, we assume everything is going wrong." Okay, so that's very Denny-like and very Phil Hocker-like. But even though she has those attributes, she, as treasurer, has worked with the professional staffers. She knows something about business management herself. And this last budget went through without *sturm und drang*. I think it took a half an hour of the board of directors' time.

Lage: That's quite amazing.

Fischer: It is amazing because the first year, I mean, the budget was the subject of discussion for two and a half days of the board's time.

Lage: Did you change the process of involving people as you develop the budget? Or what resolved the difficulties?

Fischer: Yes, we did. We got the budget guidelines discussion of the board of directors which takes place about six months before the budget is adopted where we sit down with our department heads and then we also sit down with committee chairman and say, all right,

we're about to prepare the budget for next year. Here are the general objectives we have. Here's what we want to do with chapters. Here's what we want to do with the lobbying program. Here's what we want to do with our management information system. Here's what we want to do in general with salaries and benefits. And here's what we see coming down the road in insurance rates and that sort of thing. And in a very calm, no numbers involved sort of way, we lay out those short term objectives and we say, okay, those are the objectives we will meet in putting the budget together. And then we present the budget.

Lage: The staff presents the budget, then?

Fischer: It's the executive director's budget proposed to the finance committee. And in my cover memo, I would say, here are the guidelines. Here's how the proposed budget meets the guidelines. And here are the problems that we had in reacting to doubling of the health insurance rate. Things did occur that were unexpected at the time of the budget guidelines session. The budget guidelines that Denny Shaffer put together, I remember my first week on the job, he patiently went for a walk along the beach with me at a board retreat saying, "You know, these budget guidelines, they really ought to be like four points on a half a piece of paper." Very, very general and broad, which of course gave him the latitude to say, "Okay, Fischer, you know, what I really want you to do is a, b, and c and looking--"

Lage: Was he trying to determine club policy or was this a power trip?

Fischer: Both. Both, absolutely. The budget became the planning document. The budget became the instrument for the exercise of individual power and totally unfettered by expectations on the part of the board.

Lage: So, you got the board more involved in developing guidelines.

Fischer: That's right. And with more specificity, larger guidelines, and more volunteer leaders involved early-on, they became more trusting of the staff-level process.

Lage: Then what did the finance committee do with your budget?

Fischer: Just this last time around, the finance committee blessed the budget proposal that I gave them. I think they made fifty thousand dollars worth of changes out of something like a fifty million dollar budget. And they spent maybe three quarters of the day on it instead of putting in a two and a half day period. So then the last couple of years, the smoothness with which the budget has gone through has been significantly different than the

first couple of years. And the middle couple of years were kind of half-way in between.

Lage: Could we say it's progress toward greater trust in the staff's control?

Fischer: Well, first of all we've brought greater professional resources to bear. And second, we got an early understanding of mutual expectations. And then yes, a greater trust of the staff process and rejection of the power broker type, or the misuse of power-type people like Phil and Denny. Now, whether that culture holds, who knows? I hope it will.

You know, we've got a new director of finance and administration coming in now. I would expect that she and the team, particularly Lou Barnes, who's now the controller--Lou is a solid, unflappable guy who doesn't play the politics of the board and simply calls it the way he sees it. And he usually sees it pretty clearly. And so his lack of emotionalism and his very, very strong loyalty to the executive director and the fact that Lou and I were together every step of the way gave greater confidence to the board of directors.

Lage: I noticed, I guess in sort of the mid-period, maybe it was '89, there were complaints that the budget lacked vision.

Fischer: Well, you have to see who made that complaint. That was Denny Shaffer.

Lage: No, no. Ed Wayburn.

Fischer: Oh, okay. Well, Ed kind of fell into the term that Denny was using. Ed Wayburn, Ed is a story, or an interview in himself. Ed's comment was, "Hey, the budget doesn't give new resources to my project, to my vision. It doesn't have my vision." Well, Ed didn't win at the budget guideline process. He wanted far more staff devoted to international and population efforts. And in '89, we were in that budget, putting money into chapter and state house lobbying, which is an area of leadership of my own and also of Sue Merrow's. And so he saw more money going into programs that didn't compute for him and he doesn't deal with the chapters of Texas and New Mexico, and so on. He deals with Congress and with Alaska or with international issues and so that was his code word for saying, "Hey, my money isn't there. Therefore I'll kind of trash the whole thing intellectually so that we can start from the ground up again." He was still playing the budget games of the past.

Lage: Well, that's what always happened in the September meeting, it seems.

Fischer: Right. Right. Well, he didn't win. He was a sole--a lone voice saying I don't like this budget.

Lage: So, these are code words in part. That's interesting.

Fischer: Right. One of the frustrations was the Sierra Club has no strategic plan, no business plan. And a budget should be based upon a multi-year strategic plan.

Lage: And you tried to do something about that.

Fischer: Tried to get strategic planning in place.

Lage: What happened? I saw it mentioned in the minutes and your reports.

Fischer: Well, I finally gave up. I'm, as you know, an urban planner by training and experience. I learned from my experience working with and for cities, where the planning commission really likes the city's general plan and city councils tend to hate the general plan. Well, because city council members are elected officials and a planning document, particularly a multi-year planning document, locks them in concrete. They have now said, "These are our objectives." And it makes it very difficult for them to react to the changing politics of the day. And it makes it very difficult for them to show their flash and iron as political leaders if they're still supposed to be walking lock step toward the direction as planned.

So, I equated the Sierra Club board much more with the political life of a city council. There are all sorts of politicians flowing in and around the senior volunteer level of the Sierra Club, and they didn't want to be locked into place with last year's plan or with Denny's plan or with Michele's plan or Ed Wayburn's plan.

Lage: But you had a planning committee. Did they work on the--?

Fischer: Oh, the planning committee, an absolutely and utterly toothless planning committee.

Lage: Oh, but were they devoted to the idea of a strategic plan?

Fischer: Yes, yes. They thought it was a terrific plan and they really wanted to do something about it. Unfortunately one of the leaders in planning, and this pre-dated myself, was Bob Howard, a

long-term board member. And Bob Howard has a wonderful mind and has invested a lot of his life in the Sierra Club, but he has the unfortunate facility of opening his mouth to speak and within three minutes, half of the people in the room are asleep. Within ten minutes, eighty percent of the room is asleep and Bob doesn't stop speaking for an hour, once he starts speaking. So by the time he's done speaking, he's got the ten percent of the room who is awake making their family budgets or planning their vacation or wishing they were anywhere else. And so people started to think strategic planning equals Bob Howard equals ineffectual sleepiness. [laughter] Therefore--

Lage: This is going to look great on the printed page.

Fischer: Right. Notwithstanding my respect and fondness for Bob, whose insight and doggedness served the club extremely well. But what I said is how he appeared to others, sadly. Therefore, they thought, strategic planning must be a crashing bore and a waste of time. Not true, but Arnold Toynbee said that history is made by human beings relating to and reacting to other human beings.

Lage: That's why we do these oral histories.

Fischer: That's right. Denny Shaffer made the budget process a terrible one and everybody hated it, and Bob Howard made the planning process ineffectual. Interestingly enough, Sue Merrow, over my wails of protest, appointed Denny Shaffer as the chair of the planning committee. And Denny is not at all in favor with the current board of directors and therefore whatever the planning committee does is not in favor with the board of directors.

Lage: So they're working away at this, apparently.

Fischer: They're working away at something. But the senior staff knows that it's irrelevant so they're not going to pour any time and energy into it. And the senior volunteers know that it's irrelevant except for Michele Perrault who's on the planning committee, knows kind of à la Ed Wayburn that, if she gets her ideas in a number of fora and is successful, then her ideas, her vision, have a better chance of surviving. So, Michele is doing some leadership and frankly if Denny were to shuffle off to North Carolina and Michele were to become chair of the planning committee, I think it is positioned now to take off and to become effective. Because now the budget process has gotten people calm for the new CFO [Chief Financial Officer] and for Carl--Carl himself has never paid any attention to the strategic planning process--it will be interesting to see what priority level and importance he assigns to it. But if Carl and Michele were to

say, "We need a strategic plan so that we can base our budgets upon that strategic plan," it would happen.

Lage: But right now it's done on a yearly basis sort of through the guideline process?

Fischer: That's right.

Revenue Ups and Downs

Lage: Okay. But the ups and downs of revenue, over your period were-- You had some good years and you used the term, "We shouldn't spend the spike."

Fischer: Shouldn't spend the spike. That's right.

Lage: Did the spike get spent?

Fischer: Oh, yes. Every year we budgeted revenue that was iffy. When I first came, I remember Denny sitting me down and saying, "Now when you get your budget, the first crack at it you're going to have a big gap between your projected revenues and your projected expenses. And the first thing, Michael, you should do is go down and sit down with those people in development and get them to crank up their revenue because they're sitting down there trying to cover their ass and they're going to be very conservative in revenue projection because they want to meet their projections. They even want to beat their projections. They don't want to have projections that they're really going to have to work very, very hard to get and might not entirely meet. So, Michael, you've got to go down in there with a whip and you've got to get them to increase their projections." That's kind of the thought process. "And then once you have the revenue projected, then we are going to divide up the pie and we're going to spend it all." That's when I walked in saying wait a minute, don't spend the spike.

Lage: I thought he liked the idea of setting some aside, having an endowment.

Fischer: Well, that was another thing. The endowment was an idea I cooked up in the back seat of his car the first month I was in the job up in North Carolina.

Lage: You're in the back seat of the car. You're on the beach.

Fischer: That's right. [laughter] This is not an eight-to-five job. Putting aside bequest income for endowment was something that I thought was a good idea, not only to build a cushion and to have some financial conservatism built in, but I believe that by telling prospective testators or donors through their bequests, that the money isn't going to go just to the light bill every month, but is going to have a long-term, permanent benefit for the club by being put into an endowment and only the earnings on that be spent, that that would encourage more people to leave money to the club in their wills. So, his conservatism and mine agreed in that particular part. And yes, Denny gave good lip service to the need to have a surplus or need to buffer ourselves from this imperfect altimeter. He used to say, "Gee, we never know how high we're flying because our indicators are off." He was referring to the lack of fiscal business management skill that we had, which is not--

Lage: So you were in agreement with him on that.

Fischer: We were in agreement in principle, but in practice the budgets that Denny was in charge of as treasurer always spent the spike. The revenues were going up between 12 and 15 percent a year and the expenses went up between 12 and 15 percent a year. And I was saying, "We're going up this hill. We're going up this hill and we're spending every bit of it. I don't know when it's going to happen but we're not going to get 12 to 15 percent every year. Let's have our expense chart go up less rapidly than our revenue chart." Well, the club was unable to do that, really at all levels, including my own. There's never enough money.

Lage: So, you did staff expansion and programs?

Fischer: That's right. That's right. Now, these were staff expansions generally to follow volunteer initiatives, like Sue Merrow's chapter lobbying support. That required a couple of staff positions and it required a grants program to the states, to the chapters. Before Dave Brower left the club, he wanted a third of a million dollars for a new member's handbook, arguing that this is an investment and the renewal rate will skyrocket and this third of a million dollars, it will pay off with--and he calculated up--"This will give us a hundred million dollar payoff over--"

Lage: Did it make a difference?

Fischer: Not the slightest. It was $300,000, as far as I and the staff are concerned, out the window. We had more negative comments from members who got this flashy handbook, unsolicited. All 500,000 members got it, asked for or not. We got more negative

comments from members saying why are you spending this money on this flashy document, than we got positive comments saying thanks very much, oh I never knew exactly how the club worked and this really helps.

So, every budget year there were these ideas and they usually were a quarter to a half million dollar ideas. And the ability to say no in the Sierra Club is very limited. That leads to one of our greatest strengths because we have so many volunteers doing so many things on so many issues and that's because the club, as volunteers and staff, has learned that if a volunteer or a couple of volunteers walk in and say we want to do a, b, and c. We want to set up a gay/lesbian section or we want to get involved in the nuclear effects of warfare or we want to get involved in population and immigration issues. Each of those ideas has been received with some skepticism. But the people who fought against the club being involved in those ideas lost, and painfully so. I mean, they got trashed. So, volunteer leaders have learned that it's really painful to say no. And they search for ways to be able to say yes. And that leads to spending the spike. And so actually, the ups and downs in revenue were relatively technical, I would say.

Lage: Even the later--

Fischer: No, except for the one right after the Gulf War. But the other ones were all timing and if you take a look at the graph, our revenues went up, up, and up until the Gulf War and our revenues didn't go down at all. But instead of 12 to 15 percent growth rate, we experienced 2 percent growth rate. And then the next year 3 percent, the next year 4 percent.

Lage: You were still growing?

Fischer: Still growing. We never, at no point, did we go down.

Lage: But just not at the expected level?

Fischer: That's right. That's right.

Lage: For a club that wants to control growth, you'd think they'd get ready for their leveling off.

Fischer: [laughter] Yes, that's right. Growth management was, no, we were going like that and then we were projected to go like that and we went like that [gestures].

Lage: But wasn't there an actual membership drop? Or was it just a drop in the rate of increase?

Fischer: The membership shrinks and swells even in growth years. And if you take a look at it in terms of year-end, yes, there's been about a 6 percent, something like that, membership drop just in the last year. And that's because of some renewal rate drops. But we're talking about, oh, we hit a peak of 653,000 members, something like that and now we're down at about 625,000 and projected to end the year, I think, at just over 600,000. So yes, there is currently a membership drop. That doesn't necessarily mean a drop in revenues. As a matter of fact, it won't mean a drop in revenues because we're increasing the foundation and major giver and royalty incomes to make up for that.

Lage: Okay. Now, what happened when this revenue shorted? Well, first of all, what do you attribute it to? You tie it to the Gulf War. Do you attribute it to the Gulf War?

Fischer: No. Well, that was a trigger. The recession was the main thing. As the recession washed from the East Coast to the West Coast, it affected us at the Sierra Club about ten months after it had affected most of the other environmental organizations. We were watching our indicators very closely during that budget year and didn't see any wavering until the month after we adopted our budget. And then, for about three months we saw some indicators going up one month, down the next. And then another indicator which was down the first was up the next and we were getting very, very mixed signals and nothing that we really could have based anything on until--

Lage: What are your indicators?

Fischer: Renewal rate, average gift rate, response to the direct mail rate.

Lage: These are all things that you keep track of.

Fischer: Keep track of every month.

Lage: Was that kept track of before Andrea?

Fischer: Yes, we didn't have the computer analysts or programmers to do a skillful enough or timely enough job.

Lage: But in this case, you had all the information.

Fischer: We had the information. We were watching them very closely and we were talking to the development colleagues in other organizations and trying to see what their indicators were saying to the extent that they would share that information. And it

wasn't until the months immediately after the Gulf War. We had made a, in retrospect, a serious strategic error in that year. We knew that a postage rate increase was coming up in March. And so we decided we'd make one big direct mail new member acquisition appeal and then a couple of smaller ones, later in the year. So, we put about 60 percent of our multi-million dollar budget in direct mail new member acquisition pieces into a mailing that was going to go out in mid-January.

Lage: Of '91.

Fischer: That's right. And they were printed, in envelopes and postage sealed, when the Gulf War happened. And our consultant said, "Oh, God. When the nation goes to war, you've got relatively little problem with renewal rates but nobody joins something new when something like this is going on." And so I said, "Oh, great. I have the option of taking two million dollars worth of mail and just shoving it straight into the landfill or shoving it into a landfill via people's mail boxes." Well, it was the latter course we chose but into the landfill it went. We lost a lot of money on that.

Lage: You didn't get much response.

Fischer: Didn't get much response at all because of timing and for one reason or another we couldn't postpone the mailing indefinitely. The war was a trigger, but it really was people keeping their discretionary dollars in their pockets. Virtually all of our fellow organizations with a couple of exceptions--the National Parks and Conservation Association is the only national outfit that I know of whose membership kept growing during this period--and I still don't have any idea, no clue, why that happened. Greenpeace went through the floor and still hasn't recovered.

Lage: And why is that?

Fischer: Well, we were mailing 12 million pieces a year and they were mailing 40 to 50 million pieces a year. And there are just so many names on environmental groups' mailing lists so they had to thrash around for other mailing lists. In fact, they even went to lists of catalog purchasers--

##

Fischer: --because they needed names to mail their new member acquisition stuff to. And the most productive of all their catalog lists was Victoria's Secret, which is a sexy, women's lingerie catalog.

Lage: Does this information get shared around unofficially or officially?

Fischer: Yes. Well, it was the chairman of the board at Greenpeace who told me that, David Chatfield. Anyway, right after the Gulf War, Victoria's Secret went through the floor. Their sales went down. It was the young, yuppie, upwardly-mobile buyer spending discretionary money on lingerie and Greenpeace. Well, when the recession hit they stopped buying lingerie, and they stopped buying Greenpeace. And for whatever reason, Greenpeace has not yet recovered their revenue strength.

Lage: Did they take a stance on the war, Greenpeace?

Fischer: No, they didn't. Friends of the Earth was more aggressive than Greenpeace. Though, I think by implication they did. And they did focus on the environmental destruction of the Kuwaiti oil fires and the oil spills in the Persian Gulf.

Lage: I just wondered how the Gulf War might have figured into people's renewals.

Budget Cuts and the "July Massacre," 1991

Fischer: Yes. That could well have. But my point here is the Sierra Club's dampening of its spike; you know, the spike didn't go down but it sure flattened out. And for a year, particularly that first year in '91, the expectations were for growth and the whole budget had been designed on growth, and so we had to pull way back and that did require us to lay off 10 percent of the staff, about thirty-five people.

Lage: Now, that's been called the July Massacre, or something?

Fischer: Probably was. I mean, those usually are but--

Lage: But why was the layoff done in that way? It appeared as a sudden, unexpected and kind of abrupt--

Fischer: Well, actually it was done in two ways. It was done very promptly because as soon as our indicators went flat and it was clear that we were going to have a shortfall, we were hemorrhaging money at about $200,000 a week that we didn't have. And so to delay a layoff period would make it seriously deeper and so your objective is to do something quickly to avoid an unnecessarily steep or deep level of cut.

Lage: And did you choose how to make the cuts or did the board get involved in that?

Fischer: Oh, the board got involved in it but senior staff and I were there all Fourth of July weekend, there at the office talking with the department heads saying here are the kinds of cuts we have to make, here are the kinds of objectives that we want to reach and give us, department heads, your proposed cuts. And then in a couple of conference calls with the board we made the cuts. Now we consciously said let's make the cuts except for the conservation department, which is our product line. Let's have the conservation department spend much more time thinking about, talking about, proposing options for program reduction. We may have to lay off two more staff members than otherwise necessary but let's have them involved and let's get the board of directors much more intimately involved in the program reductions that we do. And so we did, I think, have a six week or so delay before those cuts were put into place.

Lage: The cuts that involved conservation programs?

Fischer: That's right. And interestingly enough, working with Carl, we were able to make significant reductions in the conservation program without laying anybody off. Now, we left vacant positions vacant, and we did a couple of demotions and some voluntary part-time work. But that sparked criticism from Andrea Bonnette and some board members saying, "Ah, Carl Pope is blue smoke and mirrors and he doesn't have to have real pain but everybody else has to suffer the pain of layoffs" and "everyone else" reported to Andrea. Well, I thought that Carl and I were successful in making some cuts without eliminating individual positions. We couldn't have done that in the other departments.

In retrospect, I don't believe we did things poorly. I think things were handled quite well. I'm proud of that, but I hate laying people off. I hate going through a bunch of--

Lage: It's very painful.

Fischer: It is painful.

Lage: Were you able to give severance pay?

Fischer: Yes. Oh, yes. The people who had to be laid off got out-placement service. They got severance pay, I think three months severance pay plus, of course, vacation and all that sort of stuff. We were able to begin realizing savings from the layoffs three months after they were gone. And we needed to because at the end of that year we spent 3 million dollars more than we had.

We made 3 million dollars worth of expense reductions, so we were 6 million dollars off of projections. The way we were able to afford the 3 million dollars is over the preceding four years I had built up a cash reserve of 3 million dollars, only 3 million dollars.

Lage: And some of that was not spending the spike, I would assume.

Fischer: That's right. Part of that was coming from not entirely spending the spike. That's right. But in that one downturn, we spent the whole 3 million dollars. And we cut 3 million dollars. Had we not saved that 3 million dollars, we would have had to lay off more people, or would have had to borrow money, which is not the kind of, you know, we're not a sovereign government or United Airlines who ought to be doing deficit financing. And so we now have a cash reserve of over a million dollars two years after the Gulf War and are on our way to building up that cash reserve again.

Lage: So, are revenues back in an upward progression or are you just adjust--

Fischer: Well, at the 2 percent and the 4 percent a year we built this budget that was just adopted as the third flat budget in a row and one of the reasons that there was relatively little controversy is in the budget guidelines, everybody bought into that. This is not a growth period, guys. We are no longer spending any spike. We are keeping things level.

Lage: So, there wasn't so much to argue about in terms of what will we spend our new money on.

Fischer: That's right. Everybody agreed, "Oh, God. Those layoffs were so painful. We don't want to do that again." And I think the memory half-life of that event is going to be relatively long.

Staff Unionization

Lage: Did that cause morale problems among your staff?

Fischer: Oh, yes, extreme morale problems.

Lage: Because they unionized not too long after that. Is it connected?

Fischer: Yes, I think so. There had been a unionizing move about three years earlier. There are, on the staff in San Francisco and no

where else but in San Francisco, a couple of people who are very pro-union, one of whose spouses actually works for the National Labor Relations Board [N.L.R.B.], a union-supporting organization. And a couple of those folks, Lorraine Vallejo down in *Sierra* magazine is one of them, are very much the glass is half-empty rather than half-full type people and also the sort of person who might well have a bumper sticker on her car that says "Question Authority."

And so she and some others tried to get a unionizing move several years earlier. They were unsuccessful. This time they had something. They had not only real people losing real jobs, but they had management being decisive (or arbitrary, in their view) and doing something about it. And, I mean, a small number of real live people who could walk down the hall and you could point and say, "He's the one who laid folks off." And it was Andrea, myself, and Carl, and Rosemary who people could point at. Ah, but myself particularly. And so, yeah, the union folks were able to say there's no voice for the employee here.

And I think the other reason that the unionizing came up was really an interesting thing. Sierra Club is proud of the fact that it promotes from within. And so as people come in and are promoted into management positions, that's sort of an invisible barrier. You don't say, "You're now management." So, just after the unionizing move was initiated, we got all of our managers together with our attorneys so that they would know what the law required, that national labor relations law precluded any manager from threats or intimidation or promises or surveillance, those four areas; they're called TIPS. And we wanted to make sure that our managers knew that they were not to violate that. Well, so here was this group of about forty-five people in the room who were learning, for the first time, that the dotted line between management and staff was behind them.

Lage: They probably didn't think of themselves as managers.

Fischer: They did not. They were outraged, they were angry, they were furious because they saw me sitting at the head of the room. Some of them had been pointing at me as the bad guy and all of a sudden, they saw that they were part of the bad-guy team. They didn't want to be on my bad-guy team.

Lage: How do you decide who's a manager? Is it in the definition of the job? Anyone who supervises others--

Fischer: It sure is. Anyone who supervises others who has the ability to hire or fire or recommend hiring or firing and who does a performance evaluation. That's a manager.

Lage: So, they couldn't join the union which they'd probably wanted to do themselves.

Fischer: That's right. So, that was an indicator. And another constant refrain of mine (at which I was unsuccessful), that, if you've read through our finance committee minutes, was the need for management training. The most important of the managers is the first-line manager, not the senior managers or the senior executives and as we were doing our budget cut preparation in June and culminating in the Fourth of July weekend, I had been talking with senior and middle level managers and they hadn't been communicating to the front-line managers. And the first-line managers hadn't been communicating back. Well, I, naive Fischer, was expecting that the camaraderie that existed in the building was an indicator of good back-and-forth management information flow, and I was wrong.

So, I would say that the unionization at the Sierra Club is due to three things: one, a core group of folks who were ready to promote unionization and had been for some time. Two, to the smoking gun of the layoffs, which were necessitated by the flattening of the revenue and which came about because we were in fact spending most of the spike when the spike came to an end. Again, no apologies for what we did or how we did it, but it happened. And so the smoking gun was there. And third was the failure of our managers to know what their job was.

Lage: You mean they could have prepared the staff in a better way, or prepared them period.

Fischer: Or prepare them period, yes, and involve them in discussions. Here's what's happening. Hey, look what we've heard about Greenpeace. Because the Greenpeace crash occurred in August of the year before. Look what's happening at NRDC [Natural Resources Defense Council]. I mean, these were things that I told my senior staff about in our weekly meetings that, I mean, there's absolutely no reason for this to be a total surprise. But it was. Now, I didn't say it's just the managers' fault for failing to know what their job was. It's the club's fault for failing to train them in the skills and the responsibilities of being managers.

Lage: Especially if they didn't see themselves as managers, they don't assume that role.

Fischer: That's right. We did have management training sessions on a permissive basis and people just didn't come even though I would attend many of them. The culture of training for that sort of kind of internal infrastructure thing is very bad. So, those are

the three reasons. Now, I personally am a supporter of unionization at the club. I thought it was a good idea. I wish that it had not been the United Auto Workers [UAW] representing the club.

Lage: Why is that?

Fischer: For two reasons: one, the board of directors, both philosophically and empirically, gives very low priority to salary and benefit discussions on the part of the staff. The truly in-the-depths-of-their-heart feeling is, "I work for the Sierra Club for free. These people, honest to goodness, have a job with a title: director of a, b, and c and business cards. They're lucky to have this job." And "they ought to agree that if we had more money we should spend it on fighting for the Arctic rather than more health care or a better pension." So the board of directors really doesn't give very high priority to it, and I know that every budget session except the last couple, I just had to lobby and plead and beg and I wasn't sure how it was going to come down. The board gives staff needs quite low priority. And something like this management training I would expect to be a part of the bargaining unit's contract because it's in the interest of employees that their managers be competent.

The second reason is that their--

Lage: But what does it have to do with UAW? We didn't make that connection. I had asked you why you were-- Oh, maybe the question wasn't understood. You're for unionization. You're telling me why you're for unionization. Continue. I want to know why you didn't think the UAW was good. But the others--

Fischer: Okay. I'm for unionization because the executive director's too weak a reed for the employees to count on to win these things in a consistent manner. And second, there is a class of employee, the fastest growing class of employee, the employees of the chapters who are not treated fairly and equitably, who are not protected from sexual harassment, wrongful discharge, or hours and working conditions stuff because while under the law they are employees of the executive director (because chapters are not separately incorporated), but in practice they serve at the pleasure of the group chair or the chapter excom in Minnesota, Georgia, Florida, you name it. And whether they're happy in their work and the pay that they get for their work is all determined there and for the-

Lage: But they're paid by the chapter.

Fischer: No, their paycheck comes from San Francisco. And the pay comes out of the chapter's budget, yes. But they are employees of the club--not the chapter. The person who is responsible for making sure that they are treated equitably is the national executive director.

Lage: So you must have felt a lack of control.

Fischer: There is absolutely no control because for the executive director of the national to go to the chapter in Texas and say, "Here's what ought to happen to my staff member," they'd say, "What planet are you from? This is our staff member." There are seventy-five chapter employees now. There were thirty when I started and I suspect that within five years, there will be 125. So, soon, a third, at least a third of all the employees of the club will be employees of chapters. They need some organization, some representation because in the current and likely structure of the club, they ain't going to get it. So, those are the two reasons I am in favor of unionization.

The UAW, well, for crying out loud. Here's the UAW, we're fighting them on many lobbying issues, particularly the Clean Air Act. And not only that, but the style of their approach is abrasive, argumentative, demanding. And while in fact that style matches the internal politics of the Sierra Club, in terms of developing a collegial, supportive, kind of blurring-the-line between staff and volunteer and developing a motivation that our reason for being here isn't salary and benefits but our reason for being here is the common challenge to the planet, that style of unionization, such as the John Muir Local 100 was evincing was--

Lage: Was that just a local, then? It was affiliated with--

Fischer: They were a start-up union. The NLRB recognized them as a legitimate union. But the ironic thing is, no they didn't win and all of the people who had started up the John Muir Local 100 with the idea of representing people in San Francisco and in the field and in D.C.--one of my other objectives was, look, if anybody on the staff is going to get unionized then all of them ought to be unionized. So, if we have layoff city again in the future, there's not a protected class of employee and an unrepresented class of employee. And UAW was willing to represent only San Francisco folks, not nationwide. John Muir Local 100 was interested in representing nationwide and they won outside of San Francisco. But the founders of John Muir Local 100 are all employees in San Francisco so they're now represented by UAW and therefore have no interest, or no self-interest in continuing John Muir Local 100. So John Muir needs to develop

some new leaders in the field and in D.C. where they did win the union.

Lage: Well, is the UAW representing all the workers?

Fischer: No, just San Francisco.

Lage: So, what about the chapter employees?

Fischer: Chapter employees for this go-around were never mentioned and were never intended to be represented. But my view was that once the national staffers would get represented then, particularly if the field and D.C. were included, then the chapter folks would follow.

Fund Raising and the Centennial Campaign

Lage: Okay, that's very interesting. Let's move into fund raising. That seems a natural follow through to budget issues. And also a very important part of things those years when you were in charge. The Centennial Campaign sounds fascinating to me but I don't know if we want to start there or start with overall fund raising.

Fischer: Well, historically the Sierra Club's revenue stream has come from its members, from lots of small gifts. And Sierra Club really has a very short history in fund raising. Richard Cellarius, who was our president four years ago, still remembers the days when his mother, a volunteer, would go to the Mills Tower office on Bush Street and pick up the checks that would come in the mail and she would deposit them in the bank on her lunch hour. And while that was a "long time ago," it wasn't forever ago. The first real development office, I think, was only set up maybe ten years ago. So, our use of--

Lage: Well, Denny Wilcher always gets a lot of credit for being one of the first real fund raisers.

Fischer: Right, right. And that's not forever ago. But Denny--

Lage: That was the seventies. Oh, no, he came in the sixties but I don't know when he got into fund raising.

Fischer: Right. And Denny was doing major-gift fund raising and planned-giving fund raising. He wasn't doing the direct mail and the telemarketing stuff. I mean, he was probably bringing in a

couple million dollars a year. And our development department brings in $28 million a year now. I mean, it's just--

Lage: It's grown, like everything else.

Fischer: Yeah. It's not just a matter of degree, it's a matter of substance, a different critter altogether. And the club, by the time I got there, had been raising virtually all of its money through direct mail. And telemarketing had come to play an important part. In addition, the club had made a foray into revenue generated by the sale of products through its catalog. The catalog was a business venture that the club was getting into without really knowing how to do it. And the economies of scale were not right and the level of professionalism wasn't right, either. It was kind of like, in order for the Sierra Club to have an affinity credit card, we'd set up a bank and become our own banker. That's just the way we went at the catalog business. Okay, well, we'll start a catalog. So, by God, we had a warehouse in Nevada and we're basically running a catalog business and in jeopardy of losing our shirt, the ups and downs of the catalog business being quite erratic.

After having done a business plan for the catalog, I learned that in order for us to be able to realize a million dollars a year, which wasn't that much of our budget, we would have to basically expand the catalog tenfold and be running a $10 million-a-year operation, $10 to $20 million-a-year gross operation. And with the concomitant downside risk, if the economy fell out from under us, we could lose $5 million in a year, like a bolt out of the blue. And so I said, "Gee, that cost isn't worth the benefit, neither the cost of building up a catalog department ten times the size of the one we had with maybe twenty-five staff members and a lot of our assets plowed into the capital expenses of an inventory.

Lage: And diversion of interests and attention.

Fischer: Diversion of management attention, volunteer attention, and with the prospect of suffering a 2 million or a 5 million dollar loss within the foreseeable future.

Lage: Did you have a hard time convincing others that it was time to let go of it?

Fischer: Yes, of course. Those people who thought it had been a bright idea to set it up in the first place, the Phil Hockers and the Denny Shaffers and even the Mike McCloskeys of the world because it was on his watch that they decided to do it.

Lage: I always thought Len Levitt was behind it.

Fischer: Well, yes, Len was there. Sure. Yes. You know, on the surface a good idea, but I went to Jim Edgar, who is a management consultant in town with Edgar, Dunn, and Conover, and with his recommendation to shut it down, based on sound analysis and a review of the competition, we prevailed relatively quickly. But that was the club's first incursion into diversifying its revenue stream. I think that's a good objective. The way it went about the objective was not so good.

The second one was the affinity credit card and Len, I think, cut the best deal that he could, given the fact that the Sierra Club's affinity credit card was the first in America.

Lage: So, it started a trend.

Fischer: It did. There are now literally thousands of affinity credit cards making multi-mega millions for lots of people.

Lage: Did someone come to the club with the idea?

Fischer: I think so. Yes, there was a broker who came to the club with the idea. And therein lies a much more complicated and sad story. The broker went belly-up and the bank that he had brought to us tried to modify the program to their benefit and our detriment. And then finally that bank, last year, decided to get out of the business altogether. The bank didn't do a good job for Sierra Club members either. So, we've now shifted over to another bank, MBNA, which is the largest affinity credit card bank in the country. And that was Lou Barnes rescuing the good idea of Len Levitt that went wrong, just as I rescued the good idea of Len Levitt on the catalog. And we closed the catalog down but are now building it up again because we have LucasArts, part of George Lucas--what's the word I'm looking for--Galaxy, is the word I was looking for, George Lucas' Galaxy. (George Lucas was the producer of the *Star Wars* movie series.)

Lage: What is the name of the outfit?

Fischer: LucasArts Entertainment, I think it is. And they are a product licensing operation. Here's my Sierra Club centennial knife, for instance. Hats, boots, tents, pocket knives, stuffed bears. We will soon be realizing from LucasArts, they project, a million to a million and a half dollars a year. [That projection never came to pass; the agreement with LucasArts was terminated in 1994--MLF, 1996.]

So, that was Len's original idea, getting revenue from merchandise. But instead of us buying the inventory, we're licensing the use of our name to others who will then sell the Sierra Club line of product. And we have the ability to focus on quality control and don't have to spend much of our management time on it.

Now all of that's a long piece of background saying diversification of the revenue stream is important. Many of our colleague operations depend, for their revenues, upon foundation funds. I'm on the board of directors of Friends of the Earth. Seventy percent of our revenue comes from foundation funds. And NRDC, Environmental Defense Fund, Audubon Society, secure twenty or thirty percent of their monies from major donors. Well, until two years ago, the percentage of our revenues that came from major donors, foundations, and corporations totalled less than three percent of the revenue.

Lage: Just for lack of attention, or because of the nature of the club?

Fischer: Yes, both. But I think mainly the former. The Sierra Club can certainly get plenty of money from foundations. We just haven't mounted a campaign to do that. And similarly, I think we can get major donor monies but we've never mounted that campaign until we got this--

Lage: Well, you have now.

Fischer: Yes, just have now and very successfully now after several false starts, but very successfully. Bill Meadows, the current director of the campaign, I think finally has his hands on the kind of campaign that would work inside the Sierra Club.

##

Lage: You had two directors that didn't work. Was there a reason for that?

Fischer: Oh, in the case of the first director we had a very aggressive, energetic, intelligent, effective type-A campaign director, Marianne Briscoe, who was frankly far too abrasive toward her staff and was unable to delegate or train or nurture. And so she just kind of went and burned herself out, burned bridges between herself and me because she had Denny Shaffer trying to put wedges between herself and me. He, together with several major donor leaders in his thrall, was successful. And so there was a loyalty problem.

Lage: How was she with donors?

Fischer: She was terrific with donors. She was very successful at getting money in the door very quickly. She said, and I agreed, that part of our strategy in order to win acceptance of this new campaign was to get money in the door quickly rather than spend it--

Lage: To show it could work.

Fischer: To show it could work. She did that, and very well. But her colleague senior executives couldn't work with her either. They urged me, in the strongest terms, to get her off the team. So, it was clear that there was not a soul in the house who was arguing with me that Marianne shouldn't depart. Quite the opposite.

And the person we hired to fill in for her simply hadn't the management experience that turned out to be called for. He wasn't able to learn as quickly--or work as hard--as I thought he would be able to.

Lage: Is this Tom Zeko? Did he come out of the fund raising background?

Fischer: He was a consultant. Yes, he had been a fund raising consultant, had never supervised a large staff. We're talking about twenty-five people here, in four different offices, and with plenty of busted crockery around from Marianne Briscoe and bruised egos. He violated rule 1-a of a campaign director. When he came in, he saw that there was all this busted stuff that needed to be fixed. But one thing that wasn't busted, he thought, was the relationship between Sue Bell, who had been the director of the major gift division of the Centennial Campaign and the campaign volunteer chairman, Allan Brown. So, Tom said, "Oh, things aren't busted with Allan. Sue and he have a good relationship," and he turned his time and attention to other things causing Allan to blow up saying finally, "It's been six months since he's been the campaign director and he's only called me twice. I can't work with this guy."

And in true Sierra Club fashion, instead of Allan Brown coming to me and saying, "I've got a problem," or going to Tom and saying, "Tom, we've got to work this out," Allan Brown goes to a volunteer committee and, on a conference call, sharply criticizes Tom to about a half a dozen volunteers. And of course, the conference call ends by the half-dozen volunteers hanging up and each of them instantly gets on the phone to call their own half-dozen volunteers to say that Zeko's dead meat and that Allan Brown can't work with him.

So, three days later when I finally hear of all of this stuff, I mean, dozens of volunteers know that Zeko's on his way out, that Allan Brown has demanded his firing. The traditional, typical, thoughtless, and destructive Sierra Club way of doing things.

Lage: Let's talk a little bit about the Centennial Campaign Planning Committee [CCPC].

Fischer: The Centennial Campaign Planning Committee and then there's the Centennial Campaign Steering Committee.

Lage: How did all this get set up? It sounds very interesting, and it involved the foundation.

Fischer: Because the campaign is a joint exercise of the foundation and the club, two separate corporations, there was a joint committee needed, the Centennial Campaign Planning Committee.

But, you know, I think I told you the old tripartite motto, which is find a power center and attack it or find a vacuum and fill it. And if you can't find a vacuum, make one and then fill it. The CCPC was the result of all three of those mottos. Allan Brown, however, was the chair of the Centennial Campaign Steering Committee, which is the fund-raising committee, not the internal organization or bureaucratic red tape committee.

Lage: So, they were involved with actually raising funds.

Fischer: Well, not all of the CCPC is involved with raising funds.

Lage: But the steering committee is?

Fischer: The steering committee is. That's supposedly all they're supposed to do.

Lage: And were they sort of managed by Tom Zeko?

Fischer: Yes, well.

Lage: Or, did he tell them what to do and when to do it?

Fischer: See, that's the other interesting difference in the dynamic. Most volunteer fund raisers are used to working for Stanford University or the XYZ Medical School. They're used to the staff telling the volunteers what to do, which is 180 degrees out from the rest of the volunteer culture of the club, where the volunteers tell the staff what to do.

Lage: So, that's why he was upset at not hearing from Tom Zeko?

Fischer: He was disappointed (with some reason) by Tom's level of energy and his level of forcefulness. And he was upset at not being directed by Tom. Well, Tom figured, he's being directed by Sue Bell. Turns out that Allan Brown knew that Sue Bell was being offered a job at Stanford Law School and Allan Brown wanted to get Tom out of the way so that he would then be able to engineer me to offer Sue Tom Zeko's job to keep her from going to Stanford.

Allan was successful in getting Tom gone because I then went to Tom. I said, "Tom, you and I have a deal. You and I are working well under the terms of our employment agreement." As part of that agreement, I had guaranteed to give, if there were any problems, I would tell him what the problems were and I would give him a six-month cure period. And I said, "Tom, I'll fight for you. We'll stand by the employment agreement." Tom basically said, "Nah. What's the use? This place is too angry for me."

And so then, I talked to Sue and Sue Bell talked to a whole bunch of people and, in fact, I offered her the job. And she looked around and said, "It happened to Tom. It could happen to me. This is going to be a whole lot of grief." So, she went to Stanford.

Lage: So, it didn't work, Allan's plan.

Fischer: No.

Lage: But he's the foundation person, not a club person, as I understood.

Fischer: Yes, that's right. But he learned. Anyway, we now have Bill Meadows, who has been a Sierra Club activist twelve or thirteen years ago in the Tennessee chapter and has patience for the club's foibles, understands it, and is quite good himself.

Lage: And is he good with donors?

Fischer: Yes, very good with donors.

Lage: It looked like, from my notes, that in March '91, the CCPC--the volunteer/donor side of the campaign--was given full authority over the campaign. Now where did that put you in it all?

Fischer: Well, right after Marianne left, because that was part of--Marianne was unable to figure out how to work for two bosses.

And the agreement that we had was that she did work for two bosses. For policy, she worked for the CCPC. For administrative, she worked for me. And there are some people who can do this. My profession is city planning. Most planning directors work for the city manager and they also work for the planning commission. And if they work for the planning commission in a way that gets the city council crosswise with a city manager, then they fail. And if they work for the city manager in a way that makes the planning commission unhappy with them, they fail.

Lage: So it's not only the Sierra Club that has these dual loyalties?

Fischer: Oh, there are many dual reporting arrangements in many organizations; some people know how to do it and some people don't. Marianne didn't, just as Andrea didn't. And so she did her work with the CCPC in a way which got herself crosswise with me. And the CCPC encouraged that to happen because of those mottos: Find a power center and attack it. They were consciously and explicitly using her to attack me. She was the victim in that crossfire.

And so, after that, I was so furious at Allan Brown and the CCPC for the Tom Zeko thing that we got that policy changed to make it absolutely clear that I, not the campaign director, worked for the CCPC. The board of directors had to talk this through because all of a sudden they were giving their executive director a dual reporting thing. I reported to the board of directors at the club but on the campaign, I reported to both.

Lage: And the CCPC has a life of its own.

Fischer: That's right. A joint-powers agency. And the director of the campaign, then, clearly worked for me and not the CCPC. And so that's the way it is now. Bill Meadows works for Carl Pope but still must work with the CCPC regularly so that Carl doesn't have to do all that stuff because Carl's got other things to do than mess with this powerplay outfit.

Mike McCloskey and I were, during a lull in a board meeting once, (actually it was the board meeting at which, in essence, I got fired--"fired," from their point of view; "chose to leave," from my own [laughter]); during a lull in that meeting, we were counting up the number of national committees of the Sierra Club (not counting chapters) and came up with 113, seventy of which are administrative. And CCPC is one of those administrative committees which is needed to house, in Doug Scott's terms, the mandarin class of the Sierra Club.

Lage: But it looked like, maybe I didn't count them all, but I counted four different volunteer committees overseeing fund raising.

Fischer: No, that's not all of them. There are more. There are more, yes. I think Rosemary Carroll has four in her department.

Lage: Maybe that's what I was counting.

Fischer: And then the Centennial Campaign.

Lage: Does Rosemary oversee the Centennial Campaign at all?

Fischer: No, that was a matter of some angst at the very beginning because when I hired her, I hired her the first month I was on the job, she was the development director. And the department of development included major gift fund raising, planned giving, and corporate and foundation plan fund raising. The consultant whom we hired, Charlie Howland, in our first organizational meeting said, "Look, you need a really red-hot campaign director. And Fischer's never run a campaign and Rosemary's never run a campaign so you're not going to be able to hire a red-hot who's going to be third level down below Rosemary. You're going to have to have somebody who reports directly to the executive director."

So, I said to Rosemary, "All right Rosemary, just for the duration of the campaign, five years, we'll take major giving, planned giving, and corporate and foundation relations out of the development department. I will expect you and the campaign director to work very closely as partners and teammates." She and Marianne didn't hit it off right away. "And then at the end of the campaign, we will have only one fund raising director." So, the campaign director position is a temporary one.

Lage: What was left for Rosemary?

Fischer: Well, $28 million a year in direct mail and telemarketing. And she runs the marketing council which deals with licensing and royalties and those sorts of marketing endeavors. Plenty for Rosemary but, I mean it was a demotion. It was a loss of authority, responsibility, professional growth areas, etc. She was quite unhappy about it. And when Marianne Briscoe left, she lobbied again to not hire a campaign director and have her run it. And I had to say no to her a second time. When Tom Zeko left, she lobbied again. I had to say no to her a third time.

Lage: Did you agree?

Fischer: With her?

Lage: No, well, with her or with the other side? Which?

Fischer: Oh. At the very first I agreed with Charlie, the consultant, that, gosh, I'm personally going to have to be involved in this thing. But we'd better get in the best. I wasn't real happy about it, so I reluctantly agreed at that point. And in fact, I am no longer convinced that merging the two departments at the end of the campaign makes any sense.

The professional skills needed to run a major gift program are very different from the professional skills needed to run a direct mail or telemarketing program. One is much more mass-marketing, computer-oriented, high-volume, dealing with printers and mailing and the arcane technical details will each-- A screw-up in any one of those little details can cost you lots of dough. Whereas the other one is very one-on-one. You're dealing with this program executive on this foundation and here's what she thinks about Greenpeace versus the Sierra Club. And you've got to cultivate those individuals. It's a different profession, I think. So, I'm not at all convinced that at the end of the campaign they ought to be merged again but that's something to be decided on somebody else's watch.

Lage: Has the campaign gotten going? Is it meeting expectations?

Fischer: Oh, yes. It is behind its initial schedule but I think it's gone beyond all reasonable expectations given the bumpy road that it has followed. Its objective is $45 million in new monies and it's raised, I think, $16 million now. And that's pretty good. That's a lot of money.

Lage: Now what about the oft-expressed fear that I found in the minutes that soft money will drive the club, the program of the club?

Fischer: That's a valid concern. But you will recall that the soft money that I was talking about is so far 3 percent of the revenues. But we are also talking about a significant percentage of new monies, of discretionary, marginal-- The marginal dollar is going to be a soft dollar.

Lage: And who decides what pitch the fund raiser will give.

Fischer: That's right. That's right. And in many cases that pitch has got to be decided by the fund raiser right then in the room when he walks into the living room and here's the donor talking about something that they hadn't even thought of before. I mean, because the fund raiser's going to have worked with the volunteer committee in saying, "All right, this is what I'm going to pitch the person on and here's how it fits into the program that we've

all talked about." He walks into the living room and the donor says, "Ehh, no, I'm not with that but here's the sort of thing--"

The loss of control by the volunteer leaders is an issue that needs to be monitored very closely. There are plenty of soft money activities that the club can spend dough on, and litigation is one of them. And litigation is the most attractive one for the club because it's a fighting use for soft money. And as the Legal Defense Fund changes its name, the relationship, I think, unfortunately is going to change. I think we'll see the Sierra Club hiring lawyers of its own.

Lage: Oh, you do? Well, that's our next topic, if we've run through fund raisers.

Fischer: In five minutes. [laughter]

Corporate Sponsorship and the McDonald's Controversy

Lage: Let's finish fund raising, then. I wanted you to say something about all the fears that seem to be expressed about corporate sponsorship. It seemed most highlighted in the McDonald's relationship over an environmental education brochure.

Fischer: Well, it was actually highlighted before then with clear and, I think, courageous leadership on my part, which caused my lower lip to jut out when the McDonald's thing happened. A number of the Sierra Club Foundation folks, foundation volunteers, hold the view that--how's it put?--"There ain't no such thing as tainted money, just t'ain't enough." And, "we have a responsibility to go to Satan and get Satan's money from him so we can do God's work with it."

Lage: Now who thinks this?

Fischer: Allan Brown, Ron Kline, Maurice Holloway, on the board of trustees.

Lage: These are mainly people from the foundation?

Fischer: From the foundation. They're saying we have the responsibility to find money from Exxon or wherever and turn it to God's purposes. And as a matter of fact, this was raised--and decided --at one of Marianne's last meetings of the CCPC. Because Larry and Denny went along with the trustee types, the CCPC unanimously went along, and so did Marianne. She knew my position on this.

But I wasn't present at the meeting and she didn't tell me that this was about to come up--but they unanimously approved a fund raising policy for corporations which said we'll take money from any corporation.

Lage: And they had the authority to do that?

Fischer: No, they had to recommend it to the two boards of directors. And when that got to our board of directors, I expressed my disapproval and it was returned to the CCPC for modification. And so I went to their next meeting and, of course, the whole CCPC was furious at me because I, without being present at their meeting, torpedoed their resolution and brought it back to them. They were saying, "Well, why do we have to talk about this all over again? We know the way we believe." And with their eyes focused on me, did their motion again and basically said, "Stuff it, Fischer." And so I had to kill it when it got to the board of directors the second time.

Lage: But you certainly had a lot of supporters on the board of directors for that point of view.

Fischer: On the board of directors, I did. Michele was there on the board, but I didn't know that anybody else would listen. And this was one of those areas where I said to Allan Brown, "If that's the policy that's adopted by the board, I will resign as executive director."

Lage: Because they had no safeguard.

Fischer: That's right. And they were blind to the fact that corporations give money from their public affairs budgets. They are giving money in order to get something. They want to get credibility. They want to get a piece of the Sierra Club's reputation as part of the gift. Our reputation and our credibility are too precious for any million dollar gift.

They were blind to that dimension of corporate giving. And particularly, Ed Wayburn was not with me on this. He'll take money from anybody, as long as it's money he could do something with. So, here I was riding point on a very vigorous separation from corporate money.

Lage: I think of Phil Berry as being very sensitive to those kinds of issues.

Fischer: Yes. Yes, he is. He wasn't on the board that year, though. In any event, up comes McDonald's. Now I had a hands-on relationship with the McDonald's program. This was not money

that was coming to the Sierra Club. We worked out with McDonald's an Earth Day number where they would spend, I think it was three-quarters of a million dollars for an Earth Day brochure that would go out to every kid who would buy a McDonald's burger during the Earth Day month. And the brochure would be a Sierra Club brochure. We would tell them what to print in it and we'd get an ad. And so it would have a Sierra Club imprimatur. I figured, what better way of getting Sierra Club's name in front of hundreds of millions of kids around the world? But it got presented in a way that, oh, McDonald's wants to give money to the Sierra Club and we don't like McDonald's.

Lage: But the two names would appear together on this brochure.

Fischer: That's right. And you can use my argument against me. Ah ha, what does McDonald's want out of this? They want some credibility. Yeah, they did. But as long as we had control over the message, as long as we liked the brochure, I figured that our name being with McDonald's was the price we were going to pay for using their distribution network, which is basically youth-oriented, family-oriented, fast-food outlets. Sierra Club board of directors, perhaps with greater insight than I, said, "Sorry, it's too high a price to pay. We don't want to give our credibility. Even though that's a good benefit, that's too high a cost." Fine.

Lage: So, you had educated a number of them in the last argument.

Fischer: That's right. That's right. It was frustrating because I still keep fighting that fight. You can't take money from the bad guy corporations.

Lage: But how do you define the bad guy corporations?

Fischer: That's right. Good question. Well, it's clearly a subjective thing and the board of directors--

Lage: Some would say they're all bad.

Fischer: Yes, that's true but we really crossed that line when we chose to take advertising for Sierra. Taking advertising money is not altogether different from taking a gift, because that advertising money goes to keep the lights burning in the Sierra Club.

Lage: And the messages were connected with the Sierra Club. You weren't here when they made a decision on Sierra advertising?

Fischer: No. That was before I came. Right. But they were accepting Chevron's image ads when I came. You know, "Do people care?

People do" and in my first couple of months I stopped those. We will take no oil company image ads. A. And B, if we take any auto ads that show off-road vehicles, the wheels must be on a road.

Lage: That's a fine line.

Fischer: Yes. And that's why I'm saying we had already decided to argue over the fine lines when we had crossed that bridge.

Lage: Well, I think we've come to a stopping point.

A Rocky Relationship with the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund

[Interview 4: January 21, 1993--oral history intern Steve Sturgeon present] ##

Lage: We're going to start out today with Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund. Hopefully that won't take the whole session.

Fischer: Gosh, it could, couldn't it? It could take many sessions. But let's see if I can thumbnail it.

Lage: When you came in, what was the situation? Was it already a little rocky?

Fischer: Yes, when I first came both Doug Wheeler and Mike McCloskey told me, "Don't trust Rick Sutherland. The guy's out to feather his own nest. Don't trust him on fund raising and don't trust him on policy." Well, one of the lessons that I've learned in my life is that if you walk into a new relationship with somebody mistrusting them, that they have only one option: to mistrust you in return. It's virtually impossible to ever build an amicable, mutually respectful relationship. So I rejected that advice and said, "No, Rick and I are colleagues. We're peers."

One of the first issues that came up was Rick wanted full membership in the Group of Ten. This was the outfit compound of the chief executive officers of the ten large national environmental organizations. Mike had been forestalling that, saying that, "Gee, it would confuse the situation; are there one or two Sierra Clubs?" And my reaction was, "Well, wait a minute. The Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund is an independent organization. It's quite a different kind of an organization. And this horse is not only out of the barn door. This horse is across town. And here they are running like a great, beautiful

graceful horse and we're trying to snag them back into our barn or make them pretend as though they're part of us and subject to our slow, internal, bureaucratic procedures." My reaction was, "No. They're independent. They're different. They can turn on a dime. Let's celebrate that fact and recognize it." And so I sponsored Rick for membership in the Group of Ten. And it happened.

Lage: Did it become the Group of Eleven?

Fischer: Well, somebody said, "Everybody knows environmentalists can't count." [laughter] And I'm not sure whether we have covered the Group of Ten, yes, or whether we're going to later on. But, it is now the Green Group, largely because of some subsequent leadership on my part. But that was kind of an initial bona fide that I consciously used to establish a good working relationship with Rick. Early on in my tenure, however, I think it was probably three or four months later, Rick called me up and said, "Michael, just to let you know that tomorrow we're going to have a news conference opposing the appointment of Judge Bork to the Supreme Court."

"Oh," I said. "Rick, you're telling me that tomorrow morning the Sierra Club's going to have a news conference announcing our opposition to--" And he said, "No, no. The Legal Defense Fund." "Come on, Rick. How many reporters are going to catch Legal Defense Fund? It's going to be read as Sierra Club opposes it. Don't do it. This is inappropriate. This is a misuse of our name. You have been using Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund for litigation but never for public policy statements in the past."

Lage: So, was that a new direction they were turning in?

Fischer: That was a new direction. And I said, "Wait. Our board hasn't even discussed it. There's a possibility that we could have a joint news conference if this is consistent with Sierra Club policy. But if Sierra Club doesn't take a position on it, then you may not." And so he started fulminating and--

Lage: But did you have any authority to tell him that?

Fischer: No. So, he waited and waited the second week and our board, in typical Sierra Club fashion, was thinking about it and talking about it and about three weeks later, he said, "Okay, Michael. That's time enough. We're going to make our stand." And I said, "No. Don't do it. Give me another couple of days." And the board did have a conference call and opposed Judge Bork. So, I said, "Fine, Rick. Let's go. Let's have the joint news conference." And we did. But there was give and take and

tension and stress and no, I didn't have the authority. And he knew it and was prepared to go ahead without us. That, together with another bona fide, another expression of good faith, that Rosemary Carroll and I had made early in our tenure was to get a fund-raising agreement established so that we would be providing more and more money to the Legal Defense Fund as our membership increased.

Lage: More and more percentage?

Fischer: Same percentage, more dollars. At least that's what we thought. We characterized the agreement as a best efforts, good faith agreement, not a contractual relationship. But the Legal Defense Fund went, as we put it, fishing in our pond. They made direct mailings to Sierra Club members and the dollars--

Lage: Without clearing it?

Fischer: That's right, without clearing it. Actually, they bought our names by buying the names of the Wilderness Society and others. And then they would mail to Wilderness Society folks who were also Sierra Club folks. They'd get dollars from Sierra Club members but they wouldn't credit the Sierra Club with those dollars. So, our membership was going up and up and the numbers of dollars that we, the club, could raise for the Legal Defense Fund went flat. They started attacking. "This is against the agreement, you guys are failing." And Rosemary and I said, "Failing? Gee, we're doing everything we had before and even some new techniques. Not our failure. It's something else out there."

Lage: When you fund raise, it's a check-off?

Fischer: That's right.

Lage: And you were giving them what was checked off?

Fischer: There were two ways. One was telemarketing. When we did our telemarketing things, we would provide the donors with the option of giving to the Legal Defense Fund, the foundation or the club. And the dues check-off on the renewal form also provided a giving opportunity for the Legal Defense Fund. Both of those gift sources went flat, even while our other giving was going up and the membership was going up. The only variable that Rosemary and I could see was the increased level of mailing on their own part, on their own behalf, that the Legal Defense Fund was doing, in the pool of Sierra Club members. Well, the club member, I mean, figures I'm going to send my money to the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund either in a dues check-off or in response to the

Legal Defense Fund plea and the difference is transparent to the club member but to the Legal Defense Fund, that was all the difference. If we, through club mailings, failed to send more money to SCLDF, if we were failing to keep our word. It was turned into a personal thing.

And so, Rosemary and I got attacked by Rick and Joanne Kleijunas [Legal Defense Fund development director] for failing to meet the agreement. So, that and the Bork thing caused me to say, "Aha. Well, I was told not to trust him." I actually said to Rick, "I was told not to trust you, Rick. And I'll give you three opportunities which would indicate to me that I can't trust you and then I won't trust you. But until three things occur--"

Lage: Oh, you told him that on the side? [laughter]

Fischer: Right. "Until three things occur, then I'll trust you." Actually, I told him that after the first thing or two. You got one more. That sort of thing. In any event, I guess the third thing that occurred, and this was a very serious one, took place up in the Pacific Northwest over the spotted owl. The Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund had set up their own office up there. And in their office they hired, not only three attorneys, but they also had a forester, a non-attorney forester, and a lobbyist. And the speeches that were given by all of the above during the initial period of the spotted owl fight were very, very critical of the Sierra Club. So, here was the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund attacking the Sierra Club chapters of the Pacific Northwest as selling out. Too ready to compromise too soon on the spotted owl.

My own view is that they were right. The Legal Defense Fund was right in the policy that our chapters were too short-sighted and too trapped within their own congressional delegation's sense of political reality. But just because they were right didn't mean they had to publicly go on a very vicious attack of their brother environmentalists.

One of our staff members, Rich Hayes, was visiting, then, in Leningrad and was introduced to a Soviet environmentalist. And he said, "Oh, yeah. I've heard of the Sierra Club. That's the outfit that refused to fight to protect the spotted owl." Well, that was exactly the opposite of the image, reputation, style and approach that I had been counseling. The whole five and a half years that I was there, I argued that the club ought to have an approach that both is--and appears to be--demanding, aggressive, insistent, and never satisfied. That ought to be our tenor and our tempo. In fact, this approach harked back to the Brower days, sharpening the duller edge of the much more politically

astute Doug Scott's view of the appropriate role for the club. And so here was the Legal Defense Fund painting us to be exactly the opposite; a compromiser, not a fighter: not at all helpful.

Lage: Which also must have been confusing to the outside world.

Fischer: Sure, to see the Sierra Club fighting the Sierra Club. So, I sat down with Rick and said, "Rick, this doesn't wash. We really need to come to peace here." And he and I came to complete agreement, I thought. We set up a meeting in Seattle after he and I had agreed that he was going to sharply chastise his staff and get us all working together again. Well, the meeting started with one of his abrasive, young attorneys attacking our regional staff up in Seattle. Very viciously, I guess I would say. What Rick do? Supports his staff! I mean, 180 degrees out from what he told me he was going to do. Well, that was number three. I walked out of there just furious. The staffer whom I called an immature bully in that meeting, Vic Sher, went on to become Rich's successor as President of SCLDF. Sad.

Lage: How did you handle that?

Fischer: Well, I got mad, too. In return I supported Doug Scott and Bill Arthur on our staff. I mean, it was a very bad meeting. Instead of getting to yes, it drove the wedge even wider.

And, I guess, a fourth instance occurred when the Exxon Valdez spilled in Prince Rupert Sound. That day, I picked up the phone and called Rick. And I said, "Rick, I expect there's going to be litigation from this. This is the one time I'm expecting to ask you for this important favor. Sierra Club is going to sue. We're going to turn to you to be our lawyers. We want to be the only party. You're our lawyer; we're your principal client. We don't want you representing other folks."

Lage: Does that request go out very often?

Fischer: No, never. I mean that's the only time that I know in the club's history that it did go out. But it went out and Rick said, "Okay, well, I'll see what I can do." And about a week later, I get a copy of a memo from the Legal Defense Fund office up in Alaska saying that litigation is probable and here's the list of appellants that we're going to have. We weren't even listed. And the memo indicated that these other parties had agreed to sign on.

Lage: Now, why did you make the request?

Fischer: For positioning terms. I wanted the Sierra Club to get out front and be aggressive, demanding, insistent and never satisfied. We wanted to be able to take advantage of this opportunity to have our name out there as an aggressive organization and not have it buried among a bunch of other environmental organizations. Here was our law firm, you know, that's a common request on the part of a client to a law firm. This is a suit that's important to our company. You represent us and only us, SCLDF or Morrison and Foerster, whoever you are.

And in any event, it didn't happen. Rick said, "Oh, well, Michael, you know, I just really can't govern what my staff do in the different offices. You know they are the lawyers and the lawyer-client relationship is with them not between you and me." And of course, I used two words, one of which started with "b" and the other one started with "s". And the club leaders were unhappy, too, when I reported that to them, including Phil Berry.

But in any event, with these kind of relationships going and my acknowledgement to Rick that look, you're a different organization. We're sister organizations but, as I put it to him, "As long as you hold the name Sierra Club, we must insist that you not take public policy positions, that you not do our business. We're not going into the litigator business. You don't do the lobbying business or the public policy statement business. That's our business. But if you were to change your name, then hey, I don't care what you say in the public policy arena; we could still have a lawyer-client relationship."

Lage: So, you brought that up with him early on?

Fischer: I brought it up about three years ago and I remember where he was sitting and where I was sitting in the office and I said, "Look, it could be, let's say, the John Muir Legal Defense Fund. During an initial period, you could be the John Muir Legal Defense Fund, 'also known as the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund,' and then after a year it could be John Muir Legal Defense Fund, formerly 'Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund.' And then after a while, it could be 'John Muir Legal Defense Fund' of counsel to the Sierra Club, so that the relationship with the club is still clearly there for your fund raising." And Rick pounds with his hands on both arms of the chair, "I like it! I like it! Let's do it!"

Lage: Oh, he liked the idea.

Fischer: Yes, he liked the idea. But then he took it to his board of trustees, talked it through. The board of trustees hated the idea because they were afraid that changing the name would diminish their fund raising ability. They're probably right,

probably right. In other words, they were riding, in essence, on the name Sierra Club in order to seek the name recognition, the credibility, the stature, et cetera. And they were afraid to lose that. The long story, now, is that after a year of negotiation in which they tried to figure out how they could keep the name, the language of an agreement that Carl Pope and I and Phil Berry insisted on, that if you keep the name Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, here's what you have to do on public policy statements, here's what you have to do on lobbying, here's what you have to do on fund raising. Well, we had made compromises and actually, the suit of clothes fit looser for them than we were comfortable with but when they took that back to their board of trustees, it fit too tight and it was too restricting.

Lage: So, they weren't willing to take those restrictions. And you had the ability to make those restrictions because of the ownership of the name?

Fischer: Right. Well, yes, because of the ownership of the name, though they contested that. My predecessors had never insisted on a written license for the use of our name by the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, which I think was just utterly irresponsible and reprehensible. But, it was my insistence that we cure that problem and I retained the dean of the intellectual property law community in San Francisco, Mel Owen, whom I had known as a coastal commissioner years earlier and that got their attention, when we brought a big gun.

Lage: And was the club's claim fairly strong?

Fischer: I think so, though they were blustering and they were saying-- At one point, Don Harris, who had been one of the early members of the Sierra Club Legal Committee walked into one of our early negotiating terms and he laid this shotgun case in the middle of the table. He says, "Just joking, guys. But, you know, we've got the case to blow you guys away. And at the end, somebody said, "Well, what is in that case?" And he opened it up. Sure enough there was a gun in there. I mean, I think he had just been to the gun shop to get it fixed, but he knew what he was doing. I mean he was laying out this symbol of machismo. In any event, the good news is, from my standpoint, the good news really is that the Legal Defense Fund has decided to change their name.[3]

---

[3]It didn't happen. Carl initiated a different, maybe even better, approach which, at least temporarily, healed the relationship--MLF, January 1996.

Lage: After a long process.

Fischer: That's right. And one in which, you know, Rick and I came to this agreement years ago and I think we were right, that changing the name is in the best interest of both organizations. But Phil Berry and a number of other folks in the club have seen the fact that they've chosen to change the name as a defeat, as a loss.

Lage: A loss on the part of the club?

Fischer: Yes, yes. I think it's a loss of face for those individuals, for Phil. My strong belief is it's not a loss for the club. And when they decided to change the name, my memo to the board indicated this is not a loss. This is good news, which was 180 degrees out from where Phil Berry was coming from at the time and he was president at the time.

Lage: That didn't sit too well.

Fischer: No, it didn't sit too well.

Lage: Well, in working out what restrictions the club would place, if the name were to remain the same, did you and Phil and Carl have difficulty coming to an agreement on that?

Fischer: No, not really. The difference of opinion was, do we want to take this free, separate, independent organization and shackle it so that it must follow the procedures and the policies of this enormous, intricate, complicated Sierra Club and in essence slow it down so that we and they are one? Or do we want to take this independent, free, and unfettered organization, set it legally free, celebrate its freedom and take advantage of its ability to turn on a dime when it's appropriate? That's the choice. I chose the second and Phil chose the first.

Lage: Did things change at all when Rick Sutherland had his fatal auto accident?

Fischer: They just slowed down.

Lage: The new executive director didn't take a different direction?

Fischer: No, he didn't. Mike Traynor had been the chairman of the board before and if anything, Mike Traynor's patience was less developed than Rick's. Both of them were relatively brittle people when there was a potential contest.

Lage: Maybe that makes them effective environmental lawyers.

Fischer: Could be, could be. But prickly collaborators.

Lage: Right. Okay, anything else that we should say about that?

Fischer: I don't think so. They're a wonderful organization.

Lage: Sounds like you and Rick could have worked it out long ago.

Fischer: I think so. And Rick's a neighbor, I mean, Rick was a neighbor. Liz is a neighbor now, just 200 yards down the road here. And Rick and I would have breakfast together before we'd catch the bus in to work, quite regularly. I enjoyed him. Very different people, he and I, but yes, we were doing a pretty good job at working it out.

Lage: Have they picked a new name?

Fischer: Yes, they have but they haven't announced it yet. I have no clue what it is.

Lage: It'll be interesting if it comes out your original idea. [laughter]

Fischer: John Muir, right. I don't think they'll choose that.

IV THE OUTSIDE ROLE OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Defining a Role in External Affairs

Lage: Okay, let's move into what we've been trying to get to now for a couple of weeks, the executive director's "outside role." I remember you said in our first meeting, I think it was, that it was a tremendous position, but an awful job. The club had to combine the inside and the outside roles of the executive director. And why is that?

Fischer: That's right. Being the Sierra Club executive director is a wonderful position, but a terrible job. There's an immense gulf between the job and the position. Those people who are on the outside of the organization and who see only the position and not the job, expect the executive director to do-- Well, I was just talking with Carl Pope's secretary now and Carl is off for two weeks in Congress and then meeting with editorial boards and donors. No way I could have taken a two-week trip away from the home office, particularly in the early days of my tenure. One of the ways of looking at it is, possibly, things are put together well enough at home now so that Carl is able to do that. I hope that's true. I'll knock on wood so that the tape recorder can hear that. If so, I'm happy and proud.

But the time available to do those kinds of editorial board visits and donor visits and congressional visits versus the time required in monitoring the budget and monitoring the treasurer and exercising the care and feeding of the volunteer leaders and the staff--I found it to be like 95 percent, a demand that 95 percent of your time be spent on internal caretaking things, perhaps fixing the institutional structure that the club had outgrown, and 5 to 10 percent of your time being available for outside things. But there wasn't just the problem of time. I personally didn't feel welcome in being involved too much in environmental policy issues. Ed Wayburn had much of that staked

out, or Doug Scott had it staked out, or Carl Pope had it staked out before I came.

Lage: Had Mike left that to them?

Fischer: Yes, I think so. Mike had, in essence, staked out his own territory, which was the international and the intellectual community and the Group of Ten wandering around. Well, I got the Group of Ten stuff but Mike kept his international turf and there was relatively little substantive conservation turf for me to get into. That caused me then to seek an outlet for my environmental activity on the board of directors of, first, the Oceanic Society, which then merged into being on the board of the Friends of the Earth. I became the chair of the Yosemite Restoration Trust Advisory Council, and I became the chair of the environment committee for the Calvert Social Investment Fund.

Now, these are all national environmental leader positions that one would have thought I could have fulfilled entirely as the executive director of the Sierra Club, but I couldn't. It was interesting that in the performance evaluation sessions that the board of directors had with me, they said, "Well, Michael, we want you to leave the Calvert Social Investment Fund and the Friends of the Earth so that you can spend more time on this budget problem we've got here, or on this other administrative problem. I said, "Sorry, I won't do it. I mean, I'll quit those sorts of things if there's room for me in the club--"

Lage: So, you expressed that you felt there were--?

Fischer: Oh sure, oh sure, over the years. Right. But the members of the board of directors, and again, we've talked about this in the past, they have assigned for themselves administrative tasks. And the only member of the national board of directors who really takes a role in national environmental issues is Ed Wayburn. And Ed basically does it in a very non-Sierra Club way. He doesn't involve big committees. He just goes out and does it by himself. So, the rest of the board doesn't expect environmental leadership of themselves nor do they seem to expect it of their executive director.

Lage: But what about the outside world? What do they expect of the Sierra Club and the executive director?

Fischer: That's right. The outside world doesn't see the internal stuff and expects the executive director to be knowledgeable and deeply engaged. And indeed I would go to the D.C. office, oh, about once a month and spend a day to two days lobbying on Capitol Hill and those were immensely satisfying periods.

Lage: Did the D.C. staff welcome your help or did they also have a turf thing?

Fischer: No, they welcomed it but they welcomed it in an interesting way (and a way from which I did not dissuade them) and that is, they would say, "All right, Michael, this month we're really doing the California desert." I'd say, "Fine, point me."

Lage: And then would they brief you on the current issues?

Fischer: Yes. Sure, sure. And I'm a quick study and a credible spokesman and with the title executive director, they could get appointments with senators that assistant staff members can't get, quite different from on the House side. And so they were delighted to have the face card to get them into the door to talk to the senators. And yes, that was very satisfying. I'm not at all saying that it was impossible to do. And frankly, had I been more aggressive and more sharp-elbowed about it, I probably could have done more. I could certainly--

Lage: What would you have wanted to see your role as?

Fischer: Well, I could certainly have done, for instance, a bi-monthly column in *Sierra* magazine. I didn't find the time to do that. Well, that was my problem, not the club's. I mean, I could have done it had I wanted to. And I could have gotten D.C. and field staff off together in a retreat and said, "Okay, guys, we're going to set our policy on the Wise Use Movement." But the error that I made going in was talking to Doug Scott and saying, "Doug, I'm going to be buried in fixing the administrative wreck that we've got around here. You handle the conservation program but save room for me in a year or two because I'll want to play at that table."

Well, a year or two later was too late. The style of operations had been established. Who I was in the eyes of Sierra Club people had been established. I was the person who fixed the administrative wreckage. I was, you know, Fischer wants to meet on the Wise Use Movement, why? You know, that's what we've been working with Doug Scott on. So, that was a major strategic error that I made going in early.

Success in Electoral Politics, Dangers of Working Within the Political System

Lage: I understand Doug Scott tended to take a less aggressive role on some of the issues, like ancient forests, say.

Fischer: Well, the aggressive and non-aggressive thing is not quite the right word for it. Doug Scott used to say that the Sierra Club knows the American civics system better than 98 percent of all high school and college civics teachers. We know how to pull the levers. We know how to turn the dials. We know how to read the meters of this civics system. And we're proud of it. We work within the political system and we stretch the edge of the envelope but we work within that system. We know it.

My view is that Doug was trapped in the system and that yes, you do need to work within the system but you need to look at it from the outside first. The Sierra Club is full of greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses. You know, the greatest weakness is our volunteer membership and our greatest strength is our volunteer membership. Another one of our great strengths is the fact that we, alone of all the environmental organizations, are involved in electoral politics. That's one of our greatest strengths.

It's also, in this situation, one of our greatest weaknesses because when you, (you know the old saw that all politics is local politics) when you get somebody elected, when you get a Jolene Unsoeld, who's a congresswoman from Washington state, elected that means you've given your money. That means you've walked the precincts. You've knocked your knuckles bloody on front doors. You've had front doors slammed in your face. You've used wily, crafty ideas to get her elected. And when she wins, you celebrate. You are part of her family and she's part of yours.

And so when Jolene Unsoeld says to you then, here's how far I can go on the spotted owl and no farther, well, she's your person. She's your gladiator, out there fighting for you. And to say, "Jolene, you're wrong and we're going to roll you. We're going to go farther than you want to go." At which point, you know, the tension gets great and finally she's going to say, "Well, I've got to attack you publicly then if you're going to do that because I've got other constituents who are going to be angry as hell if you sue to stop all forest sales, etc. And the local chapters were slow to say (and, in fact, have never gotten around to the point of saying), "Jolene, goodbye. Been nice

knowing you. But the forests are more important than our relationship."

##

Fischer: By definition, she's a captive of the system. By definition we aren't. But in practice and human relations terms, we allowed ourselves to become caught in her system. And Doug would be aggressively unapologetic about that close partnership. You know, the first step is get our people elected to Congress. Second step is help them get good laws passed. Third step is get the regulations in place to implement the laws. And the fourth step is sue the bastards if they don't follow the law. None of those steps imply ever breaking faith with the person that we got elected, the Jim Jontzes of the world and the Jolenes of the world. So, Doug was not necessarily a compromiser. He's a politician.

Lage: Well, did that ever come to discussion within the club?

Fischer: Yes. But always in the most gentle of terms because to hurt any of the political activists is something that, well, it wouldn't be smart because they could hurt back. [laughter]

Lage: How would you explain the club's strength in electoral politics. Is there money involved?

Fischer: Oh, you mean why is that one of the greatest strengths? Well, because, in fact, when you get your friends elected, boy do you have access and they will sponsor you. Dick Bryan, who's our senator from Nevada, he knows that the club was instrumental in getting him elected. When I pick up the phone and call Dick Bryan, he's going to be there. He carried the automobile fleet fuel efficiency legislation as a freshman senator knowing that he had us as his troops behind him. And he wasn't all alone, wasn't going to get whipped by (Senate majority leader) George Mitchell and other people because we were there and we were going to make him stronger and we did.

Lage: Is it the troops that get him elected or has the club diverted a fair amount of money to the election campaign?

Fischer: Oh, it's really the troops. But yes, the money counts as well. But the maximum contribution is like $10,000 so it's not an enormous amount. But if we max out, we're among the relatively few contributors who do max out and they notice. We hate that concept. I mean, the Sierra Club would support the public financing of election campaigns so that there isn't any special access because of contributions and just because we're good guy

contributors. And that puts us on the same plane as the bad guy contributors.

Lage: Yes, but you still are considered a PAC [Political Action Committee].

Fischer: That's right. We're a PAC. That's right. And are seen as a special interest. So, the money is important but it's not the central thing, I think.

Searching for Environmental Justice

Lage: You've mentioned that one of the first things you did was get involved with Cesar Chavez and the fast. Now, was that part of finding your role, too?

Fischer: Yes, I think so. And part of my own instinct at that time, rather than a fully-thought-out strategy for who the club ought to be. But I knew that the pollution by agricultural pesticides was an environmental problem and a social problem. And that we, the environmental community, could demonstrate solidarity with people who were being injured by greedy corporations just as wetlands are damaged by greedy corporations. And so when (I guess it was my first month or two in office) Cesar Chavez commenced a fast, I joined in that fast for, I guess it was two weeks, water only.

Lage: Had you been in touch with his movement at all?

Fischer: No, I hadn't.

Lage: You just reached out to him?

Fischer: Yes, I called and talked to a nun who was running their public affairs office and they said, "Oh, yes. We'll add you to the list."

Lage: Was that something where you joined him physically?

Fischer: Well, I did go down to Delano for the breaking of the fast, after some months. He was frail and they had a mass under a big tent with thousands of people and lots of television and I was there in the front row. And just after that, I wore the wooden cross that his grandmother had made him wear for the fast and subsequently passed the cross off to one of Bobby Kennedy's daughters in Delaware, in a labor union ceremony in the parking

lot of a "hypermarket" then being boycotted. The cross went around the country to people as they were spreading the word.

Lage: And the fast was over pesticide use. Is that correct?

Fischer: Right. Exactly. Yes, it was part of the grape boycott. Grapes, as a crop, evidently take more pesticides than your normal everyday average crop. But they all take a lot.

Since it was so unlike the Sierra Club, there were a few people who warmly welcomed that and said, "Gee, that's a great idea." And I think, by far the larger majority either went, "Huh?" with this question mark over their head or, "Geez, what was that about?" And since it was only two weeks and I had only a couple of conversations with news media people, it didn't get much coverage, and the impact in the club wasn't great. Except I think it was my first statement, early on, that connecting human injustice to environmental destruction is a good thing to think about. And it was my way of playing the first card in that hand. And that's the hand that I played during the five and a half years that I'm hopeful will have the most long-lasting impact on the club.

Lage: It sounds as if it was also a concern that was growing outside the club at the same time.

Fischer: Yes, though at the time I reached out to the Group of Ten and asked if any of them would want to share in the process, and I urged John Adams to come down to Delano with me. And it didn't click there either.

Lage: How did people respond? Just, say, in the Group of Ten, the same kind of, "What's happening?"

Fischer: Yes, either, "Right on, brother," John Adams did that and Mike Clark of Friends of the Earth did that. But the rest of them were, kind of, "Huh? Gee, that's not trees or glaciers or mountains or oceans. What's that about?" Interestingly enough, those were very early days in the appreciation of the overlapping ripples.

Lage: Yes. Well, let's talk more about that because I know you did continue, both in the Group of Ten and in this club to sort of push towards environmental justice things.

Fischer: Well, a colleague of mine, Tom Layton of the Gerbode Foundation in San Francisco, is interested in this. He and I share a mutual friend, Lew Butler, who's the president of California Tomorrow. The push of California Tomorrow is: California becoming a very

diversified culture. In the next three to five years European-Americans will be a minority group, and by the year 2000 white males will comprise less than 15 percent of the new entrants into the labor force. And so California Tomorrow talks about the diverse future and how do--

Lage: That's an organization that's completely changed its direction.

Fischer: That's right. They started out being land-use oriented and now they're totally socially oriented. And so anyway, Tom and Lew and I talked with Rich Hayes. Rich had been my selection to be director of volunteer development on the executive staff; another Sue Merrow idea. Rich was very much a proponent of cultural diversity and dealing with the racial injustice of, the racism of, pollution.

And so I talked to a couple of board members and announced at a board meeting that I had made a $25,000 proposal to the Gerbode Foundation for a grant to fund Sierra Club efforts in ethnic diversity. We talked last time, I think, about the three-part motto: find a power center, attack it. Find a vacuum and fill it. Can't find a vacuum, go on the attack again and make one. Well, here I was expressing some leadership, some direction. It hadn't been fully discussed with every little nuance of the grassroots. Well, the name is predictable, Denny Shaffer. And the reaction was predictable: he went on the full attack.

Lage: And what was his objection?

Fischer: His objection was that, "This is not the Sierra Club. The club knows how to do environmental activism but it doesn't know social activism." So, yes, Denny went on the attack basically saying that this wasn't what the club's mission is. It's not what we're good at, not what our purpose is. He knew this guy Fischer was out in left field and here's a demonstration, just out of step with the organization.

Lage: Were your efforts going to be to diversify membership or staff, or both?

Fischer: Program first. Yes. Let's have what the club does be relevant to communities of color and of service to communities of color, and when we demonstrate that we have the desire and the ability to be effective in that field, then the members will follow.

Lage: So, it really was a new program direction?

Fischer: Right, a new program direction. And jarring and threatening to at least Denny. Now, Denny probably, he wouldn't agree to this but he was probably attacking for attack's sake. He found an issue to attack on. He didn't care about the issue.

Lage: You don't think that he would rather not be involved with the minority community? Or do you have a sense of his social views?

Fischer: There may have been some of that. No, Denny, at least, has fifteen- and twenty-year-old bona fides where he did work in Fayetteville as a city council member and a mayoral candidate with the African-American community there. As Vivien Li (board Member 1986-1992) put it to me some months later, "Well, you know, Denny has the good stories but none of them are younger than ten years old. And he sure sounds like a racist now." I don't think he is a racist, but he is from the South.

In any event, as was all too typical at the board meetings that I attended, when somebody would go on the attack, everybody else jumps under the table. This pattern was in full operation during the March '92 board meeting which resulted in my negotiated resignation announcement. And so there was no other board member, no other national leader at the early stage that was prepared to support a new program initiative. I then immediately recognized that I had made one of these leadership errors. You never get too far out in front of the folks.

Lage: You hadn't gone to somebody and developed your support?

Fischer: I had gone to a couple of folks, thought that it was good enough, but I was wrong. So I, in essence, went silent, publicly silent. Now, I had been making trips to chapters and so I had met people of color in chapters and started talking to the people of color, Sierra Club members I knew, and started working more closely with Vivien Li, the only person of color on the board of directors. And was able to say to them, "We got this $25,000 promised from the Gerbode Foundation."

I had to go back to the Gerbode Foundation and say, "Tom, the board of directors yanked me back and asked me not to submit a proposal for a grant." He said, "Oh, well, okay. That makes it only even more important to us." A month later he said, "I told the board what you had mentioned to me and they approved the grant without a proposal. So, I've got $25,000 for you, Fischer."

Lage: Oh, wow, you don't get that too often.

Fischer: No, you don't. And I was able to use that as a carrot to people of color. Look, let's get our program together. We've got $25,000 whenever we figure out what we want to do. And that was an effective carrot, though it took about a year for the Ethnic Diversity Task Force to first come together informally and then get formal acknowledgement with Vivien Li's leadership and then to put a program together and then to formally apply for the money. But the money was there and I was able to say, "Yes, I talked to Tom last month and it's still there waiting for us." And so I didn't--

Lage: That doesn't seem like an extraordinarily long time, given the Sierra Club, if you get the volunteers involved.

Fischer: And I didn't go away from the issue. I mean, I didn't say, "Oh, well. It's not something I'm going to work on." But I worked on it in a very different way. I sent Rich Hayes to the Ethnic Diversity Task Force meetings. I didn't go. And so instead of it being a personal leadership effort, it became much more of a shared, tell me how I can support, sort of effort. Though, it was clear enough, particularly to the people of color, that they were there because I had the idea, and because I got the money and because I was encouraging them and because I had given Rich Hayes the charter to do it. And indeed, in his last months at the club, that's basically all Rich was doing, was ethnic diversity work. And some of his other volunteer leaders were unhappy because he wasn't doing his volunteer development sort of work. So Rich gave the ball a spin, at some cost to himself, as well.

Lage: And what kind of initiatives did the club end up taking, once they had the ground?

Fischer: The committee made a very good decision: they took the money and shoveled it out the door to chapters. They said, chapters and groups come up with mini-grant proposals and I think we got several dozen. Oh, I think we got fifty to eighty, something like that, proposals of which they could fund only about a dozen in the $500-$2,500 range. And these were proposals to, oh, in El Paso for the white and Hispanic communities to work on a water pollution problem. Some of the proposals were pretty pedestrian, like expanding the inner city outings program to have four canoe trips instead of two, you know, that sort of thing.

Most of those proposals didn't win funding. But the proposals that did win funding were those that created coalitions with the Sierra Club chapter and an organization of color to either lobby the city council or the state house and usually on a pollution issue.

Rich, as the volunteer development director, had also surveyed our chapters and groups and found that thirty-five of the fifty-seven chapters had solid waste or toxic waste issues at the top of their agenda. And those issues, of course, are issues of common cause to communities of color. And so it was to those chapters that most of the effective grants went.

Lage: But they probably hadn't been working with the communities?

Fischer: No, they hadn't been. I remember one time I was picked up at the Dallas airport by the chair of the Dallas group of the Lone Star Chapter. And as we were driving into town, I asked him what collaboration there was between the Dallas group and organizations of color. And he says, "Oh, none. Our members mainly live in north Dallas, over around the university." And I said, "Well, are there any environmental racism issues?" He says, "Oh, yeah. There's this lead smelter and lead slag problem over in west Dallas." I said, "Well, is the Sierra Club doing anything about that?" "No," he says. "Those people had to kind of organize their own. There's the West Dallas Organization Against Toxics and there's Texans United and they're taking care of that." I said, "Well, Mike, tell me, if the lead slag problem had been in North Dallas, would the Sierra Club have been involved in it?" "Oh, yes sir! Oh, yes sir, we would have!" I said, "Uh, Mike, see a problem there?"

He said, "Yeah, I see what you mean. But you know, I can only get people to do things that they really want to do. All I have is volunteers and you know, the woman volunteer at the end of her workday, after dinner says to her husband, 'I'm going to go over to the university and work on the lawsuit against the Ouachita Forest National timber harvest plan,' And the husband probably says, 'That's fine.' Or the activist will say, 'Honey, I'm going to go down to city hall. We're going to work on this recycling ordinance.' And the husband says, 'Fine.' Or the person says, 'Hey, I'm going to go over to Amy's house. We're going to work on the next outing down to Big Bend National Park.' The husband says, 'Fine.' Or she says, 'I'm going to go over to West Dallas and we're going to meet with the community groups on the lead slag thing.' And the husband says, 'Like hell you are.'" [laughter]

Lage: Is this what he really told you?

Fischer: Yes.

Lage: It's even a sexist issue.

Fischer: Exactly, right. [laughter] You got it. I even chastised him. I said, "Mike!" So, anyway, yes, it was quite sexist.

Lage: But it is a real problem.

Fischer: The short answer is the Dallas group of the Lone Star Chapter now does have a West Dallas lead problem committee. It only has two people on it. But they go down to the West Dallas monthly meetings. And so the Sierra Club is there now. There's two of them out of an incredible group. They have a monthly meeting of the Dallas group that brings between 300 and 500 people together. It is just--

Lage: So, two is very small.

Fischer: Two is real tiny.

Lage: If they have that many activists.

Fischer: However, the west Dallas folks now come to the Sierra Club monthly meeting as well so that they are kind of like the drip, drip, drip Chinese water torture thing increasing the awareness. And I'm pleased that at least there's a beginning there and the club will do something.

And I had to have á conversation only about a year ago with Ed Wayburn who was saying, "Michael, I've just got to tell you I disagree with you. You're trying to turn the club in a direction that's inappropriate." So, I told him the Dallas story and said to him, "Don't you see a problem there, Ed? This is a Sierra Club issue. Thirty-five of our chapters have this as their top priority and we're not working with the communities which are most heavily impacted by lead pollution. This isn't taking the Sierra Club into an issue that's not what the club does."

Lage: It's not a new issue. It's just new groups.

Fischer: He said, "Michael, you have now opened my eyes. You are right. And I'm wrong." But his instinct was to bury his head in the snow up in Alaska and say, well that's what I really think the Sierra Club is about. But no, the first People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit took place in Washington, D.C., October of '91. And there were a dozen Sierra Club people there, the largest contingent of any of the national environmental organizations. Six hundred people attended. And the meeting in early December in New Orleans, (which was kind of "Summit Two") had almost 2500 people there. Three hundred of us were people of pallor, as my wife calls it. And forty of us were Sierra Club activists. Half of the forty of the Sierra Club people were

people of color. Sierra Club volunteers primarily, some of the staff of color.

Lage: When you went out, initially, to the chapters and groups to find Sierra Club people of color to work with, did you find them?

Fischer: Sure, they're there. Absolutely.

Lage: Did they tend to be from the middle class, would you say?

Fischer: Yes. Oh, yes. Absolutely. They do, indeed. And African-American and Hispanic, not Asian, interestingly enough, though there is an increasing number of Asians here in the Bay Area. Terry Ow-Wing is one of the Ethnic Diversity Task Force members and she's on the San Francisco group excom. That's an interesting challenge in itself, and this is very much on the side. The response of the Asian community to environmental issues. Jane's (Jane Rogers, my wife, environmental program executive at the San Francisco Foundation) staff member, Jack Chin, is downstairs right now and he's a leader in APEN, the Asian and Pacific Islanders' Environmental Network. There was another people of color environmental meeting just last weekend in San Jose, sponsored by an organization called EDGE, the Environmental and Ethnic Alliance. Started out the Environmental Discussion Group of Ethnic, but that didn't quite fit. But EDGE was good.

Lage: EDGE is a good name.

Fischer: Yes, we like EDGE. It isn't quite a precise acronym, but close enough. Anyway, I was one of the half dozen founders of EDGE about two years ago. It's a state-wide, California organization. After founding it, I got out and handed it off to Mike Paparian who then handed it off to the volunteer chair of Sierra California, Sherman Lewis. But this meeting last weekend, of three hundred people, maybe fifty, sixty of us were white. And maybe thirty, forty people were Asians. And so, Jack Chin, who was there, stood up and said, "I've never been in an environmental meetings that had so many Asians. Let's have a caucus. Come to the corner over there and let's talk."

Lage: Now, what's the explanation for the Asians not getting into it so much?

Fischer: I don't know. It's an interesting-- I had assumed that it would have been easiest to make communion with the Asian community, particularly here in California where the matriculation rate of Asians at UC Berkeley is the highest of any group, 42 percent or something like that. And here's the Sierra Club in

environmentalism, and joining organizations is seen as a highly educated, middle-class, kind of upwardly mobile sort of endeavor. And so, I would figure that the gulf between a community of color and the environmental movement would be narrowest with that race which was clearly striving to be middle income, highly educated. And that the gulf would be greatest with the African-American community.

Well, I found that the opposite is true, that the African-American community, I think, primarily because of their civil rights organizing history and culture, is far better prepared, far more interested in association than the Asian-American community is right now. And I'm not sure exactly why that is, and that's one of the things that I want to study.

Lage: Well, I think you probably put your finger on it. Is this one of the things you're going to be looking at, perhaps, when you're at Harvard?

Fischer: Yes. I'll be teaching a class in environmental racism, having speakers of color come on out.

Sturgeon: Can I just jump in here? Do Hispanics tend to fall in between?

Fischer: Yes, they do. And Hispanics also tend to have far less of a national presence and keep their presence regional, like in the Rio Grande valley or the desert southwest.

Lack of Diversity in the Major Environmental Organizations

Lage: You also made some effort with the Group of Ten to get more diversity.

Fischer: Well, the Group of Ten were ten, and then eleven, white guys. I mean, white, middle-aged, middle class men. And Mike Clark and I, (Mike, formerly president of Friends of the Earth) finally said in a meeting about three years ago now, "Look, as long as it's ten white guys, we ain't coming anymore, not only because it's not satisfying to us personally but because our attendance in this sort of group sends a signal that's counter to the signal we're trying to send to our own organizations."

And we, the Group of Ten, had been attacked about a year earlier by the Gulf Coast Tenants Organization and the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice. The New York

Times had played up those attacks and had basically painted all of the "Gang of Ten" with the same brush. At both Friends of the Earth and Sierra Club, we were saying, "We can't afford to be tarred with that brush. We're out of here, guys." And so the Group of Ten was expanded to, I guess it's almost twenty now. We changed our name to a very unfortunate one, the Green Group.

Lage: Another color.

Fischer: Yes, that's right, which our staff took almost no time in turning into the Gangrene. Somebody else took a little bit longer to find a much more apt description, which is the Green Grope. [laughter]

Lage: You'll have to explain that one.

Fischer: The ten, and now eighteen of us, get together and hey, there's no real good agenda. And as the staff who's called in the Green Group meetings, the "B Team-"-talk about a presumptuous, pompous, and superior term. It applies to senior staff professionals, who don't happen to be the executive director. Again, Mike Clark put it in good terms. He says, "Hell, there's no subject that any of us around this table know the answers to more than the first three questions on. Our staffs are the experts and here we are excluding our staffs from these meetings and pretending to set policy."

Lage: So, the meetings are of--

Fischer: Just the CEO's.

Lage: The CEO's. I see, and not your staff.

Fischer: No staffs, no volunteers. Just the ten CEO's, as our staff says, groping along together. I mean, in the mist. What do we know about the details of specific programs? Some of the representatives of some of the smaller outfits, particularly the population outfits, probably do know as much as our division chiefs do. But when you get up to the executive director of the Sierra Club who is, yes, he's doing some environmental stuff but he's also running a $50 million a year corporation and worrying about cash flow in this end of it or personnel problems in that end of it, the depth of knowledge and of real-time information is not very great. So, that's why they call it the Green Grope. And I tend to agree with them unless we're talking at the broadest level and seeking opportunities for collaboration and thinking through positioning and future vision. That's what the CEO's are best suited for.

Lage: Well, what is the purpose of the group? I mean, do you ever come up with, "Let's have a united front on a particular issue?" In the year after leaving the club, I was retained by John Adams of NRDC to interview Green Group members, define the alliance's mission, and make recommendations for new directions. So far, the recommendations are being implemented.

Fischer: Yes, yes. All too often and, frankly, I don't think that's the purpose. The purpose of the group is basically to keep in touch, to know each other as people so that-- There are too often opportunities for either attack or destructive competition. And so when those opportunities pop up, whether it's either volunteers of the respective outfits shooting each other, or staff or somebody else using one organization against the other, for the CEO's to know each other and trust each other well enough to be able to pick up the phone and say, "Hey, Fred--" Like when Fred Krupp cut his deal with McDonald's. Before that was made public, Fred called me up and said, "Michael, I know you're one of the most outspoken against getting in bed with corporations. This is what I'm doing. This is why I'm doing it. Please don't attack me in tomorrow morning's paper."

Lage: Now, what organization is he with?

Fischer: The Environmental Defense Fund. Well, Fred and I, over the course of three years, had had enough beers together and had talked enough things through so we knew each other well enough he could do that. And I could say, "Okay, I can see where you're coming from, Fred. Alright, I'll not say anything and I'll send the word down the line that they're not to say anything." That's what it's for. I mean, it's not to do something.

And when they do something positive, together in a unified front, my own view is that that's destructive of the specific niche or role or style that each organization could do. I mean, if all ten of us, or eighteen of us walk lockstep in every issue, there wouldn't be a need for ten or eighteen outfits. You might as well just have one or two.

Lage: It takes the club long enough itself to reach a policy. Did bringing the new groups in make a change?

Fischer: Yes, mostly for the good, by getting the group from ten to eighteen--

##

Fischer: --the addition of Faye Wattleton from Planned Parenthood and Marian Wright Edelman from Save the Children and Susan Weber from

Zero Population Growth and Ben Chavis, an African-American leader from the United Church of Christ. Yes, those people were active and interested participants in our quarterly meetings.

Lage: Save the Children I wouldn't think of as an environmental group.

Fischer: No, you wouldn't. You're right. You wouldn't think of it. But, boy is it. I mean, lead poisoning and poverty. These are environmental issues. Or they certainly have environmental dimensions.

Lage: Yes. I noticed that the National Charities Information Bureau [NCIB] criticized the club or threatened to cut it off or something because of lack of diversity.

Fischer: Well, now you're going back into administrative matters. Oh, well, NCIB has a number of standards. My first conversation with NCIB was on the cost of fund raising. NCIB has standards and they sent a routine letter saying where's your policy on diversity, where's your policy on conflict of interest, and in fact the club didn't have formal policies on that. But we whipped them up real quick and it was not a major thing at all.

Lage: Okay, I was just thinking there are outside pressures in this direction, too.

Fischer: Yes. The New York Times articles publishing the attacks against the Gang of Ten from the Gulf Coast Tenant Organization and the Southwest Network, those were very, very helpful (albeit painful) outside pressures. And they occurred in the period when I was invisible, when I was kind of working from within in the club. And I was saying, this is a way we ought to be going, and somebody else on the outside whaling away at us with a two-by-four was very effective. I thought it was a constructive approach. And NCIB's nudging was another effective thing. So, sure, that's--

Lage: Did the Gulf Coast Tenant Organization and the Southwest Network get into the Group of Ten, then, into the Green Group?

Fischer: No. They are regional outfits, rather than national. But they remain effective people, Pat Bryant from New Orleans and Richard Moore who, although his name doesn't sound it, is Latino from Albuquerque. Both Richard and Pat will be guest speakers of mine at the Harvard course. I saw Richard last weekend and Pat in New Orleans last month. So, they remain effective, articulate, involved people. And Roberto Suro, who's the New York Times writer, continues to crank stories out. The New York Times had a

front page story on this issue two weeks ago, something like that, praising the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, largely, but--

Lage: Oh, because they're taking on some of those issues.

Fischer: They are. They are doing a very good job. This is an area where Mike Traynor and I did very directly and very personally collaborate. And I had met with Legal Defense Fund staffs in both Tallahassee and New Orleans where their initiatives are located. And they're neat.

Lage: Very good. Well, that whole area's an interesting one and one that we haven't talked about in these oral histories with other people. Oh, no, Bill Futrell, actually.[1] He was an early person who pushed for that, who got the club involved in that. That was the City Care Conference [in 1979].

Fischer: The City Care Conference in Detroit. Yes, there was a burst way back then.

Lage: And Vivien Li came on the scene at that point.

Fischer: Vivien Li was a staff member back there at the City Care Conference. But that didn't last. That's an interesting thing, actually.

At this EDGE conference in San Jose last weekend, Denis Hayes, who was one of the Earth Day founders, who's now the executive director of the Bullitt Foundation up in Seattle, reminded us that there had been a multicultural environmental effort that had no staying power, no lasting power, of about fifteen and twenty years ago. And he challenged us in the room to examine why that was and to see that this effort had staying power. His thesis was that the City Care era was splintered into local battles. And when those local battles were either won or the locals got tired of fighting them, then the collaboration collapsed and that there really needed to be some national objectives, some large purposes toward which we were working together in common and that we shared together very closely. Most of these efforts have been focusing instead on little battles, not on the larger agreements.

Lage: It might have had something to do with the Carter administration and the end of the Carter administration because I think they

---

[1]J. William Futrell, "'Love for the Land and Justice for its People': Sierra Club National and Southern Leader, 1968-1982," in Sierra Club Leaders II, 1960s-1970s, Regional Oral History Office, 1984.

were very involved. Okay, shall we move on, or do you need a break?

Fischer: I'm just going to get some hot water. I bet your microphone probably even picks up from the kitchen.

Firsthand Experiences in the Arctic and the California Desert

Lage: Probably. You took a trip to the Arctic. What came of that experience?

Fischer: Well, first of all, it was very, very moving to have the privilege of going where there was no sign of the hand of man. Doug Scott and I flew to the Deadhorse Airport, which is where Prudhoe Bay oil folks land. And from there we flew in a bush plane, and I'm going to keep this relatively brief, flew to Kaktovik and then from there went into a small little Piper Cub, one at a time, because this airplane only takes the pilot and there's one person sitting behind him and then there's just enough space for the backpack behind that--And we went thirty miles into the wilderness from Kaktovik. Kaktovik is kind of the wilderness in that eighty to ninety people live there. And he landed us on a gravel bar, one at a time, and two hours apart.

So, I was the first out and got only two hours worth of intense solitude. But to be where there are no trails, no roads, no campsites, no buildings, in vast country-- It's a desert. It's an arctic desert with no trees. The willow trees that are there you'd call bushes here. And I climbed up to the top of the Sadlerochit Spring as I was waiting for Doug to come in, probably got up 2,000 feet. I could see the pack ice out in the Arctic Ocean thirty miles away. I could see the wetlands, the shoreline. I could see the tundra fields, then the foothills and then the hill I was standing on. Then, turning around to the South, I could see the Brooks Range with towering Mount Michelson and its hanging ice fields. I could see for fifty to sixty miles in any direction and no sign of the hand of man. If a panel truck had been parked ten miles away it would have utterly changed the whole character of the place.

And at this outlook that I was perched on, it was kind of a promontory, around the corner flew an eagle, right at my eye level, probably ten feet away. We met eye to eye. The eagle wheeled, looked at me, and then said, "Well, I'm out of here." But just that instant of inter-species contact was a thrilling one to me. "Thrill" is a corny word and, if I were John Muir, I

could blend in some music and poetry. But that brief experience was moving. And then I think we spent a total of three days wandering around.

After two hours, Doug finally flew in to join me, and then Tim Mahoney, who was our lobbyist on the Arctic and had been taking a group of senators around the Arctic, came clattering over the hill in an Armageddon-type helicopter. And the helicopter stopped. He jumped out with his suitcases, fish and beer [laughter] in the middle of the empty wilderness, and then off it went.

Lage: So, just the three of you?

Fischer: The three of us were there for about three days, just experiencing--

Lage: Was this in your first days as executive director?

Fischer: Brand new, yes. First two, three, four months.

Lage: For your induction.

Fischer: That's right. Doug Scott's idea, an expensive one for the club. It was a truly inspirational experience, as brief as it was, and gave me both the motivation and the credibility to be a spokesman for the protection of the Arctic on television programs and in the Senate.

Lage: So, being there does count, you think, for lobbying?

Fischer: Oh, absolutely. Not only inside, not only in the eyes of the senator who would say, "Oh, you haven't even been there, huh? You white guy from the city." Because the uniform of the day inside the Beltway is, of course, the sincere suit. So, here you are, wearing your pinstripe suit, talking about a wilderness. And if you can say that, yes, I was there and here's what I did and here's what I saw, all of a sudden the pinstripe suit goes away. And the senator or his aide or her aide is given a window into that reality that's quite different from the standard lobbyist. So, yes, that gave me a bit of an outsider credibility. Very few of the other Gang of Ten members had been there.

Lage: And that was one of the main issues the club was involved in. The early meetings of your executive directorship you mentioned three issues, California desert, the Arctic, and clean air. And it seemed as if those were the theme for the whole period.

Fischer: That's right. Those were the issues that I lobbied on, most of the time, lobbied on and rode on. And that's an indicator that, yes, I had a role to play in outside environmental issues. That's the exercise of what I call "the position" as opposed to "the job." And that was very, very satisfying.

I had a similar experience in the California desert at Womb Rock, which is a magnificent spot. It's deep in the desert and there's no sign to it. At the base of a, oh, maybe 200-foot limestone cliff is a boulder about as high as this room and about as large as this dining room, so say, ten feet around. And into this boulder is carved or worn kind of a little cavelet, maybe the size of a refrigerator. And up at the top of this are pictographs.

And on the sides of this cavelet are two windows about two feet high and a foot wide, something like that. One of the windows points to the east and the other to the southeast. And the window that pointed to the east had its bottom edge worn perfectly smooth. And it's the spot where Mojaves, for centuries, would be reborn because the idea is that on the vernal equinox this is the spot where the earth spreads her legs and the sun comes in and impregnates the earth and from this spot all life spills forth. And so centuries worth of people had ceremonially been reborn.

You go outside the rock and then climb through this window and basically spill down at the floor of this little refrigerator-sized cavelet and you're looking through this hole, through the cavelet, to the serrated purple peaks over there where the sunrise at the vernal equinox would first come through. And it's just totally moving, I mean, inspirational and the hair stands up on the back of your neck.

And again, looking through this hole at the purple mountains in the distance, there's no sign of the hand of mankind. Yes, there's a road across the valley maybe five miles along but the scrub masks that-- So, telling that story over and over again as a way of anthropomorphizing the desert or of being able to paint the word picture, as I would say in my speeches: as you approach, here's the purple mountain, there's a yellow mountain range, there's a white mountain range. And the trail gets thinner and thinner. You can describe where this boulder is standing and what it looks like and its colors and the temperature of the pre-dawn morning and that sort of thing. But to make the desert seem like a place that is fragile and rich and filled with beauty and mystery is a way of inspiring people to want to protect it.

Lage: And if you haven't been there you can't do it.

Fischer: If you haven't been there you can't do that. I mean the pictures on the calendar don't do it. So, those kinds of events during my tenure at the club were very, very important to me.

Memorable Lobbying Experiences

Lage: Is there any memorable lobbying experience to describe how lobbying occurs at this level?

Fischer: Well, one of the most satisfying was my budding friendship with Tim Wirth, when I was lobbying him to be a sponsor of Dick Bryan's automobile fleet fuel efficiency bill and he was reluctant. He just thought that the politics were wrong and that this was something that he couldn't get on board and--

Lage: The labor opposition, was that part of it?

Fischer: The labor opposition was part of his concern, yes, and then the economic reality and the fact that if we went for fleet fuel efficiency standards on one side, then the people who wanted to drill the Arctic, Senator (J. Bennett) Johnston and Ted Stevens, etc., would have to get their objective met. And the meeting is long enough ago, a couple of years ago, that I don't remember the details of the conversation but I remember that he changed his mind. And he said, "Okay, Michael, I'm on. Not only am I on, but I'll work like heck with you. Let's get a meeting with Dick Bryan and we'll set our strategy."

Lage: But you don't remember what you said that changed his mind?

Fischer: Sure, I do. In essence, I told him the objections he was raising were all inside-the-Beltway political excuses. But there's a real world out there, a world at risk. That the Bryan bill was reasonable, responsible and effective. That it was right. And that a failure on his part to exercise leadership, to support the measure, wouldn't square with the Tim Wirth I'd gotten to know in informal conversations over the past year or so. (Wren Wirth, his wife, and Janice, my wife, are colleagues in the foundation world and we'd met in those circumstances). It was very, very satisfying to hear a person arguing and saying no, no, no and then finally saying oh, okay, well, yes, I'll do that.

Lage: So you found a way to dramatize those energy issues? I can see talking about the Arctic and the desert, the beauty of wilderness, but fuel efficiency must be more difficult.

Fischer: I just happened to be accompanied in that visit by David Gardner, the head of the D.C. office, and Dan Becker, the head of our energy program, and the two of them were unusually silent. Usually, my style of lobbying is to go with an expert and to engage the senator in the general issue and then turn to the expert to give the details. But in this meeting it was basically a Tim and Michael show. Now, Dan and David both saw that event, and they were then able to tell the rest of the folks on the staff and then from the staff it spread. Hey, Fischer won one. We have a good champion there. That meant a lot to them. I kind of liked it, too.

Lage: Oh, yes. That's great satisfaction. You mentioned meeting Don Hodel?

Fischer: [laughter] Yes. Hodel was Jim Watts' deputy when I first got to know him. When I was at the California Coastal Commission, working on off-shore oil drilling, Jim Watt and I got to know each other relatively well. Don Hodel was his deputy and then his successor. I had met Don, oh, a couple of weeks into the job. I had been introduced to the Washington press corps with a luncheon that Joanne Hurley had put together, shortly after Don Hodel was pooh-poohing the erosion of the ozone layer and saying, "Ah, we don't need to limit CFC's. Just give everybody sunscreen, a hat, and sunglasses."

Lage: That was an incredible statement.

Fischer: Yes. So, as little party favors for the reporters, we had a Sierra Club hat and a pair of sunglasses. It was interesting to watch even the *Wall Street Journal* reporter walking out of the La Brasserie restaurant on Capitol Hill with a Sierra Club hat and sunglasses on. But anyway, I had an extra set in my briefcase and on the flight home the next day, here was Don Hodel, three seats behind me. And Don knew me. So, I fished into my briefcase and I said, "Hey, Don, here's a hat and sunglasses for you." He says, "Cheap shot, Michael. Cheap shot." Later, on that same flight, I gave him a copy of *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, a sensitive novel about the value of wilderness to the native communities of the Northwest. I hope he read it.

Lage: Did he realize the--?

Fischer: The absurdity of his statement, no. [laughter] No. Anyway, some months later, Don had been in Denver at Rocky Mountain

National Park celebrating the removal of a small dam up in the national park that had served as a part of Denver's water supply. And what was in the newspaper in Denver the next morning but the Earth First action at Hetch Hetchy's O'Shaughnessy Dam in Yosemite where Earth First had painted this big crack on O'Shaughnessy Dam. And Hodel, to his credit, said, "Hey, wait a minute. If a small dam is wrong in Rocky Mountain National Park, then a big dam is wrong in Yosemite National Park. We're going to take that dam out." And so, I immediately jumped onto a--

Lage: Now, did he say this to you?

Fischer: No, he said this to the media. I immediately jumped to the reporters saying, "Right on, Don Hodel! Don's got it right." And I got calls from most of my other Green Group folks saying, "You don't understand. Don Hodel's the enemy. Don't say anything nice about Don Hodel." I said, "I know how much of an enemy he is. But he's right this time and when he's right, let's talk."

Lage: You don't think he was trying to call the bluff?

Fischer: Well, I don't and here's why. Because here we were at Deadhorse Airport (in far northern Alaska), Doug Scott and I, and we'd stayed at the Deadhorse Hotel, which is a story in itself. The next morning we were going to fly out to Kaktovik. Well, the fog was so thick you and I could barely see each other, right. And we found our way through the fog over to the bush pilot's plane and the guy says, "I don't know when it's going to lift, if it ever will lift today. Why don't you all go down and talk to the control tower?"

So, we kind of shuffled down the gravel strip and into the control tower which is three stories up and inside there's one young woman in her twenties. She was the controller, nobody else around, no locked doors or anything. And so here she is talking to an air force captain who's got a flight of U.S. senators. He's circling above the fog. And she's telling him to go back to Fairbanks and he's, "Oh tut-tut, you know, darling." "You're not going to tell me what to do" sort of thing. And during a break she says, "Oh, I think the fog might lift about noon," something like that.

So, we went back to tell the bush pilot. And fifteen minutes later there was just this enormous screaming jet noise and the bush pilot's jaw drops. He says, "My God, I've never seen a large plane land in this kind of fog." The air force pilot with all of his senators aboard was not, dammit, going to go back to Fairbanks just because some little girl told him to.

No sexist heat, you know. In any event, we were relatively close to where the airplane pulls over and parks. And so I sauntered over to see who was going to get off, and here are these senators filing down the stairs. I found myself the first in a receiving line. "Welcome to Alaska, senator. I'm Michael Fischer, of the Sierra Club."

Lage: What had they been doing?

Fischer: Well, they were out to take a look at the Arctic because Don Hodel was trying to get them to approve drilling the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. And I had seen these other cars off to the right. And people came walking up. After about the sixth senator that I was introducing myself to and welcoming to the Arctic, this guy three people down says, "Fischer, what the ---- are you doing here?" It was Don Hodel. It was his party. [laughter]

Lage: He didn't expect to have the other side there.

Fischer: No, he didn't. He didn't. And so Don and I spent about an hour chatting there on the runway after the senators were going off to get their hot shower or whatever, and we were talking about Hetch Hetchy and how that dam had to come down. And he was convinced. He was committed. He knew what he was talking about. He knew why he was talking about it. He knew the history of the Sierra Club and why John Muir had opposed the dam. By this time, he had been briefed. And he-- I was saying, "All right, Don. We're together on this one. We'll work with you." It never did happen.

Lage: Whatever happened with it?

Fischer: Well, Dianne Feinstein was the mayor of San Francisco at the time and her bureaucratic, gray-faced minions convinced her that tearing out O'Shaughnessy Dam would be terrible for the city of San Francisco.

Lage: Well, they would need an alternative water source.

Fischer: They've got it. I mean, there's the Don Pedro Dam just downstream.

Lage: Oh, just below, I see.

Fischer: Not a single drop of water gets lost. I mean, the drop of water rains. It goes into the dam #1; if that dam weren't there, it would go straight to dam #2, from which it's now piped to the city. The only purpose for the O'Shaughnessy Dam [dam #1] is to

generate electricity. And so, yes, the city would lose about $3 million a year. I mean, $3 million a year, not a whole hell of a lot. But that's the only cost to the city. And it's the only potential loss. There is no loss of water. And so for a $3 million a year cash flow into the city, you know, posterity is being denied this beautiful canyon.

Lage: Oh, it'd be such a dramatic, not just a gesture, it would be a dramatic gesture as well as--

Fischer: There's another argument against it, and my daughter gave me this one: you know, the dam has been there, now, for eighty-five years, and the ecosystem has adapted to it. There are peregrine falcons that depend upon fishing in that reservoir. And you take the reservoir out and there will be some species dislocation. So, what's right?

Sturgeon: Could the valley recover if they took the dam down?

Fischer: Over the period of a century or so, it would have a so-called bathtub ring around it. But the National Park Service, and Hodel and I were talking about this, would have a wonderful demonstration of nature's recovery system. I mean it would take decades, but that's something that you could demonstrate. Here's what happened first. Here's what happened second. The climax forest came up and these species were here for the first three decades and now look, they're dying out because in the second three decades, this other species is taking over and here's why. Here's the dynamic, that sort of thing.

Lage: And what a wonderful thing it would have been to have that for the club centennial.

Fischer: The thought occurred. Anyway, it didn't work because the Demos said that they would never have played. Dianne Feinstein convinced the Democratic party that--

Lage: Did you talk to her on the issue?

Fischer: Yes, but she was being the mayor of San Francisco. Dianne is an environmentalist of very recent coinage.

Lage: Do you expect good things from her as senator?

Fischer: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

Lage: Even though she's of recent coinage?

Fischer: That's right. [laughter] She's got an election to win in two years. And if she turns brown, I don't think she's going to do as well.

Fostering the Strength of Chapters and Groups

Lage: Interesting. Okay. We touched on your view about chapters and groups as being sort of the heart of the Sierra Club. But I wondered what you did as executive director in terms of fostering their strength.

Fischer: We talked about the greatest strength and the greatest weakness. And the club has a cadre of real grassroots volunteers, unlike any of the other national environmental organizations, even Audubon Society, I would argue. Audubon Society's chapters are separately incorporated. Sierra Club's are not. But they behave as though they are. And they believe they are, almost in every way except formally. And so the first way I recognized this was while I was fixing the administrative wreckage. I very consciously didn't do that in a way that laid the heavy hand of central control on the chapters, even though there's every reason to do so if you look at it just in administrative terms--concerns about risks, exposure, fiduciary responsibility.

So, the first thing was to restructure the administrative problems of the club in a way that didn't dampen the initiative, the self-startingness of the chapters. And as I was saying, there's every administrative reason to do that. Just as an example, there are seventy chapter staff persons. When I started there were thirty. And the chapter staff growth is the fastest growing component of staff. It's very conceivable that by the year 2000, at least a third if not a half of the total staff members will be staff of the chapters. Well, there is now no one who can deliver equitable treatment to those staff members.

So, chapters and groups. Then during Sue Merrow's presidency, Sue was also very supportive of state-house lobbying. She is a lobbyist for Common Cause in Connecticut, or was anyway. And all of my experience with the Sierra Club and the rest of my career had been here in California. I'd known what the Peninsula Regional Group was doing. When I was at the coastal commission, we'd have the Sierra Club San Diego Chapter representative, Joan Jackson. We'd have the Sierra Club L.A. chapter representative. We'd have the Malibu representative, Dave Brown. We'd have the Big Sur representative, Rod Holmgren, you know. I know these people up and down the coast--we worked hard together on real,

live, screaming environmental protection issues, fighting developers; these were chapter or group activists.

And in Sacramento, it was Sierra Club California. It was a variety of lobbyists for the Sierra Club--John Zierold, Norbert Dall, Mike Paparian. We worked together on issues of environmental substance. That's the only Sierra Club that was visible to me for twenty or thirty years. I'd never heard of Doug Scott. I'd never been part of the Arctic or the Alaska fight. The Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, Superfund legislation; that was not part of my world. And so the appreciation that I had for the power of the Sierra Club was fully developed at the local level. It was that part of the Sierra Club that I felt closest to, most understanding of. Indeed, at the national level, particularly back in D.C., the Sierra Club is pretty staff-dominated, which is entirely the opposite of what it is at the chapter level. And interestingly enough, it is also the opposite of what it is at the national administrative level, where there are seventy administrative volunteer committees with volunteers stuck to every professional staff member like glue.

Lage: So, on the national level, the volunteers focus on administration. And at the local levels, they're--

Fischer: They're the conservation activists. That's where real, live conservation activism occurs in the Sierra Club. So, with Sue Merrow's commitment to that, she and I were a very, very good team. I think we've talked about this in the past. And in that budget year, we put together a program which had $300,000 worth of grants to chapters for state-house lobbying and--

##

Fischer: --for chapter level lobbying coordination.

Lage: Was this, in any respect, to make things more uniform?

Fischer: No, but to provide higher priority and a greater percentage of our resources to chapter lobbying. And I said in many speeches, including to our staff in D.C., "Look, I think we've topped out in national lobbying." After all, we had a staff of almost forty lobbyists there. "Perhaps we've got some growth, but I think only modest in international lobbying. But we haven't topped out in state-house lobbying. In some ways, we'll have to be covering our opponents because the Wise Use Movement and other folks are going to the statehouses. But look, we've just won the Clean Air Act. The next step is implementing the Clean Air Act at the

state level. We've got superfund problems. There are problems at the state level."

Lage: Did the national staff accept this?

Fischer: Not with terrifically good grace, but they accepted it. And in any case, that's the direction that Sue and I were setting in. Richard Cellarius, Sue's successor, did okay on that. Wait a minute, Richard came before Sue.

Lage: Yes. Phil Berry was her successor.

Fischer: That didn't compute for Phil Berry. And also, subsequent to that, we have now had two colloquia where the chapter staff lobbyists get together nationally once a year. And those colloquia are incredibly enriching and stimulating to Bill Holman, the Sierra Club lobbyist in North Carolina for the last ten years. He's basically all alone in North Carolina. And our three-person lobbying staff (led by Ken Kramer) in Austin, basically they're all alone. Ann Waiwode, our lobbyist in Michigan, basically all alone. And there's very little resource, very little system for getting Ann together with Ken together with Bob, and with Mike Paparian in Sacramento, they're the chapter-level deans of our state lobbying program. And we've got thirty-five lobbyists scattered around the country.

Lage: So, they compare notes?

Fischer: They can compare notes, get some attaboys from each other, build up a network of colleagues and peers, kind of like the Group of Ten. And there really isn't anybody at the national level to give solace and comfort and succor to the frontline troops and that's really what the chapter lobbyists are, frontline troops. And they're very much <u>the</u> Sierra Club in their state.

It's only been the last two years that we've had those colloquia. Those are examples of the kind of leadership that both Sue Merrow and I have brought to the club. Just as all politics is local politics, all environmental protection is local environmental protection. And the restoration of the Kissimmee River is something that the national club in fact takes pride in. But hey, nobody other than the Florida chapter and Theresa Woody, our one staffer, who's at a regional sub-office in West Palm, they're the only people in the Sierra Club who really pushed that. And it was successful. They did it under the flag of the Sierra Club. But very little national club resources went to that.

Lage: And who's restoring it?

Fischer: Army Corps of Engineers, over their own objections. They dug the ditch, and now they get to have jobs filling the ditch back up.

Lage: And figuring out how to restore a dug ditch to a river.

Fischer: That's right. And it's a ninety-mile-long dug ditch. So this is a healthy corps of engineers make-work job.

Lage: Now, was part of your job to visit chapters and kind of unify the club in some way?

Fischer: I believed that that was. And that's one of the reasons why I said to myself that I couldn't figure out how to do the job and spend fewer weekends at it. While, yes, there are a lot of meetings that went to national club committees, the planning committee, the finance committee, the development advisory committee, the centennial campaign planning committee, and the board of directors. I had to be at every one of those. You add those up, and that's four, six, four, five, six. Whatever that adds up to, that's twenty-plus weekends a year just for those half-dozen mandatory committees. And then there are oh, another half-dozen national committee meetings to which the executive director has to show up, I would say at least once a year. So, there you've got twenty-five committees. And then, about a half a dozen visits to chapters and groups is what I budgeted each year. And then you've got the trips to D.C.

Lage: Just to meet people or to show the flag, sort of.

Fischer: Well, to give them an inspirational speech so that you don't become an administrative nebbish stuck back in San Francisco and an irrelevant figure to them. Because if you show up at one chapter meeting and give a good speech and fix chili with them and wash the dishes and go for a hike and go to sleep in the same bunk room where everybody else is snoring together, you do that once and the word spreads to the adjacent couple of chapters. And, "Oh, you mean he's a real Joe. Well, what did you think of him?" Or, you know, "What does he think about us?" And you have that sort of thing. So, one of those visits has a ripple effect that, well, it's a corny thing, but it links people to an institution in a personal way.

And, you know, regardless of who the executive director is, that is a gift that you give to those humans who want to think that they're part of a very human institution. It's not an ego aggrandizement. It's a, "You are a facet of an institution and you want to present a human face to that institution."

Lage: What were Sue Merrow's remarks about square dancing in the service of the club?

Fischer: Oh, yeah. [laughter]

Lage: Is this part of the usual party?

Fischer: What did she say? "My Lord, how many miles has this person square-danced in the service of the club." Just square-dancing and being joyful with people and, you know, touching people, young and old, is something that folks don't expect. Or if they do expect it, they miss it if they don't get it. And well, truth is, they didn't get much of that from Mike McCloskey or Doug Wheeler. They got it from Doug Scott. But not from the executive directors in the past and, you know, when you look back to David Brower, then you're looking at a different institution.

Lage: Yes, you didn't have those chapters.

Fischer: The Sierra Club of David Brower's period was a California organization. It was a regional, not a national institution. It had a national reputation, just as Gulf Coast Tenant Organization has a national reputation, but it was a regional organization. Sierra Club now has 60 percent of its members who live east of the Rockies. So, this is not a western organization anymore, but it has the image and reputation of being a western organization. And that's why I went to almost no chapters on the West Coast.

My chapter visits were virtually always in the Midwest and the East. Or, every vacation for the last nine years, Jane and I have gone to the north shore of Kauai. So, since I got this job, we've had a potluck for the Kauai group excom and we've gone on Kauai group hikes almost every year. And the Kauai group excom folks who have gotten to know us as people and as more than Sierra Club folks, but as friends, they send ripples to their colleagues in the rest of Hawaii certainly, but also to other chapters. And to continue to energize that self-starting grassroots power is something that yes, the Sierra Club executive director can do and should do.

Lage: Does it help when you run into problems like you did with the Atlantic Chapter?

Fischer: It does. It does, but just a little. Interestingly enough, I very consciously stayed out of all those problems, just as I very consciously learned early that you don't do windows in the job and you don't do California either because you get stuck to them and you do nothing else. And the Atlantic Chapter problem is very much a tar baby. We ran far too many people into that tar

baby. [laughter] And as I was watching all these people rushing toward it, I said, "Not me."

Lage: Did you let the volunteers take care of that?

Fischer: Yes, yes.

Lage: What was the North Carolina Chapter problem? I just saw a reference to it but I don't know what it is.

Fischer: Oh, oh, oh. That's another Denny Shaffer story. Denny came from the North Carolina Chapter and his personality, which is fault-finding and vicious and angry-- You know, when the North Carolina Chapter wanted to do something their way, they did it their way, even when Denny was treasurer. When he went to North Carolina meetings, he'd put on his North Carolina hat and he'd say, "Screw national." And then he'd come to San Francisco, put on his national's treasurer hat and ignore anything mentioned about North Carolina. But he'd go after any other chapter that tried to do what North Carolina would do and tried to get them to stop it. Right after he stopped being chapter chair, his wife moved up and she became the chapter chair. So, there are some Denny Shaffer problems in North Carolina but beyond Denny there are wonderful people.

Lage: Were the problems issue-related?

Fischer: No, they weren't issue related. They were administrative-related problems. Bill Holman, the chapter lobbyist in North Carolina, is wonderfully effective and is totally unpoisoned by the Denny Shaffer venom. So, North Carolina Chapter friction is all administrative stuff and it's virtually 90 percent Denny Shaffer's stuff.

Lage: Is there anything else about chapters or do we have enough? We've talked about it before.

Fischer: I don't think so. The general aspect of the club is powerful at its chapter level and it doesn't quite have a handle on how to stay good, how to stay stuck together.

Leaving the Club

Lage: I also wanted to get the human side that you brought up. You know, what you had done as a person and why that's important.

Now, let's go on to these other topics on your list, some of which were a mystery to me.

Fischer: The principal reason for my departure from the club is that it has taken, in the five and a half years I've been around, between thirty and thirty-five weekends a year. And Jane and I love each other.

The first time it really came to a head was a year ago last spring. So, gee, almost two years ago now. Janie had accrued a sabbatical. She had been at the San Francisco Foundation for seven years and after that period you get to take two months off plus your own month's vacation. So, she got a three month period of time. And I took a month off, the longest vacation I'd ever taken off in my life, and went to Europe with her for a month.

At the end of that month, we looked at each other and we said, "Every minute has been precious. We have enjoyed it. Boy, do we love each other. Boy, do we enjoy spending time together. And wait a minute, now that this month is gone, when's the next time I'm going to see you?" You know, because we would literally go four and five weekends in a row without seeing each other. And so, well, we've been gone for a month and now I'm booked for the next six weekends. And we said, "Something's wrong. How much longer can we continue to do this?" And the immediate reaction was, "Well, not indefinitely. Maybe another year or two but that's it."

Lage: The weekend time, you didn't get compensatory time off for? Well, she worked, too.

Fischer: Well, sure. She'd worked, yes, until she got chronic fatigue syndrome last February, she was at work. So, yes, after three or four weekends in a row I might even take Monday and Tuesday off. She'd be at work. And it was nice for me. I got to do my laundry, pay my bills. Terrific weekend. And so that didn't help the partnership.

And then that feeling was sealed when we were at Rick Sutherland's memorial service, just up on Mount Tamalpais here. I was chatting quietly with Liz, kind of off by ourselves, and up walked Ed Wayburn. Ed didn't have to say a word before Liz started sobbing. And she leaned over to him and said, "Ed, Rick and I had years planned out together, just like you and Peggy have had, and now we'll never have those years." This little light went on over my head, and I said to myself, "Oh, so I can't plan on Jane being around, or me being around, ten years from now."

So, those two things together really were the reason for my departure from the club. Life is, in fact, too short. That, together with the unfortunate mixture of too much administration and too little substance to the job, some of which was my own fault. And third was just the free-floating anger which makes the job difficult and less pleasant to do, the job as opposed to the position. But the first, really, reason was the time away from Jane.

The catalyzing event which led to the timing of my departure, as we've discussed above, was the less-than-high-regard which Phil Berry and I had for each other and the emotional reaction on the part of a few key board members to my firing of Andrea Bonnette. Months earlier, though, Jane and I had decided that my departure from the club would be sometime between May '93 and May '95. I had told Mike and Maxine McCloskey, but no one else in the club, of that decision. The Berry/Bonnette chemistry simply moved the date up a bit.

1989 Earthquake

Fischer: The big 1989 earthquake is nothing more than just one of the events of my tenure. Yes. That was a big deal. I mean, I was under my desk with the building going kah-bam, kahh-bamm! And the pictures falling off the wall and spraying glass all over me.

Lage: The building had been earthquake-proofed when you moved in.

Fischer: The building had been earthquake-proofed, right. But I literally passed the point of wondering whether the next crash would kill me to knowing that I was dead in the next crash. Then it stopped crashing. But there was about a ten-second period in my life when I knew that I was about to be history. Well, I had never gone over that watershed before. [laughter] It was a remarkable thing. Then immediately getting up, and there were people screaming.

I mean, actually during the quake, Andrea Bonnette, whose office is right next door, was screaming, "Michael, Michael! Oh, my God! What do I do?" So, I got out from under my desk, stood her under the doorway, and then ran back in my office and got under my desk again and then had to go back and take care of her emotional reaction when the shaking stopped.

After it was steadied I ran around, looked and saw cracks in the wall and saw broken windows and I had no idea how stable the

building was. And so I evacuated the building, which in retrospect was an error. But at the time, everybody got out. We didn't know how stable it was. And then I went and checked the whole building for anybody that might be injured. Nobody was injured. Our security guards, who all live in the Tenderloin, all came and they helped monitor the building.

We got a volunteer group of people in the next day because there were all sorts of hazardous situations with bookcases having fallen over and computers having fallen off the desks. If it had taken place fifteen minutes earlier, what was it--three or four minutes after five, as I recall, and most of the secretarial desks were empty. There were at least a half a dozen desks where people would have been either killed or injured. The desk in the library back there in the stacks, a whole wall of books fell onto that desk. That person would have been, if not dead, seriously injured.

Lage: All those should have been bolted.

Fischer: Well, they are all now. That's right. None of them were bolted, even the bookcases in the library itself were not bolted and one of those fell over and the smashed glass cut Phoebe Adams on the leg. She was the only injury. But just getting on the phone, which wasn't easy because the phones were out, and telling Richard Cellarius what had happened, was memorable. He wasn't home so I left a long message on his machine. And then a couple of days later, I saw that he had transcribed it exactly and sent it out through e-mail. So, within moments, the whole club leadership structure had a report from headquarters.

And then getting it all put back together again and doing the earthquake drills. That was nice bonding experience, the people who were courageous and who were committed to the club and who were good teamwork folks, all came together. Though it also gave Sue Merrow, this is back to the power of the chapters, gave her a macabre excuse to say, "You know, if that earthquake had leveled the whole national headquarters and if it had taken another several years to rebuild the national," she said, "it would take years to stamp out the Sierra Club around the country." She said, "It would have gone forward without hardly a hitch." She was probably right. [laughter] Which, yes, helps put you in perspective, right.

Sturgeon: You said it was an error to evacuate the building after the earthquake.

Fischer: Well, the next day, or two days later (I've forgotten, I was there for most of the time), we brought in the structural

engineer who had done the earthquake proofing. He and I went through every corner of every floor together. There wasn't a single thing that had been knocked out of kilter. And he showed me where to look for things that might indicate out of plumb or serious structural flaws.

And so, I saw how sturdy the structure was and that in no place did even the slightest dislocation occur. We were in a very, very safe building. The floors of the building are made by two-by-twelves on edge, slammed together. Used to be an autoparts warehouse. So, the floors are very, very stable platforms. If the pins get knocked out, they're very heavy, and would pancake whatever's in between. So, what that demonstrated to us is that we've got a fort there and instead of going out onto the street where there will be homeless people and extremists or other people who are going to be from damaged buildings that staying put, staying where we are, would have been probably the wiser.

There was one example of a person who tried to get home and couldn't and she came back later that night and the guard wouldn't let her in, which was exactly the wrong decision. So, he forced our staff member to, in essence, be homeless that night whereas had we said, "Well, no, we're in a strong place here. Let's stay here. Let's get the bookcases put together and make a home away from home." And what that then says to the staff members' families is, "You don't hear from them, they're okay." But maybe we had to, because I didn't know that it was stable. I thought it might fail, I mean, many of the windows were broken.

Lage: The advice is to go back there, I think, after the initial--

Fischer: Yes. And the main staircase going down creaked a bit. The damage occurred because it's a brick building and the brick outside walls were all strengthened with the steel stiffening bars. But inside the brick, it's all wooden posts holding up these wooden floors. And in the middle of the building, when we renovated it, we punched a hole for the central staircase. On top of the staircase is located the stacks of the library, those rolling stacks which put this very, very heavy mass right in the middle at the most flexible part of the posts that hold up the floors, which are thinner at the top and down in the basement, they're big, thick things. So, up at the most flexible part of the wood, here's this big mass of the library stacks and that mass basically sloshed back and forth.

Lage: Because it's on wheels, too.

Fischer: That's right. And so that caused lots of cracking in the dry wall along the staircase. When we walked up and down the staircase, the staircase was creaking and cracking and that caused me alarm. So, you know, I didn't know that we were safe and in the absence of that knowledge evacuated everybody. Probably not knowing it, I would have done it again but now that we knew that it was safe, we wouldn't do it again and everybody felt pretty comfortable about the building.

Sturgeon: I heard some comment that when the building was being renovated prior to the Sierra Club moving in, the choice came down to choosing between reinforcing the walls or central air conditioning or something like that and they went with reinforcing the walls which in hindsight was a wise decision apparently.

Fischer: That's right. I heard that rumor, too. And I agree.

Centennial Speech

Fischer: Oh, the centennial speech is also on your list here. That's the speech that I gave which called for a friendly takeover of the Sierra Club by people of color. The Appalachian Trail through-hike, it says, and the centennial speech.

Lage: Oh, I see. Oh, those are two different things.

Fischer: Well, they're related because it was in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, at one of the stops along the Sierra Club Centennial Appalachian Trail through hike that I gave the centennial speech on May 28, 1992. And this is a speech that was intended to give expression to my leadership, for the club to be of service to people of color.

Lage: And you called for a takeover?

Fischer: A friendly takeover of the Sierra Club by people of color, which is a bit of hyperbole, of course, but it's a way of saying, "Hey, folks, we've got open doors. We've got groups in every city, chapters in every state. Three people of color on the toxics committee of the Dallas group takes over the whole Sierra Club. I mean, you don't need to take over the board of directors in order to get the flag to wave over your battle."

Lage: What was the reception?

Fischer: The speech was very, very well accepted by people of color, got a lot of play around the country. I think the speech will have residual impact for some years. [It was reprinted as an appendix to Mark Dowie's *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century*, MIT Press, 1995.] It, once again, reawakened Denny Shaffer's attacks, but by that time his attacks were almost irrelevant. But that speech itself is one of my parting gifts to the club and I would ask that it be appended to this oral history.[1]

Lage: I'd like to have a copy, if you have it or I can get it from Dina.

Current and Future Plans

Fischer: We already talked about my role on other boards. I was on the board of directors of Friends of the Earth, Calvert [Social Investment Fund], and Yosemite Restoration Trust, basically--

Lage: Did the Friends of the Earth board come after David Brower had left the Friends of the Earth?

Fischer: Oh, yes. I had been, for years, on the Oceanic Society Board of Trustees and the Oceanic Society merged with the Environmental Policy Institute, which then merged with Friends of the Earth. And the name that made best sense was Friends of the Earth. I think there might have been three or four staff members from Friends of the Earth and two from Oceanic Society and twenty from EPI, the Environmental Policy Institute. But the name given to the whole merged organization was Friends of the Earth.

Lage: I hadn't realized that had happened.

Fischer: Yes, David was long gone. But we still pay David a pension at Friends of the Earth. I'm heading to D.C. next week, first to go to the Environmental Air Force, on whose advisory council I sit and then to meet with the Friends of the Earth board and then to Harvard University.

Lage: The Environmental Air Force?

Fischer: It's a group of volunteer pilots who fly missions for grassroots environmental organizations, fly them around to look at clear

---

[1]See Appendix.

cuts or to check out wetlands or to get them to meetings that they have to get to.

Lage: Who put that together?

Fischer: Oh, a young man by the name of Alan Brecher out of Philadelphia. The advisory council is John Sawhill of the Nature Conservancy, myself, the president of the Airline Pilots and Owner's Association and the movie star, Christopher Reeves. The four of us are getting together for the first time in Maryland next week.

Lage: And let's go to your future plans, then, to Harvard and--

Fischer: Okay, well, I've got a couple of irons in the fire. Right now, I'm heading to Harvard University where I will be one of six fellows for the spring semester at the Kennedy School of Government's Institute of Politics. These fellows are intended to build the bridge between the rarified halls of academia and the gritty world of political reality.

Lage: And they come from the world of politics?

Fischer: Well, let's see, Lynn Martin, the current secretary of labor will be a fellow with me. Congressmembers Pat Saiki from Hawaii and Jim Moody from Wisconsin, both of whom ran for the senate and lost. The current, well, I say current, I mean as of today, the former under secretary of the treasury, Paul Douglass, I think. And finally Lee Daniels, an African-American reporter from the New York Times. That's the six of us. We have a little hallway with six offices, which is called Fellows Row. And teach a course once a week--

Lage: Your own course, not together?

Fischer: Yes, right. And mine will be on environmental justice. And two dinners a week and one class a week and the rest of the time is my own to take classes, to think, to dream, to exercise, whatever.

Lage: Is this something you apply for?

Fischer: No, you get invited to do it. And I was delighted to be invited. And while I'm there, I'll be seeking to get the position of regional administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. It's the only Clinton administration job that I'm interested in because Janie and I are committed to living here in the Bay Area.

Lage: And how do you seek that job?

Fischer: I'm delighted not to be part of the feeding frenzy for jobs inside the Beltway. One seeks the job by being sponsored by political leaders. Barbara Boxer and Nancy Pelosi and Dianne Feinstein and George Miller have all sponsored my candidacy. You also seek it by having been active in the campaign. I was one of the founders of Environmentalists for Clinton/Gore and I gave surrogate speeches for the candidates in five different states.

Jane and I also made the largest political contribution of our lives, $1,000, to the campaign. We made the basic error, however, of even though it was sent with a letter from me and I sent it to Brookes Yeager [Sierra Club national lobbyist on public lands 1980s to 1991], who was taking a leave from Audubon Society, to handcarry it to make sure that they knew that I had made the contribution--but the check that we wrote it on had Jane's name listed first. So, all of the thank you's and all the invitations to the inauguration and all the requests for more money have come to Jane.

Lage: Oh, no. [laughter]

Fischer: Which is just fine.

Lage: Well, she's not seeking the job.

Fischer: No, that's true. That's true. I have to somehow figure out a way of making sure--

Lage: So, the job's a political appointment?

Fischer: That's right. That's right. It's really the senior political appointment position on the West Coast. There are no regional jobs for the Interior Department out here other than the western regional representative for the secretary of interior which has no authority. It's basically a figurehead position. The regional administrator of EPA does have independent authority and that area covers Nevada, Arizona, California, and the whole Pacific Basin.

Lage: Sounds great.

Fischer: Well, particularly with my commitment to environmental justice. It's a position which can shift the priority of the agency to focus on inequality, inequity. So, if that doesn't happen, and it might not, who knows--I don't know Carol Browner, the new EPA administrator. And they are, rightfully, seeking diversity in their appointments.

##

Fischer: If that position doesn't work out, I am working with a number of foundations to secure a series of grants to work with the Natural Resources Defense Council in their San Francisco office. I plan to be working on ocean and coastal matters--much of my career has been invested in that--and in environmental justice as well as in western land-use planning, the Sierra, earth management.

Lage: You have a lot of options.

Fischer: I think so. I think so. I'm feeling very comfortable. This is the first time since I was eleven years old that I'm unemployed. It feels wonderful. Mom made me get a job on my twelfth birthday to bring money into the house. I've never not had a job since then, even all the way through college. So, yes, it's terrific. I recommend it. Save up a little money first.

Lage: Well, it might happen, given the university's budget problems.

Fischer: That's right. Save up some money if you can and then get invited by Harvard. I mean, one of the current fellows at Harvard said, "Michael, no heavy lifting in this job. And they even pay you for it." It'll be fun.

Lage: It sounds so. The only bad part seems to be being back there and being away from Jane.

Fischer: Away from Jane-- a) away from Jane, and b) Boston in the winter time.

Lage: But you'll be there in the spring, too.

Fischer: Yes, that's true. Thank you very much for all the time.

Lage: Thank you. This has been wonderful.

Fischer: Well, I'm not sure "wonderful" is the reaction most club readers would use, but at least it's a little tiny window, from one person's perspective, into a piece of the history of the club.

Lage: Yes, and I think to get you when it's fresh is very important.

Lage: [The final question was added during the editing process.] Perhaps you should include an addendum about your current position, since a couple of years have passed since we recorded this.

Fischer The Harvard semester ended in May 1993, after a cumulative snowfall of six feet, tremendous intellectual stimulation, and the expenditure of many frequent flier miles to travel home every

other week. The EPA job did not, thankfully, materialize. With a grant from the Gerbode Foundation, I spent the rest of 1993 as a senior consultant at NRDC's San Francisco office, helping to fashion a national campaign to reform the management of America's national forests. I remain a pro-bono senior advisor to NRDC, even now. In early 1994, I returned to the protection of California's coastal resources as executive director of the Coastal Conservancy, a sister state agency to the coastal commission. Now beginning my third year there, I have found the perfect mix of high satisfaction (with a staff of fifty, we buy, develop and restore coastal land, urban and rural) and low stress (the board of seven members truly like each other and have an explicit rule: never embarrass the staff). Incredible. Great. The way it should be. And Jane and I spend almost every weekend together. When I asked her, last week, what my departure from the club meant to her she said, "We no longer have to spend so much energy to separate ourselves from the animosity and turmoil of the club so that when we're together, we're really together."

It was a fantastic honor to have held the position for five and a half years. I'm proud and thrilled to have been at the club--and pleased to be there no longer. -- MLF, January 1996.

TAPE GUIDE--Michael L. Fischer

Interview 1: November 6, 1992	
Tape 1, Side A	1
Tape 1, Side B	15
Tape 2, Side A	27
Tape 2, Side B	40
Interview 2: November 17, 1992	
Tape 3, Side A	46
Tape 3, Side B	56
Tape 4, Side A	68
Tape 4, Side B not recorded	
Interview 3: January 14, 1993	
Tape 5, Side A	79
Tape 5, Side B	90
Tape 6, Side A	101
Tape 6, Side B not recorded	
Interview 4: January 21, 1993	
Tape 7, Side A	111
Tape 7, Side B	124
Tape 8, Side A	135
Tape 8, Side B	147
Tape 9, Side A	159
Tape 9, Side B not recorded	

APPENDICES

A. Evaluation Criteria for Executive Director, July 1987 163
B. 1990 Accomplishments 168
C. Centennial Address, Harpers Ferry, May 28, 1992 169
D. Outgoing Remarks to the Board of Directors, November 14, 1992 178
E. Sierra Club Oral History Series List 182

SIERRA CLUB

730 Polk Street San Francisco, California 94109 415 · 776 · 2211

Appendix A: Evaluation Criteria for Executive Director, 1987

July 7, 1987

Memorandum

To: Larry Downing

From: Michael Fischer

Subject: Evaluation Criteria

Attached is a typed (but not rewritten) version of the first-cut evaluation criteria which we discussed at the Executive Committee meeting in Vail.

Could you take a crack at inventing intermediate, more measurable checkpoints for some of the criteria? I'll do so, as well, and we can talk about it in North Carolina...

Thanks very much for your early, sensitive leadership on this important matter; I certainly feel good about it.

Oh, by the way; I did tell Mike that it's your intention to set aside a day on either side of the February Board meeting for the first evaluation, using the criteria...

Talk to you soon.

cc: Executive Committee

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL CRITERIA

1. COMMUNICATION WITH BOARD

- o general rule: don't lose touch; carry out, but don't set policy or box Board in. Use initiative, imagination in carrying out policy, though
- o talk regularly with President; whenever major decisions come up, roughly weekly check-in
- o on budget, talk regularly with Treasurer
- o seek ways to use Board members, especially President, as national spokespersons
- o send brief monthly status memos to Board members, notes/copies of relevant materials for your information
- o visit with Board members when travel takes me to their locales
- o closely work with President on meeting agendas; preparation of follow-up/action lists at Board/committee meetings; demonstrated followthrough after meetings
- o help select, work with Board consultant for Board development (fundraising, budget, employer, decision-maker)

2. STAFF ADMINISTRATION

- o establish an atmosphere and practice of senior staff collegiality; regular information exchange and shared decision-making
- o evaluate, seek organizational management improvements
- o institute and regularly maintain senior staff performance evaluations
- o initiate management training, especially at mid level; take steps to build the management "bench" in each unit; administrative assistance in each department
- o maintain regular, open, supportive communication with all staff through regular meetings, receptivity to individual staff notes and meetings, trusting communication with steward Do this in a way which does not confuse or undercut senior/mi management

- o delegate responsibility to Department Heads, but develop relationships so neither Board nor I am surprised by problems
- o establish atmosphere, expectation of interoffice communication, trust, interdependence, support
- o establish improvements in information resource management
- o establish new system for coordinating, supervising, monitoring the internal legal affairs of the Club
- o develop good working relationship with Mike - view him as a resource on club history, staff management
- o bring field office staff to Board meetings, coordinate their work better with overall priorities
- o seek to involve more volunteers in the work of each department (in the office)

3. FISCAL MANAGEMENT

- o prepare budget well, in timely fashion
- o constantly seek and undertake new fundraising initiatives
- o working with Development Director, develop personal relationships with selected major donors and foundation officers
- o communicate to entire staff the importance of fiscal conservatism and stewardship
- o closely monitor income and expenditures; working with administrative office, keep Treasurer closely apprised
- o evaluate, seek and secure improvements to accounting and budget-setting processes for next year's (not this year's) budget
- o prepare for new administrative officer

4. INTERORGANIZATIONAL COORDINATION

- o establish close, personal working relationships with Rick and Steve. Involve them as quasi-senior staff as appropriate. The most important vehicle for this joint work will be the Centennial campaign

- o consult with them regularly on major Club decisions and planning objectives

- o work with Mike to continue - and build on - Group of Ten relationships, joint action to improve effectiveness of our conservation campaigns

5. LONG-RANGE PLANNING

- o work directly with Planning Committee and VP for Planning to establish our ongoing strategic planning process

  - o strategic plan to be linked to Centennial campaign case statement

  - o five-year plan to drive annual budgets, make annual process less onerous

  - o plan to be related to membership development
    - o both to develop minority/geographical/size-of-membership objectives
    - o as well as to examine institutional ability to respond to/support changing membership

  - o ditto financial, information resources

  - o who speaks for Club? how to get better accounting of chapter money. More specific interim tasks needed here (need to get to know Pat Dunbar)

6. COMMUNICATION WITH MEMBERS, CHAPTERS, COMMITTEES

- o establish a protocol with Sierra/California to have high priority, working with Board and staff task force

- o attend Chapter functions as time is available without inordinate travel (expect presence in the office about 2/3-3/4 of the time, travel away from home no more than 1/4 of weekends)
  Work with President and field office staff program for most effective Chapter meeting attendance
  Meet especially with Bay Chapter
  Board members to make clear that their instructions to MLF are to stay home; so Chapters shouldn't expect frequent visit
  Oversee those who communicate with Chapters to insure clear, timely, effective written communication
  Evaluate need for pulp house organ newsletter

- o consult regularly with Council, issue committees

7. PUBLIC SPOKESPERSONSHIPS

- o coordinate with President, Chairman on a regular basis and to share that responsibility with volunteers (Speakers Bureau approach?)
- o work closely with Public Affairs, Conservation Director to assure that I am appropriate speaker, and that Club policy fully supports intended statements
- o seek improvements in determining, recording and communicating clear policy statements on a variety of subjects

8. CONSERVATION PROGRAM AND CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

- o for the first year or so, principal attention should be given to internal administration (But don't hold back if instruction says yes or no)
- o maintain close communication with Conservation Director, Public Affairs Director to remain fully informed on conservation campaign
- o be prepared to be credible spokesperson for Club positions in media, speeches and on Capitol Hill
- o in second and succeeding years, play a stronger role in helping to determine conservation priorities, campaign strategies
- o regularly communicate with VP for Conservation
- o assume that all administrative decisions have a direct result on improving the direct or indirect support to the conservation program (does it make more pencils?)

Appendix B: 1990 Accomplishments

MEMORANDUM

TO: Executive Committee

FROM: Michael Fischer

ABOUT: 1990 Accomplishments

Sorry that this is so late, and so brief. During 1990, I:

1. Reorganized the management structure, and made it work under somewhat adverse conditions, especially involving Doug's and Marianne's departures.

2. Brought the fy'90 budget in with the expected surplus, and built the fy'91 budget in close collaboration with the FinCom and Board--with several new programs, especially the "new strategic corner" we've turned: statehouse lobbying.

3. Kept on top of the Legal Defense Fund negotiations, having brought Mel Owen into the situation.

4. Maintained, with Suem, the current projects list.

5. Kept the strategic planning effort stumbling along.

6. Built good teamwork relationship, I think, with Suem--starting with a Brian O'Connell luncheon, ASAE training session.

7. Exercised leadership in the Group of Ten which resulted in a less formal, more inclusive structure.

8. Continued leadership (with a different strategic approach) in the ethnic diversity field.

9. Helped organize and pull off a good showing in Houston at the G-7 Economic Summit.

10. Held two retreats with Mike, established an almost bi-weekly schedule of 'phone meetings.

11. Played a key role in the development of our corporate fundraising policy under adverse conditions.

12. Continued to develop credibility and respect from our DC staff (and with Senators and Congressmembers) as I worked closely with them on Calif Desert, Arctic, Brian bill.

13. Prepared more than a dozen written reports to Directors, maintained a close adherence to Board policy and style.

14. Delivered 16 speeches, four of them major, broadcast events (e.g., Commonwealth Club, Brown Univ, World Affairs Council) and four at Chapter events (Florida, Rocky Mtn,So/NoCarolina,Ozark).

6/1/92

Appendix C

CENTENNIAL ADDRESS
MICHAEL L. FISCHER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
SIERRA CLUB
MAY 28, 1992
HARPERS FERRY, WEST VIRGINA

I. Introduction

Today, we celebrate an anniversary during a time of unprecedented environmental threat. The urgency of our mission has never been greater than during this decade of the 1990's. This is a time for celebration, yes! But also a time for anger, for worry, for hope.

We are marking ten decades of activism and sacrifice, **one hundred years** of struggle, a centennial of service to the highest end we recognize. And, we're looking forward to beginning our second century by building a new (long-overdue) partnership, which I will describe.

Before we get to our celebration, I want to talk about something that happened at the very creation of the United States that places our fight in context. I want to talk about two tragic omissions made by Thomas Jefferson when he wrote the Declaration of Independence: one that has made the environmental struggle necessary; and another that will probably shape its future for at least the next one hundred years.

The first omission is in the category of what Jefferson called "unalienable rights." Mr. Jefferson lived in a world that seemed divinely constructed to support and sustain human beings. It was impossible for him to imagine—as it was impossible for generations as recent as that of our parents to imagine—a world in which the quotidian human routines of war, settlement, business, and daily life could threaten the living balance of an entire planet.

So in his magnificent catalog of unalienable rights we find, to our abiding sorrow, no mention whatsoever of the right to breathe clean air; or the right to drink pure water; or the right to live unassailed by toxins, unbombarded by nuclear radiation, unsuffocated by poisonous atmospheres, unexposed to the ferocious and unfiltered energies of Space, unthreatened by global changes in climate. He included none of these rights, and we have lived long enough to regret it.

His second omission is in the category of "self-evident truths," and here Jefferson didn't miss by much. He wrote that "all Men are created equal," very much in the Enlightenment's mainstream. But he neglected to specify exactly who these "Men" (and women, Tom?) were, thus leaving the field open for those who would construe, assert, and ultimately be willing to die for the belief that the Men

Gathered here today, metaphorically lit by the one-month-old flames of South Central Los Angeles—and seeing in our mind's eye the burning buildings and violence of Watts in 1965, Newark in 1968, Miami in 1980, and all the other times people of color rose up in despair against a system which crushes them—we can see with unusual clarity the price we have paid for his lack of specificity.

But what do these omissions have to do with the centennial of the Sierra Club?

The answer is "Everything." They define its past and its future.

II. Environmentalism and the First Omission

The first omission can be regarded as the headwaters of the environmental movement. It made environmentalism necessary. Had the right to a clean biosphere been mentioned in the Declaration, it might have been given the same Constitutional protections now accorded the right to bear arms, the right not to quarter troops in your home, and other such niceties. Had it been included in the Declaration, John Muir and his friends would never have had to sit down in a San Francisco office on May 28th, 1892—one hundred years ago today—to draft and sign the articles founding the Sierra Club.

But environmental rights were not included. And John Muir, and his friends, and all of his spiritual descendants have been forced to act to remedy that omission. Their first fight was defeating a proposed reduction of Yosemite National Park.

Since that effort, the club has fought a One Hundred Years War for responsible stewardship of our planet, a fight whose consequences will forever outweigh those of the one-hundred-year squabble between England and France in the fourteenth century. We have won some brilliant victories. We have suffered painful defeats. But we have never given in to the forces of those who worship growth, and who seem to regard the Earth as little more than a platform for the display of ever-larger and more destructive forms of commercial solipsism:

* In 1905, we fought to get Yosemite returned to federal management, and won.

* In 1911, we fought the battle to establish the Devil's Postpile National Monument, and won.

* In 1923, we were instrumental in preventing the Kings River in the Sierra Nevada from being dammed.

* In 1935, we fought to establish King's Canyon National Park, an effort successfully concluded five years later.

* In 1948, we helped defeat a dam that would have flooded 20,000 acres of Glacier National Park.

* In 1951, we introduced the concept of federal legislative protection for wilderness areas, a powerful weapon that we and many other conservation groups have used to tremendous effect.

* In 1963, we initiated the fight to keep federal agencies from damming and flooding parts of the Grand Canyon.

* From the Yazoo River in Mississippi, to the Oachita National Forest in Arkansas, to the Everglades to the Ardiondacks; the Sierra Club has been there, and is there now.

* In 1973, we launched the campaign that successfully defended the Clean Air Act from the ravages of the auto industry.

* In 1980, we won the fight to establish the "Superfund" law designed to help clean up toxic waste.

* And in 1991, in concert with the Gwichin people, we led the effort to defeat the Johnston-Wallop Energy Bill, the effort of our self-proclaimed "environmental president" and his Bronze-Age advisers to gut the Clean Air Act, resuscitate nuclear power, destroy the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and sacrifice large portions of our riparian lands. All to serve the short-term interests of those who today manipulate our political and economic systems, to the detriment of our children--our future.

Every decade of our first hundred years has seen conservation victories of national significance. And it is time to celebrate! But the price of environmental quality is eternal vigilance, so the past is but prologue.

III. Civil Rights and the Second Omission

Just as the first of Mr. Jefferson's omissions was the headwaters of the environmental movement, the second of his tragic omissions can be regarded as the headwaters of the civil rights movement.

It is appropriate that we discuss racism and civil rights here today for two reasons. First, because it was within a few miles of this place, 133 years ago, that Old Osawatamie Brown struck his famous blow for his self-evident truth.

When John Brown and his 22-man party attacked the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, his immediate goal was to equip an army of liberation. But this raid, put down by Colonel Robert E. Lee, precipitated an avalanche of blood and iron, a civil war, fought ultimately to rectify Mr. Jefferson's second omission—to include people who are not white in the Declaration's definition of humankind.

Ever since the ratification of the 13th amendment in 1865, the civil rights movement has fought and won its battles by itself. The Civil Rights Act was passed by a shaken Congress in 1866. The NAACP won its great triumph in Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954. That was followed by passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1964, and the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission soon thereafter. All of this happened with very little assistance from nongovernmental organizations concerned with other social issues.

But by many measures, the civil rights envisioned by Jefferson remain denied to many Americans today. This certainly holds true if you think in terms of the environmental rights which we at the Sierra Club have been fighting to protect these last 100 years.

So let's review where we are. We have seen that America has suffered from two omissions from the Declaration of Independence, and that the two omissions have given rise to two major grass-roots movements in the 19th and 20th centuries. But until now, these two movements have been almost entirely separate – like two neighboring rivers draining separate watersheds.

And this brings us to the second reason racism and civil rights concern us today. The environmental movement and the civil rights movement have so far been effective acting alone. But in the future, it will be impossible for either movement to get as much done separately as they could if we joined forces.

Let the word go forth from this time, from this place: **My purpose in being here on this Centennial Day is to invite a friendly takeover of the Sierra Club by people of color.**

IV. Identity of Interest

Why should the Sierra Club want such a takeover? And why should people of color be interested in executing it?

The answers to these two questions are written on the landscapes of poverty in every region of this country and around the world. The fact is that while the rich are busy creating the poisonous byproducts of our economic system, the poor have to live submerged in them. The world's high-risk toxic environments are not in Georgetown, or Greenwich, or Malibu. They are in the inner cities, or in the towns of where poor, disenfranchised people of color live. On the South Side of Chicago. In Martinez, California. In Harlem. On the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. In the Liberty City section of Miami. In East St. Louis. In West Dallas. In Cancer Alley, between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

* Living near major highway corridors in inner cities has been found to elevate the levels of lead in the bloodstream. Who lives near those corridors?

* Working in fields where pesticide use is high significantly increases the risk of systemic poisoning for farm workers. Who works in those fields?

* Living in old-line manufacturing zones means living in an atmosphere polluted by toxic waste incinerators, coal-burning power plants, chemical plants, and other facilities too dirty or dangerous to be placed in the suburbs. Who lives in those zones?

People of color do. People of color bear a disproportionately large share of the economy's toxic burden. Sixty percent of African American and Latino populations in the U.S. live in communities with one or more toxic waste sites. Sixty percent of the country's largest commercial hazardous waste landfills are situated in predominantly black or Latino neighborhoods.

Yet these same people reap a tiny share of whatever benefits the economy might offer.

This is where the Sierra Club and the civil rights movement share an absolute identity of interest. We have dedicated ourselves to fighting the degradation of the environment that will kill us all if it proceeds at the rate advocated by the "What, Me Worry?" Republican Right. The civil rights movement has dedicated itself to fighting the systemic injustice suffered by people of color every day of their lives.

The point is this: If people of color bear the brunt of our economy's poisons, what is that but just another form of injustice, of racism? In fact, we see in the lives of the nation's poor the final confluence of racial injustice and environmental degradation to create environmental injustice. **And I believe the struggle for environmental justice in this country and around the globe must be the primary goal of the Sierra Club during its second century.**

This is the battleground where the environmental movement and the civil rights movement can join forces. Must join forces, really. Both groups are being compelled by events to act. People of color must adopt the environmental agenda to survive. The Sierra Club must embrace multiculturalism. **We have nothing at stake but our moral and ethical integrity.**

The Club exists to influence public policy. This is where our enlightened self-interest comes in. In the United States, the decision-making bodies (city councils, the courts, state legislatures, Congress) are, thank God, becoming more ethnically diverse. In the rest of the world, where all of us have a stake in the development options they choose, they are, by definition, culturally and racially diverse.

So we are faced with a choice: Will we remain a middle-class group of backpackers, overwhelmingly white in membership, program, and agenda—and thus condemn ourselves to losing influence in an increasingly multicultural country? Or will we be of service to, of relevance to people of color, combine forces, and strengthen our efforts at our chapter and group level, especially, in the localities where the environmental and civil rights battles are going to be lost or won?

We must build that bridge now. We must refuse to become irrelevant.

I should note that, as we are attempting to build the bridge, others with apparently cynical and sinister purpose, are attempting to tear it down. Just as campaign operatives identified Willie Horton as a target for dividing America, just as operatives identified the Murphy Brown character as opportunity for a cheap shot at women, an EPA political appointee in February identified a draft EPA report on environmental equity as an opportunity to divide traditional environmental organizations from the emerging movement for environmental justice, to split off the constituencies into rival camps. We all quickly saw through this ploy and called a halt to this destructive venture.

Two weeks ago the President, himself, took a whack at the bridge between environmentalists and our polluted communities when he ordered the Environmental Protection Agency to publish an illegal regulation for states' programs to issue air pollution permits. The regulation precludes the full public participation envisioned by Congress in the all-important process of getting a permit, and it allows industry to essentially permit themselves under the guise of "minor permit adjustments".

Now where are these self-permitted polluting facilities disproportionately located? In what neighborhoods will the permits issued with virtually no public comment be clustered? Communities of color, of course: already overly polluted, already disenfranchised and cut out of the debate in so many ways. Insult upon insult.

Again, the Sierra Club joins communities of color in exposing and fighting this cynical manipulation of public policy. Gutting clean air permits that won't go into effect for several years will do nothing for the pre-election economy. In fact, planning for tight permits would fuel the economies of industrial communities.

Tight permits can be used to produce permanent, good jobs in industrial communities in open debate and consensus-building about how to sustain productive, but clean industrial economies. This process will attract capital to the facilities and nearby service providers. It will also curtail human suffering, health damage and health care costs. I know this from my discussions with union leaders and community activists in Louisiana's Cancer Alley. I say that we must join with communities of color to use environmental protection as a vital step in industrial and economic revitalization.

I recently attended one of the plenary sessions of the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, organized by Reverend Ben Chavis -- and that really opened my eyes. I was in a room full of 600 environmentalists, all of them informed, hardworking, courageous, and committed, and fewer than 100 of us white. I was elated, inspired and moved by the experience. But how are we going to work together effectively if in the environmental movement we do not broaden our own membership? It's good news to learn that 7% of our members tell us that they are people of color. It's better news to learn that 12% of our members under 30 years old are people of color. But, there is more, much more, that we must do.

Last year, I spoke to Qu Geping, China's EPA administrator, about his concerns about the future. He spoke of the fact that his country's energy supply is soft coal, and that the program of modernization will have refrigerators in most Chinese households by the middle of the next century. He clearly sees the potential impact on China's future of these two facts, saying simply: "I fear for my children. Regardless of what the developed nations do to limit greenhouse gases, I fear for my children."

We know some of the steps Mr. Qu should take if he wants to avert this catastrophe. But China is a culture radically different from our own. How are we going to have any influence on them if we have not demonstrated a commitment to multiculturalism within our own organization?

The need to retain our credibility and expand our influence in a diverse world is behind the Sierra Club's Ethnic and Cultural Diversity Initiative, an effort to:

* Increase the ethnic and cultural diversity among our leaders, members, and volunteers;

* Increase the ethnic and cultural diversity of our staff and independent contractors; and

* Increase Sierra Club interaction with ethnically diverse groups on environmental issues;

As part of that effort, we have also used these criteria to decide whether to fund 50 grant requests from Sierra Club chapters and groups for environmental outreach programs. Among the programs funded were:

- Hiring a person of color as a grassroots organizer in the South, which has become an wasteland where the well being of the poor and people of color is subordinated to the demands of business and the laxity of local governments;

- Working with the Coalition Against Childhood Lead Poisoning in Baltimore, where one-half of the children of color screened for lead poisoning had elevated lead levels. This grant will be used to create educational materials, develop a media campaign, and hire an organizer to keep the community aware of the dangers of lead.

- Convening an agenda-setting meeting of our Great Lakes volunteer and staff leaders with Native American environmental leaders from across the ecosystem. Indian people, who hunt and fish for much of their food are particularly at risk to toxics. In cooperation with Indian leaders, we'll survey the tribes to identify specific toxics issues and then develop a realistic, cooperative plan to tackle them, learning across cultures as we do.

The grants and the diversity initiative will begin the effort. But the battle for environmental justice will be fought and won at the local level. And the Sierra Club is absolutely the best-positioned organization to influence those decisions.

We have in existence now 425 local chapters and groups in almost every corner of this country. Every one of them can begin to establish coalitions and networks with local advocacy groups for people of color when decisions affecting local environments come before city councils and county boards of supervisors. Every one of them has an open membership policy, and every one of them welcomes new volunteer activists. **This is where the friendly takeover I call for can best take place.** The power, the commitment, the courage, the effectiveness, the history of victories which Sierra Club chapters and groups have proudly built over the decades is ready for expanded service.

In other words, the infrastructure is already in place. We (in both movements) just have to recognize the need to use it.

V. Conclusion

From Thomas Jefferson's two omissions 216 years ago, from those two seemingly insignificant sources, two major grass-roots movements have sprung like two long and powerful, separate rivers. Our histories have been impressive; but the future needs us like never before.

And now those two rivers are flowing together, like the Shenandoah and the Potomac Rivers, just over that ridge here at Harpers Ferry, are joining forces like the streams of Yosemite described so beautifully by John Muir:

> It seems strange that visitors to Yosemite should be so little influenced by its novel grandeur, as if their eyes were bandaged and their ears stopped. Most of those I saw yesterday were looking down as if wholly unconscious of anything going on about them, while the sublime rocks were trembling with the tones of the mighty chanting congregation of waters gathered from all the mountains round about, making music that might draw angels out of heaven.

The music we make as we join forces may not draw angels out of heaven. But it may draw people out of their complacency, and cause them to see what we have done–cynically or unintentionally–to communities of color across our land. It may cause people to rise up and demand justice–environmental justice–for all.

I hope it does. The vibrant first century of the Sierra Club is now ended, and the second century beckons us—all of us. There is no more time to wait. It's time for our proud music together to begin in earnest.

Let's all sing, together, now:

John Brown's body lies amouldering in the grave,
John Brown's body lies amouldering in the grave,
John Brown's body lies amouldering in the grave,
but his soul goes marching on.

Thank you very much.

-- end --

Appendix D

REMARKS OF

MICHAEL L. FISCHER

OUTGOING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

TO THE

SIERRA CLUB BOARD OF DIRECTORS

NOVEMBER 14, 1992

This is a satisfying day for me, as I look at my friend Carl Pope, newly-seated in the executive director's chair, and as I look back over the 5 1/2 years since you asked me to serve in that same position.

The Sierra Club is a proud, powerful and effective institution; even the newly-elected President of the United States knows that fact first-hand. Since 1987, when I joined your team, it has grown quickly and well--from 365,000 members to over 600,000. Our budget has grown from $24 million to $39 million, and our endowment fund has grown almost 5 times, to almost $10 million. We are, in every way, stronger now than we were five years ago. I'm proud of that, and you should be, too; it hasn't happened by accident.

My service to you has included managerial and financial accomplishments which are too dull to list, but which were not without their excitement at the time. The Centennial Campaign has been successfully launched, and new professionalism has been brought to our business management. We have successfully passed through several critical transition zones as we have expanded our size, scope and mission. Indeed, this passing of the baton to Carl is another such transition, and we can all be pleased with its success.

I came to the Club with a firm, abiding, even spiritual love for the beauty of our planet, and was deeply thrilled by the brief trip which Doug Scott, Tim Mahoney and I took to the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. I threw myself into the Congressional lobbying effort to protect that magnificent place with love and vigor, and I'd like to think that I have played a small but effective part in that so-far successful battle.

Just after dawn on a crisp winter morning several years ago, led by Elden Hughes, I slid headfirst through a rock opening--made smooth by centuries of similar personal ceremonies--into Womb

Rock, the center of the vernal rebirth tradition of the Mohave people. After scores of lobbying visits I have made over the years (added to thousands of lobbying contacts by Club volunteers), and with our two new Club-endorsed Senators from California, we are now in a position to realize those three new national parks in the California Desert.

Three days ago, as Senator Dianne Feinstein and I were warmly embracing just after her oath of office ceremony, I spoke to her of the Desert--and she replied that, yes, she had a meeting with Senator Cranston scheduled for Thursday, and was ready to move quickly. This nascent victory is another on the list of the "but for the Sierra Club, this gift to the future would not have been made". Thank you for giving me the position to play a part in this historic event. Someday, when it comes time to dedicate the equivalent of the Redwood Volunteers Grove, as we did in Redwood National Park last month, I hope you'll count me among the hundreds of Sierra Club desert rats who worked to protect it.

My greatest enjoyment and satisfaction has come from dozens of visits I've made to chapter and group events, for that's where the true power and majesty of the Club is to be found--and where some of my closest friendships have been built. That's what Sue Merrow noticed in Bangor, Maine, two months ago, when she commented, "my lord, how many miles has this man squaredanced in the service of the Club?"

Squaredancing is, of course, a metaphor for the kind of joyful work which national and grassroots Clubbers have to do together. And this kind of dance step is the way we assure close collaboration on the Yazoo, the Kissimmee, Missouri streams, the West Dallas lead slag problem, the Mississippi Alliance, the Utah Symphony. It also creates the mutual trust which makes it possible for volunteers to seek the assistance of the executive office to solve the inevitable internal legal or fiscal problems which crop up to bedevil chapter activists.

Carl, I urge you to take up that hillbilly beat--get to some of the Dallas Group's monthly meetings and hike the Hanalei Stream with the Kaua'i Group Excom.

In the last five years, the national Club has directed a significantly greater proportion of its resources to state-level conservation and to the service of our chapters and groups. Rosemary Carroll has diverted Development Department resources to increase Chapter fundraising capacity. The 1993 budget before you this weekend, the sixth balanced budget I've prepared for you, adds chapter-serving staff to the Outings and Administrative Departments.

Bruce Hamilton and Paula Carrell have provided important leadership: the mission of the field network has been explicitly

modified to redirect their considerable talents to issues beyond the Beltway. I hope that this trend continues, and that the state colloquia become much more significant events in the life of all Club leaders--as only one example. As Directors, you should skip other commitments and attend this event, if you're not already committed to attend the New Orleans People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit II, scheduled for the same weekend.

On that note, it is with great personal satisfaction that I have seen the courageous leadership of local volunteers, together with chapter and field staffs, make the Sierra Club the single national environmental organization which has dramatically redirected its program to be of service to communities of color. We have begun a new chapter in the Club's history, have opened up our battlelines on many new fronts, and have recognized the importance--and value--of building new alliances with the hundreds of grassroots environmental organizations in the African-American, Native American, Latino and Asian communities. We have only just begun, however; much, much more lies ahead.

As I said, I came to the Club with a love for the earth's beauty, as first articulated for me by **This is the American Earth** in 1960, and I leave with that love fully intact. But my years at the Club have also given me a new life-commitment: to the cause of environmental justice. Dan Wiess has been successful in leading me to understand the critical responsibility we have to deliver an unpoisoned life to our children. So I leave with a broader commitment to the protection of this planet; I expect to devote much of my remaining environmental career to the search for environmental justice.

As I leave, I urge my friends in the Club to carry on with three specific tasks to which I have devoted my time here: **first,** become active accomplices in the effort to involve people of color who share that commitment to environmental justice in the work of the Club; **second,** in everything you do, project the image and reality of an organization which is aggressive, insistent, demanding and **never satisfied;** and **third,** focus more of the skill, time, attention and resources on our statehouse legislative program. Much of the action of the next decade, at least, will be there as we go into combat with the wise users, and as we implement the Clean Air Act and other national victories we have won, and will win. This state-level effort must be done without, of course, diminishing our national efforts, now that it's harvest time in DC.

To you Directors, I have a final--and very urgent--request: bend much more of your efforts to the support, motivation and encouragement of your staff. Yes, this is a volunteer organization, and it must always be so. But the power of volunteer leaders is magnified by a loyal, happy, hardworking,

courageous and committed staff. The Club has the best staff imaginable. It is essential that you support, through Carl, the needs of your staff. **Whatever** he says is necessary to build staff pride, support him. Send that new, historic, clear signal, and you will find the Club a stronger organization as a result. If you are to come first for them (and you should), **they** must come first for you. It has been a privilege to serve in their company, and I wish to give each and every member of the staff my deep respect and thanks.

It is with pride, satisfaction and confidence that I stride off the Sierra Club's stage, but not out of your history and without retirement from our common cause. I look forward to linking arms in that fight over the years, and to maintaining many of the close friendships which you have given me.

Carl--the best of good fortune, friend.

Appendix D

April 1997

SIERRA CLUB ORAL HISTORY SERIES

Interviews conducted by the Regional Oral History Office,
University of California, Berkeley.

Single-Interview Volumes

Adams, Ansel. Conversations with Ansel Adams. 1978, 768 pp. (On photography and conservation.)

Berry, Phillip S. Sierra Club Leader, 1960s-1980s: A Broadened Agenda, A Bold Approach. 1988, 149 pp.

Brower, David R. Environmental Activist, Publicist, and Prophet. 1980, 320 pp.

Colby, William E. Reminiscences. 1954, 145 pp. (An interview with Sierra Club secretary and director, 1900-1946.)

Fischer, Michael L. Executive Director of the Sierra Club, 1987-1992. 1997, 192 pp.

Leonard, Richard M. Mountaineer, Lawyer, Environmentalist. 1975, 482 pp.

Livermore, Norman B. Jr., Man in the Middle: High Sierra Packer, Timberman, Conservationist, and California Resources Secretary. 1983, 285 pp.

McCloskey, Michael. Sierra Club Executive Director: The Evolving Club and the Environmental Movement. 1983, 279 pp.

Merrow, Susan D. Sierra Club President and Council Chair: Effective Volunteer Leadership, 1980s-1990s. 1994, 89 pp.

Siri, William E. Reflections on the Sierra Club, the Environment, and Mountaineering, 1950s-1970s. 1979, 296 pp. [$72]

Stegner, Wallace. The Artist as Environmental Advocate. 1983, 49 pp.

Wayburn, Edgar. Sierra Club Statesman and Leader of the Parks and Wilderness Movement: Gaining Protection for Alaska, the Redwoods, and Golden Gate Parklands. 1985, 525 pp.

Wayburn, Edgar. Global Activitist and Elder Statesman of the Sierra Club: Alaska, International Conservation, National Parks and Protected Areas, 1980-1992. 1996, 277 pp.

Wayburn, Peggy. Author and Environmental Advocate. 1992, 193 pp.

Zierold, John. Environmental Lobbyist in California's Capital, 1965-1984. 1988, 202 pp.

In Process: Phillip S. Berry (update), Laurence I. Moss, Michele Perrault; Douglas Scott, Danny Shaffer

Multi-Interview Volumes

Building the Sierra Club's National Lobbying Program, 1967-1981. 1985, 374 pp.
- Evans, Brock. "Environmental Campaigner: From the Northwest Forests to the Halls of Congress."
- Tupling, W. Lloyd. "Sierra Club Washington Representative."

Pacific Northwest Conservationists. 1986, 281 pp.
- Dyer, Polly. "Preserving Washington Parklands and Wilderness."
- Goldsworthy, Patrick D. "Protecting the North Cascades, 1954-1983."

Sierra Club Leaders I, 1950s-1970s. 1982, 433 pp.
- Hildebrand, Alexander. "Sierra Club Leader and Critic: Perspective on Club Growth, Scope, and Tactics, 1950s-1970s."
- Litton, Martin. "Sierra Club Director and Uncompromising Preservationist, 1950s-1970s."
- Sherwin, Raymond J. "Conservationist, Judge, and Sierra Club President, 1960s-1970s."
- Snyder, Theodore A., Jr. "Southeast Conservation Leader and Sierra Club President, 1960s-1970s."

Sierra Club Leaders II, 1960s-1970s. 1985, 296 pp.
- Futrell, J. William. "'Love for the Land and Justice for Its People': Sierra Club National and Southern Leader, 1968-1982."
- Sive, David. "Pioneering Environmental Lawyer, Atlantic Chapter Leader, 1961-1982."

SIERRA CLUB HISTORY COMMITTEE ORAL HISTORY SERIES

Interviews conducted by volunteers for the Sierra Club History Committee.

Single-Interview Volumes

Clark, Nathan. Sierra Club Leader, Outdoorsman, and Engineer. 1977, 147 pp.

Moorman, James. Attorney for the Environment, 1966-1981: Center for Law and Social Policy, Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, Department of Justice Division of Lands and Natural Resources. 1994, 168 pp.

Robinson, Gordon. Forestry Consultant to the Sierra Club. 1979, 277 pp.

Multi-Interview Volumes

The Sierra Club Nationwide I. 1983, 257 pp.
- Forsyth, Alfred. "The Sierra Club in New York and New Mexico."
- McConnell, Grant. "Conservation and Politics in the North Cascades."
- Ogilvy, Stewart M. "Sierra Club Expansion and Evolution: The Atlantic Chapter, 1957-1969."
- Van Tyne, Anne. "Sierra Club Stalwart: Conservationist, Hiker, Chapter and Council Leader."

The Sierra Club Nationwide II. 1984, 253 pp.
- Amodio, John. "Lobbyist for Redwood National Park Expansion."
- Jones, Kathleen Goddard. "Defender of California's Nipomo Dunes, Steadfast Sierra Club Volunteer."
- Leopold, A. Starker. "Wildlife Biologist."
- Miller, Susan, "Staff Support for Sierra Club Growth and Organization, 1964-1977."
- Turner, Tom. "A Perspective on David Brower and the Sierra Club, 1968-1969."

The Sierra Club Nationwide III. 1989, 310 pp.
- Alderson, George. "Environmental Campaigner in Washington, D.C., 1960s-1970s."
- Duveneck, Frank. "Loma Prieta Chapter Founder, Protector of Environmental and Human Rights."
- Steele, Dwight. "Controversies over the San Francisco Bay and Waterfront, 1960s-1970s."
- Walker, Diane. "The Sierra Club in New Jersey: Focus on Toxic Waste Management."

The Sierra Club Nationwide IV. 1996, 207 pp.
Avery, Abigail. "Nurturing the Earth: North Cascades, Alaska, New England, and Issues of War and Peace."
Ives, Robin and Lori. "Conservation, Mountaineering, and Angeles Chapter Leadership, 1958-1984."
Reid, Leslie. "Angeles Chapter and National Sierra Club Leader, 1960s-1990: Focus on Labor and the Environment."
Reid, Sally. "Serving the Angeles Chapter and the National Sierra Club, 1960s-1990s: Focus on Wilderness Issues in California and Alaska."

Sierra Club Reminiscences I, 1900s-1960s. 1974, 212 pp.
Farquhar, Francis. "Sierra Club Mountaineer and Editor."
Hildebrand, Joel. "Sierra Club Leader and Ski Mountaineer."
Robinson, Bestor. "Thoughts on Conservation and the Sierra Club."
Rother, James E. "The Sierra Club in the Early 1900s."

Sierra Club Reminiscences II, 1900s-1960s. 1975, 177 pp.
Bernays, Philip S. "Founding the Southern California Chapter."
Bradley, Harold C. "Furthering the Sierra Club Tradition."
Crowe, Harold E. "Sierra Club Physician, Baron, and President."
Dawson, Glen. "Pioneer Rock Climber and Ski Mountaineer."
Hackett, C. Nelson. "Lasting Impressions of the Early Sierra Club."

Sierra Club Reminiscences III, 1920s-1970s. 1984, 264 pp.
Clark, Lewis. "Perdurable and Peripatetic Sierran: Club Officer and Outings Leader, 1928-1984."
Eichorn, Jules. "Mountaineering and Music: Ansel Adams, Norman Clyde, and Pioneering Sierra Club Climbing."
Eloesser, Nina. "Tales of High Trips in the Twenties."
Kimball, H. Stewart. "New Routes For Sierra Club Outings, 1930s-1970s."
LeConte, Joseph. "Recalling LeConte Family Pack Trips and the Early Sierra Club, 1912-1926."

The Sierra Club and the Urban Environment I: San Francisco Bay Chapter Inner City Outings and Sierra Club Outreach to Women. 1980, 186 pp.
Burke, Helen. "Women's Issues in the Environmental Movement."
Colgan, Patrick. "`Just One of the Kids Myself.'"
Hall, Jordan. "Trial and Error: The Early Years."
LaBoyteaux, Duff. "Towards a National Sierra Club Program."
Sarnat, Marlene. "Laying the Foundations for ICO."
Zuni, George. "From the Inner City Out."

The Sierra Club and the Urban Environment II: Labor and the Environment in the San Francisco Bay Area. 1983, 167 pp.
Jenkins, David. "Environmental Controversies and the Labor Movement in the Bay Area."
Meyer, Amy. "Preserving Bay Area Parklands."
Ramos, Anthony L. "A Labor Leader Concerned with the Environment."
Steele, Dwight C. "Environmentalist and Labor Ally."

Sierra Club Women I. 1976, 71 pp.
Bade, Elizabeth Marston. "Recollections of William F. Bade and the Early Sierra Club."
Evans, Nora. "Sixty Years with the Sierra Club."
Praeger, Ruth E. "Remembering the High Trips."

Sierra Club Women II. 1977, 152 pp.
Farquhar, Marjory Bridge. "Pioneer Woman Rock Climber and Sierra Club Director."
LeConte, Helen. "Reminiscences of LeConte Family Outings, the Sierra Club, and Ansel Adams."

Sierra Club Women III. 1983, 173 pp.
Christy, Cicely M. "Contributions to the Sierra Club and the San Francisco Bay Chapter, 1938-1970s."
Goody, Wanda B. "A Hiker's View of the Early Sierra Club."
Horsfall, Ethel Rose Taylor. "On the Trail with the Sierra Club, 1920s-1960s."
Parsons, Harriet T. "A Half-Century of Sierra Club Involvement."

Southern Sierrans I. 1976, 178 pp.
Chelew, J. Gordon. "Reflections of an Angeles Chapter Member, 1921-1975."
Jones, E. Stanley. "Sierra Club Officer and Angeles Chapter Leader, 1931-1975."
Jones, Marion. "Reminiscences of the Southern California Sierra Club, 1927-1975."
Pepper, Dorothy. "High Trip High Jinks."
Searle, Richard. "Grassroots Sierra Club Leader."

Southern Sierrans II. 1977, 207 pp.
Amneus, Thomas. "New Directions for the Angeles Chapter."
Charnock, Irene. "Portrait of a Sierra Club Volunteer."
Johnson, Olivia R. "High Trip Reminiscences, 1904-1945."
Marshall, Robert R. "Angeles Chapter Leader and Wilderness Spokesman, 1960s."

Southern Sierrans III. 1980, 250 pp.
Bear, Robert. "Desert Conservation and Exploration with the Sierra Club."
Johnson, Arthur B. "Climbing and Conservation in the Sierra."
Poland, Roscoe and Wilma. "Desert Conservation: Voices from the Sierra Club's San Diego Chapter."
Mendenhall, John and Ruth. "Forty Years of Sierra Club Mountaineering Leadership, 1938-1978."

Volunteer Leadership in the National Sierra Club, 1970s-1980s. 1995, 181pp.
Fontaine, Joe. "Conservation Activitist, Consensus Builder, and Sierra Club President, 1980-1982."
Gill, Kent. "Making the Political Process Work: Chapter Activitist, Council Chair, and Club and Foundation President."

INDEX--Michael Fischer

Adams, John, 126, 135
Adams, Phoebe, 154
affinity credit card, 99-100
Alayeto, Ophelia, 46
American Institute of Planners, 12, 33
Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, 144
Army Corps of Engineers, 149
Arthur, William, 115
Association of Bay Area Governments, 10
Audubon Society, 101, 146
Azevedo, Margaret, 22

Barnes, Lou, 59, 83, 100
Barzaghi, Jacques, 24
Becker, Dan, 142
Beckmann, Jon, 52
Bell, Sue, 102-104
Berry, Phillip, 49, 58-59, 73-76, 78, 109, 117-118, 148, 153
Bodovitz, Joseph E., 14, 16, 28
Bonnette, Andrea, 53-60, 70, 72, 80-81, 92, 94, 105, 153
Boxer, Barbara, 159
Brecher, Alan, 158
Briscoe, Marianne, 101-102, 104-105, 108
Brower, David, 40, 48, 79, 87, 150, 157
Brown, Allan, 53, 102-105, 108-109
Brown, David, 146
Brown, Governor Jerry, 24, 25, 26, 27-28, 31
Brown, Willie, 30, 31
Browner, Carol, 159
Bryan, Richard, 124, 141
Bryant, Pat, 136
Butler, Lew, 126

California State
  California Coastal Commission, 16-18, 20-24, 26, 27-32, 47, 51, 142
  Coastal Conservancy, 161
  Department of Parks and Recreation, 16
  Fish and Game Commission, 16
  initiative process, 15
  North Central Region Coastal Commission, 15-23, 30
  Office of Planning and Research, 24, 28
  Proposition 20, 15, 24, 26
  Urban Strategy for California Plan, 25
California Tomorrow, 126
Californians Organized to Acquire Access to State Tidelands (COAAST), 20
Calvert Social Investment Fund, 121,157
Carroll, Rosemary, 53-54, 58, 94, 105-106, 113-114
Cellarius, Richard, 58, 66, 68-71, 73, 98, 148, 154
Chatfield, David, 91
Chavez, Cesar, 125-126. See also environmental justice issues.
Chavis, Ben, 135
Chin, Jack, 132
City Care Conference, 137
Clark, Michael, 126, 133-134
Clean Air Act, 146
coastal legislation, 14-15, 25
Coastal States Organization, 43
corporations and the environment, 108-110, 135

Dall, Norbert, 23, 43, 147
de la Rosa, Sue, 46
Dedrick, Claire, 41

Deukmejian, Governor George, 29-30, 31, 33, 47
Diablo Canyon, 40
Don Pedro Dam, 144
Downing, Larry, 37, 38, 42, 48, 50, 64-70, 108

Earth Day, 110, 137
Edgar, James, 65, 100
Edelman, Marian Wright, 135
Egger, Frank, 22
Environmental and Ethnic Alliance (EDGE), 132, 137
Environmental Defense Fund, 101, 135
environmental justice issues, 125-126, 130-158, 159
environmental protection
  Kissimmee River, 148
  oil drilling, Arctic, 141
  ozone layer, 142
  personal motivations, 7-8
Environmental Protection Agency, 158-160
Environmentalists for Clinton/Gore, 159
ethnic diversity in the environmental movement, 126-138, 156-157

Feinstein, Dianne, 31-32, 44, 144-145,159
Fiddler, Richard, 81
Fischer, Michael F.
  Arctic experience, 138-139
  boyhood interests, 4, 8
  career choices, 5, 7
  Centennial Appalachian Trail Speech, 156
  early life, 1-9
  graduate school, UC Berkeley, 9-10
  membership in Sierra Club, 40-41
  mentors, 11
  personal politics, 9
  San Antonio, Texas, 2, 9
Fischer, Michael F. [cont.]
  single parent, 35-36
  Womb Rock experience, 40
Fletcher, Kathy, 7
Friends of the Earth, 13, 91, 101, 121, 126, 134, 157
Futrell, William, 137

Gardner, David, 142
Gerbode Foundation, 126-127, 161
Green Group (Group of Ten), 111-112, 121, 126, 133-136, 139, 143
Greenpeace, 91, 95, 107
Gulf Coast Tenants Organization, 134, 136

Harris, Don, 117
Hayes, Denis, 137
Hayes, Rich, 114, 127, 129-130
Hetch Hetchy O'Shaughnessy Dam, 143-145
Hirten, John, 13
Hocker, Philip, 80-81, 83, 99
Hodel, Don, 142-143
Holloway, Maurice, 53, 108
Holman, William, 148, 151
Holmgren, Rod, 146
Howard, Robert, 85
Howland, Charles, 106
Hurley, Joanne, 46, 50, 57, 142

Jackson, Joan, 146
Jacobs, John, 13, 15
John Muir Local 100, 97
Johnston, Senator J. Bennett, 141

Kennedy School of Government, 158
King, Jonathan, 57
Kleijunas, Joanne, 114
Kline, Ron, 108
KNBR (radio station), 14
Kortum, William, 20
Kramer, Ken, 148
Krupp, Fred, 135

land-use planning
  emphases in the 1960s, 10
  Bodega Harbor, 21
  Dillon Beach, 21
  See also California Coastal Commission
Lane, Melvin B., 28
Layton, Tom, 126, 128
Levitt, Len, 50-53, 80, 100
Lewis, Sherman, 132
Li, Vivien, 128-129, 137
Loma Prieta earthquake, 153-156
Lucas, George (LucasArts Entertainment), 100
Lundborg, Brad, 22, 28

McCloskey, Maxine, 46, 153
McCloskey, Mike, 33, 36, 44, 46, 48, 52, 61-63, 99, 105, 111, 121, 150, 153
McCloskey, Paul N. "Pete", 9
McComb, John, 50
McDonald's Corporation. See also corporations and the environment
Mahoney, Tim, 139
Meadows, Bill, 101, 104-105
Merrow, Sue, 58, 66-70, 78-79, 83, 85, 87, 127, 146, 148, 150, 154
Miller, George, 159
Mitchell, George, 124
Moore, Richard, 136

National Charities Information Bureau, 136
National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), 94, 97
National Parks and Conservation Association, 90
Natural Resources Council of America, 63
Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), 95, 101, 135, 160-161
New York Times, 133, 136
nature, attitudes toward, 8

Ow-Wing, Terry, 132
Owen, Mel, 117

Packard, Jean, 77
Paparian, Michael, 132, 147-148
Pelosi, Nancy, 159
Perrault, Michele, 29, 37, 38, 47-50, 85, 109
Planned Parenthood, 135
Planning and Conservation League (PCL), 11, 14, 24, 41
Pogue, Ann, 59, 68, 81
Pope, Carl, 32, 43, 47, 55, 59-61, 85, 92, 94, 105, 117, 118-120
Press, William, 24, 25, 26

Reeves, Christopher, 158
Roberti, David, 30
Rocky Mountain National Park, 143
Rogers, Jane, 36, 132, 141, 152-153, 160
Rosen, Marty, 36
Ruckel, Tony, 59, 73-74
Rust, Audrey, 50

San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC), 14, 16
San Francisco Planning and Urban Research (SPUR), 13, 41
Save the Children, 135-136
Sawhill, John, 158
Scott, Doug, 43, 46, 48, 50-52, 55, 57-61, 78-79, 105, 115, 121-124, 138-139, 150
Scott, Martha, 61
Sea Ranch, California, 17-18, 20
Sedway, Paul, 33, 37, 47
Sedway-Cooke, 33-37
Shaffer, Denny, 46, 48, 50-53, 68, 70, 72, 76, 80-83, 85, 86-87, 99, 101, 108, 127-128, 151, 156
Sher, Vic, 115
Sierra (magazine), 57, 94, 122

Sierra Club
advertising, 110
board of directors, 38-40, 44-46, 52, 64-65, 68, 70-71, 77, 96, 109-110
budget, 79-84, 86-92, 147
centennial campaign, 98, 102-103, 106-107
planning committee (CCPC), 103-105, 108
chapters
Angeles Chapter, 146
Atlantic Chapter, 150
employment in, 96-98
issues, 130
Hawaii, 150
Loma Prieta, 41
Lone Star Chapter, 130-131
San Diego Chapter, 146
San Francisco Bay Chapter, 20-22, 44
staff, 146-147
electoral politics, 123-124
endowment fund, 86
Ethnic Diversity Task Force, 129-132
executive directorship, 36-39, 49, 52, 96, 120-122, 148-150
federal agencies, relations with, 29, 43, 47
fund raising, 98-103, 105-110, 112-114, 129
internal affairs, 1990s, 91-98
legal committee, 117
legislative lobbying, 23, 43, 79, 139-144, 147-148
logo, 49
management, 94-96
membership
growth, 62, 88-90, 113, 150
history of, 40-41
parallels with coastal commission, 22-24
planning committee, 84-85
purpose, 127-129
racial minorities in, 127-133, 136, 156
senior staff, 50, 54, 64, 68
Sierra Club [cont.]
staff and volunteer relations, 61, 67, 103
staff unionization, 93-98
state agencies, relations with, 25
strengths and weaknesses, 123-124, 146
volunteers, 39, 43, 56, 68, 88, 107-108, 147, 151
women serving as board members, 32-33
Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund (SCLDF), 49, 71, 73-74, 76, 108, 111-118, 123, 137
Sierra Club Foundation, 66, 108
Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, 133, 136
spotted owl controversy, 114
Steele, Dwight, 25
Stevens, Senator Ted, 141
Stevick, Steve, 75
Suro, Roberto, 136
Sutherland, Rick, 49, 74, 111-119, 152

Thollaug, Chris, 59
Tiniano, Jerry, 43
Traynor, Michael, 118, 137

United Auto Workers Union, 96-98
United Nations, 43
United States
Federal Coastal Zone Management Act, 29
House Merchant Marines and Fishery Committee, 47
Unsoeld, Jolene, 123

Valdez oil spill, 115
Vallejo, Lorraine, 94
Vinyard, Lucille, 20

Waiwode, Ann, 44, 148
Watt, James, 47, 142

Wattleton, Faye, 135
Wayburn, Edgar, 37, 78-79, 83-84, 109, 121, 131, 152
Weber, Susan, 135
Whale Center, 46
Wheeler, Douglas, 33, 36-38, 42, 43, 46-49, 52, 61, 111, 150
Wilcher, Denny, 98-99
Wilderness Society, 113
Wirth, Tim, 141
Wirth, Wren, 141
Wise Use Movement, 147
women, leadership qualities, 32-33
Woody, Theresa, 148
World Development Bank, 43

Yeager, Brookes, 159
Yosemite Restoration Trust Advisory Council, 121, 157

Zeko, Tom, 102-103, 105
Zero Population Growth, 136
Zierold, John, 43, 147

ANN LAGE

B.A., and M.A., in History, University of California, Berkeley.

Postgraduate studies, University of California, Berkeley, American history and education.

Chairman, Sierra Club History Committee, 1978-1986; oral history coordinator, 1974-present; Chairman, Sierra Club Library Committee, 1993-present.

Interviewer/Editor, Regional Oral History Office, in the fields of natural resources and the environment, university history, California political history, 1976-present.

Principal Editor, assistant office head, Regional Oral History Office, 1994-present.