Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Robert Cox

Robert Cox: Sierra Club President 1994–96, 2000–01, and 2007–08, on Environmental Communications and Strategy

Sierra Club Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Roger Eardley-Pryor, PhD
in 2020

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

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Robert Cox, three-time president of the Sierra Club 1994–1996, 2000–2001, and 2007–2008, pictured here during his first term. (1994)

Abstract

Robert Cox served three times as president of the national Sierra Club in 1994–96, 2000–01, and 2007–08. He is Professor Emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH), and as a scholar of activist rhetoric Cox helped found the academic field of environmental communication. Cox was born in September 1945, in Hinton, West Virginia, where his early influences included roaming Appalachian forests and rivers and learning his family's history of union organizing and work toward social justice. He was recruited to the debate team at the University of Richmond where, from 1963 to 1967, he studied communication, philosophy, history, and religion while also participating in civil rights protests. In 1970, Cox earned his PhD in classical rhetoric studies from the University of Pittsburgh with a dissertation on the rhetorical structures of the Vietnam antiwar movement in which he actively participated. From 1971 to 2010, Cox was a Professor in the Department of Communication at UNC-CH where he helped establish the field of environmental communication and focused his research and teaching on argumentation, rhetorical theory, and social movements. Cox married Professor Julia Wood in 1975 when she also joined the UNC-CH faculty in the Department of Communication. Upon Dr. Wood's suggestion, Cox joined the Sierra Club in 1979 and, over time, he earned leadership positions at every level in the Club: as chair of the Research Triangle Group, as chair of the North Carolina Chapter, and as an elected member to the national board of directors for most years between 1993 and 2013, including three times as president of the national Sierra Club. Cox made significant contributions to passage in the US Congress of the North Carolina Wilderness Bill, to the Sierra Club's early engagements in the environmental justice movement, to restructuring both the Club's internal governance and its volunteer structure, as well as to leading Sierra Club engagements in national politics, particularly during his times as Club president. In this oral history, Cox discusses all of the above, with a focus on leveraging influential communication and strategy, while also sharing his experiences hiking and trekking in the Himalayas, in the mountains of Europe, and in the Appalachian Mountains.

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Interview History

By Roger Eardley-Pryor, PhD
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June 2023

Robert Cox is a scholar and a gentleman. Robbie also has a fire burning in his belly for protecting nature, confronting injustice, and empowering people, which fueled his long-time leadership in environmental politics, strategy, and influential communication. As you'll learn from his oral history, Robbie spent several decades as a leader, communicator, and pragmatic strategist in the Sierra Club, where he became one of the most influential volunteers in the nation's largest and most influential environmental organization. As a professor of rhetoric and a founder of the academic field of environmental communication, Robbie forged a liberal philosophy of environmental politics that remained open to evidence, experience, and argument. Robbie also honed an exceptional ability to synthesize his own experiences and knowledge in ways that includes and empowers others to join him in collective action. Even as Robbie acts toward his sense of righteousness, he is never righteous about it. With me, he was confident, clear, and always thoughtful, while also overtly humble, generous, and collaborative. This interview history shares my reflections on the process and contexts of creating Robbie's oral history, and it concludes with some of the significant themes and topics of our discussions.

Robbie and I began planning his oral history in July 2020 during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In September 2020, with Robbie at his home in North Carolina and me at my home in northern California, we recorded remotely over Zoom nearly eleven hours of his life history during five interview sessions. Robbie's oral history was actually the first Zoom interview that I ever recorded over my then-spotty at-home internet connection, which made for awkward interruptions and occasional inaudible moments in the transcript. Nonetheless, I found our conversations both enjoyable and incredibly informative. Robbie's enlightening interview offered a welcome respite from the anxiety that I also recall experiencing that summer about the state of our world, the future of our nation, and safety of the people I love most.

By September of 2020, Robbie and I had separately spent half a year confined mostly to our respective homes and surrounding communities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, still several months before any available vaccines, we remained rightfully apprehensive of the novel coronavirus, an airborne pathogen that was suffocating and ending thousands of lives every day around the world, many of whom died alone in hospitals or at home, unable to speak or breathe. Also at that time, the toxic rhetoric and ongoing chaos of President Donald Trump's administration increasingly infected the impending 2020 US presidential election. And during that same summer, many American streets erupted as sites of protest and battlegrounds against systemic racial inequalities, particularly in light of disproportionate killings of Black men and women by armed and mostly white police forces. All of this occurred while the consequences of burning fossil fuels and the impacts of climate change grew increasingly dire. Here in California, a longstanding drought, a record-breaking heat wave, and an unusual lightning storm combined to spark a deadly assemblage of nearly 10,000 wildfires that burned over 4.2 million acres across the state, making 2020 the largest wildfire season in California's modern history. Smoke from the

enormous amalgam of fires rendered skies orange and made the outside air toxic to breathe for weeks on end, all while the risk from deadly pathogens in our inside air remained potent. From my slapdash and open-air garage office under my highway-adjacent apartment in Sonoma County, California, I recall my throat and eyes burning with particulate and smoke during several Zoom interviews with Robbie. Even so, at the time, hearing Robbie's inspiring stories of environmental activism offered a kind of refuge from our stressful surroundings. His stories also emphasized the incredibly high stakes for our present moment of environmental politics, rhetoric, and civic engagement.

During that summer of 2020, Robbie and I both prepared for his five recorded oral history sessions. Befitting his renown as a pathbreaking scholar and professor, Robbie drafted an exquisite outline that skillfully structured his interviews. My own preparations included reading several of Robbie's academic publications and multiple editions of his definitive book, *Environmental Communication in the Public Sphere*, which, when first published in 2006, became the first text offering a comprehensive introduction to the then-burgeoning field of environmental communication. Robbie's best-selling book is now co-written with Phaedra C. Pezzullo, an outstanding communications scholar and activist in her own right whom Robbie mentored through her PhD. They released the sixth edition of this book in 2021. I found particularly useful their chapters on environmental advocacy campaigns, especially on the environmental justice and climate justice movements. Among Robbie's academic publications that proved informative for his oral history included his analysis of "the irreparable" trope in J. Robert Cox, "The Die Is Cast: Topical and Ontological Dimensions of the Locus of the Irreparable," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68:3 (1982): 227-239, especially as "the irreparable" informed Robbie's wilderness activism; his challenge in the first issue of the then-new journal Environmental Communication to consider the ethical purpose and imperative for environmental communication in J. Robert Cox, "Nature's 'Crisis Disciplines': Does Environmental Communication Have an Ethical Duty?" *Environmental Communication* 1:1 (2007): 5-20, the abstract of which you will find in the appendix to this oral history; as well as Robbie's call for communication that strategically mobilizes environmental action to either interrupt or enable change within systems of power in J. Robert Cox, "Beyond Frames: Recovering the Strategic in Climate Communication," *Environmental Communication* 4:1 (March 2010): 122-133. Robbie also shared and I read two of his consequential proposals to the Sierra Club board of directors: "Project Renewal" from June 1994, which restructured the Sierra Club's internal governance, and "Project ACT" from September 1995, which reoriented the Club's grassroots organizing. I also read various interviews with Robbie in past Sierra Club newsletters, as well as interviews he gave to other publications as part of the influential Groundswell Sierra campaign to prevent a cohort of anti-immigrant activists from gaining control of the Sierra Club's board of directors in the early 2000s. One such interview was "Former Sierra Club Director Discusses Hostile Takeover Attempt by Anti-Immigrant Activists," in the Spring 2004 edition of the Southern Poverty Law Center's *Intelligence Report*.

Additionally, in advance of our recording sessions, I spoke by phone with several people whom Robbie suggested and introduced to me. During the summer of 2020, I had enjoyable, unrecorded, and informative discussions about Robbie, in the following order: with Dr. Phaedra C. Pezzullo, author of *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Travel, Pollution, and Environmental Justice* (2007), a Sierra Club environmental justice activist, and a professor at the University of

Colorado Boulder who was Robbie's first graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH); with Dr. Julia T. Wood, Robbie's love and life partner, a prolific scholar, and a fellow professor emeritus in the Department of Communication at UNC-CH who knows intimately Robbie's life and Sierra Club activism; with Molly Diggins, a volunteer leader and former state director of the Sierra Club's North Carolina chapter who recounted some of Robbie's state-level activism; and with Carl Pope, former executive director of the national Sierra Club who formed a close working relationship with Robbie, particularly during Robbie's three terms as Sierra Club president from 1994–96, 2000–01, and 2007–08.

After Robbie and I recorded eleven hours of his oral history between September 14–23, 2020, I reviewed his interview transcript text and shared it with Robbie in November 2020. Robbie rapidly reviewed and returned his transcript to me in December 2020 with light edits and spelling corrections to names and places, along with citations to various articles and books we referenced. He also shared digital scans of photographs and drafted captions for his appendix, with additional photographs provided by Phaedra C. Pezzullo.

The final processing of Robbie's transcript from 2021 through 2023 has taken me an exceptionally long time to complete, and for that I am sorry and take full responsibility. The circumstances of my delays stem from continued pandemic-related adjustments at work; my first-ever purchase and move with my remarkable spouse and our then-three-year-old daughter from a crammed one-bedroom apartment to our new home in Santa Rosa, California; as well as a work-related need for me to conduct an extraordinary amount of new oral history interviews for a variety of Oral History Center projects, including the ongoing Sierra Club Oral History Project. I apologize for these delays! And now, in the summer of 2023, I am delighted to finally share Robbie's outstanding oral history.

Robbie Cox's oral history is significant for detailing the environmental activism and political strategies of one of the most influential volunteers in recent Sierra Club history. Some of the themes throughout Robbie's oral history include the profoundly democratic nature of the Sierra Club, details on the Club's geographically diverse grassroots activism, as well as numerous ways that volunteer environmentalists work together to shape state and national legislation. Robbie also reconstructed the ways he synthesized his career as UNC professor with his life as an environmental activist, especially through his work in Sierra Club media campaigns. He recounted his decades as a nationally elected volunteer leader in the Sierra Club, as told through the perspective of an academic scholar of rhetoric and communications. And throughout, Robbie shared stories of direct action for environmental causes at all levels of Sierra Club engagement, from local to national.

The in-depth, life-history approach used in this oral history reveals ways that Robbie's personal influences and his engagements in the Sierra Club evolved over time. For instance, Robbie's family history of labor activism instilled in him the power of people and the importance of social justice. Similarly, his participation on debate teams shaped substantially his education and academic work, while also playing a central role throughout his life as a political and environmental activist. Robbie's interview also explored the Sierra Club's and his own personal engagements with environmental justice, including his attendance at the First National People of Color Environmental Justice Leadership Summit in 1991, his leveraging of media in the national

Sierra Club's partnership with "Jesus People Against Pollution" in Mississippi, as well as his experiences on toxic tours of *colonias* in Matamoro, Mexico, along with other actions against the negative results of neoliberal free trade agreements.

Robbie also shared insider details on several significant moments in the Sierra Club's recent history. He recounted the Club's severe financial crises in the 1990s that resulted in his work to reorganize the Club's internal governance through Project Renewal as well as the Club's volunteer structures via Project ACT. Robbie recounted his central role in the Sierra Club's efforts to combat the de-regulatory and anti-environmental Congressional agenda in wake of Newt Gingrich's Republican take-over of Congress in the 1990s, as well as Robbie's personal role in securing the Sierra Club's endorsement of Al Gore, for whom Robbie campaigned in 2000. Robbie also detailed the central role he played in the Groundswell Sierra campaign in the early 2000s to resist a take-over of the Sierra Club by anti-immigration and white supremacist forces. And, as the world warms and the seas rise, Robbie discussed ways that the Sierra Club has confronted the compounding crises of climate change in the twenty-first century. Robbie's decades of environmental activism provide a lens on ways the environmental movement has evolved over time from its early focus on wild lands, to concerns about human health, to engagement on issues of environmental justice, to combatting the modern complexities of climate change. Robbie also reflects on the contemporary Sierra Club's internal and external challenges in its ongoing work for equity, inclusion, and justice.

Back in the summer of 2020 when I spoke with Carl Pope to prepare for Robbie's oral history, Pope recalled Robbie's exceptional leadership and effectiveness. When "Professor Cox" first won election to the national Sierra Club board of directors in 1990, Pope described Robbie's presence as "immediately noticeable." Pope shared how Robbie used his expertise in rhetoric to unify people and advance proposals for environmental action. "You could see Robbie work at a board meeting," Pope remembered. "When he wanted to get the board to agree, he would offer some initial proposal tentatively, then let folks respond to it and let the room talk. Then he'd come back in and make the same proposal, but he changed two words to see if that worked. He'd keep playing with the proposal and make changes rhetorically, until he got something that would work for everyone." The Sierra Club's board of directors come increasingly from a variety of backgrounds across the United States. And all directors are volunteers, not employed staff, but like much of the Sierra Club staff, many Club directors consider themselves to be full-time environmental activists. As Carl Pope noted, however, most Sierra Club directors "are not professional communicators. People would talk past each other. Robbie's skill on the board lubricated that process, which was phenomenally helpful. If anyone wanted to get something done, you asked Robbie." Indeed, Robbie got things done.

Pope also described Robbie as a kind of environmental philosopher. "He wasn't ideological," Pope explained, "but surely, he had his own vision of where the Club should go." Now, with this publication of Robbie Cox's oral history, you too can hear him tell you in his own words about his visions for the Sierra Club and the ways he mobilized constituencies to make a reality of his visions for environmental protection, political power, and justice.

Project History

By Roger Eardley-Pryor, PhD
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January 2020

The Sierra Club and the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley have a long-standing partnership for preserving the Sierra Club's past through oral history interviews. In 1970, amid an upsurge of environmental activism that produced the first Earth Day and codified a suite of new legal statutes, a collaboration arose between the Sierra Club, one of the oldest and most influential environmental organizations in the United States, and the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library (formerly the Regional Oral History Office), one of the oldest organizations professionally recording and preserving oral history interviews. The resulting Sierra Club Oral History Project has, over several decades, moved through cycles of intensity and lull due to the availability of funding for recording and publishing interviews. Over the past half century, this ongoing collaboration between the Sierra Club and the Oral History Center has produced an unprecedented testimony of engagement in and on behalf of the environment as experienced by individual members and leaders of the Sierra Club.

Sierra Club volunteers helped conduct several interviews in the Sierra Club Oral History Project. But in its earliest years, as now, extensive and deeply researched oral history interviews with legendary Sierra Club leaders—like photographer and former director Ansel Adams, longtime directors and former Club presidents like Dr. Edgar Wayburn, or former executive directors like David Brower—are conducted on a professional basis through the Oral History Center by oral historians with expertise in environmental history.

Now fifty-years old, the Sierra Club Oral History Project continues to document the leadership, programs, strategies, and ideals of both the national Sierra Club and the Club's grassroots at the regional and chapter levels from the early twentieth century through the present. These interviews highlight the breadth, depth, and significance of the Sierra Club's eclectic environmental efforts—from education to litigation to legislative lobbying; from wilderness preservation to energy policy to environmental justice; from outdoor adventures to climate change activism to controlling chemicals; from California to the Carolinas to Alaska and beyond to international realms. The Sierra Club Oral History Project, together with the sizable archive of Sierra Club papers and photographs in The Bancroft Library, offers an extraordinary lens on the evolution of environmental issues and activism over the past century, as well as the motivations, conflicts, and triumphs of individuals who helped direct that evolution.

In 1969, two separate but related events stimulated the Sierra Club Oral History Project. In the summer of 1969, a fortuitous meeting occurred on a long bus ride from San Francisco to the dedication ceremony for the newly established Redwood National Park. The new and then-youngest Sierra Club president, Phillip Berry, sat next to Amelia Fry, an experienced oral history interviewer at what was then called the Regional Oral History Office of The Bancroft Library. Fry had conducted oral histories with former National Park Service directors and Berkeley

alumni Horace Albright and Newton Drury, as well as leading figures in California politics and natural resource management. On that bus ride north, Fry suggested preserving the Sierra Club's unwritten history through audio-recorded, transcribed, and publicly available oral history interviews with the Club's leading volunteers and influential actors. Both Berry and Fry understood how written documents like board minutes, memorandums, and membership records could not possibly capture the Club's complex past and ongoing story, especially amid its increasing complexity from rapid growth in the 1960s. Berry liked the idea of oral history interviews, given his deep appreciation for the Sierra Club's rich past, its momentous campaigns, and especially its human entanglements. After all, Berry's first Sierra Club presidency followed years of internal debate that resulted in David Brower's resignation as the Club's first executive director.

That same summer in 1969, Marshall Kuhn met fellow Sierra Club member James Rother while hiking in Yosemite Valley. Rother, then ninety-years old, shared his memories from the early twentieth century of hiking with John Muir, the famed preservationist and Sierra Club founder. Kuhn realized that, unless recorded, the reminiscences of Rother and other early Club members would soon be lost forever. That fall, Kuhn convened an ad hoc committee of Sierra Club members interested in preserving the Club's written documents as well as recording its unwritten oral histories. Kuhn's ad hoc group petitioned members of the Sierra Club Board of Directors, including Phillip Berry, who recalled his earlier discussions with Amelia Fry. In May 1970, one month after the first Earth Day, the board established a standing Sierra Club History Committee that initially included four former Club presidents and several former directors, with Marshall Kuhn appointed its founding chairman. That September, the board designated The Bancroft Library as the official depository of the Club's written and photographic records. With that, Kuhn and his committee focused on developing a significant Sierra Club Oral History Project.

Kuhn and the Sierra Club History Committee turned to Willa Baum, director from 1958 to 1999 of The Bancroft Library's Regional Oral History Office (now the Oral History Center), for advice and support. Baum, a nationally recognized authority in oral history, agreed to train Sierra Club volunteers in the arts of oral history interviewing. For additional assistance, the Sierra Club History Committee also hired a professional consultant, Susan Schrepfer, an environmental historian and recent PhD in history then working with the Regional Oral History Office and with the Forest History Society. Schrepfer designed and mailed a six-page questionnaire to Sierra Club members who had joined the Club prior to 1931. More than half responded, which helped the History Committee identify several prospects for initial oral history interviews. The History Committee, in conjunction with the Oral History Center, selected additional interviewees (narrators) from the ranks of Sierra Club leadership over the prior six decades.

Beginning in 1971, Sierra Club volunteers from northern and southern California, along with oral history students at California State University, Fullerton, and at the University of California, Berkeley, initiated the Sierra Club Oral History Project by recording reminiscences of early Sierra Club members. In 1974, when Susan Schrepfer accepted a professorship at Rutgers University, Sierra Club History Committee-member Ann Lage began coordinating its oral history efforts. Lage, who earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees in history from the University of California, Berkeley, soon joined the staff of the Oral History Center where she oversaw the Sierra Club Oral History Project until her retirement in 2011.

Lage also co-chaired the Sierra Club History Committee with her husband Ray Lage following the death of Marshall Kuhn in 1978.

In 1980, with considerable support from the Oral History Center, the Sierra Club sought and earned a sizeable grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to thoroughly document the Sierra Club of the 1960s and 1970s. By that time, the Sierra Club Oral History Project included thirty-five volunteer-conducted interviews, and the Oral History Center had conducted or was completing five extensive oral history interviews with Sierra Club leaders. Between 1980 and 1984, however, the NEH grant and matching funds from the Sierra Club Foundation made possible the completion of an additional seventeen professionally conducted oral histories and forty-four volunteer-conducted interviews, totaling over 250 hours of recorded history.

Following the NEH grant period in the early 1980s, the Sierra Club Oral History Project resumed a slower-paced routine, conducting interviews only as donated funding permitted. Between 1984 and 2019, trained Sierra Club volunteers contributed to The Bancroft Library eight new oral history interviews, resulting in two multi-volume collections published respectively in 1989 and 1996. Between 1992 and 1999, the Oral History Center conducted eight extensive Sierra Club interviews, three of which featured narrators previously interviewed. The pace of interviews slowed further in the twenty-first century. Between 1999 and 2018, the Oral History Center completed and published five new interviews for the Sierra Club Oral History Project.

In the Spring of 2018, a renewed collaboration between the Sierra Club and the Oral History Center restored life to the Sierra Club Oral History Project. Therese Dunn, the Librarian at the Sierra Club's William E. Colby Memorial Library, and Jim Bradbury, Communications Specialist with the national Sierra Club in Oakland, obtained fresh funding from the Sierra Club Foundation with hopes that the Oral History Center could conduct new in-depth interviews. That April, Dunn and Bradbury ventured to Berkeley where they met with Martin Meeker, the director of the Oral History Center since 2016, with Ann Lage, the retired oral history expert on the Sierra Club, and with me, Roger Eardley-Pryor, an interviewer at the Oral History Center with expertise in science and environmental activism. Since the bulk of Sierra Club oral histories conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Sierra Club, the nature of environmentalism, and the natural environment itself all experienced significant changes. In an effort to address those changes while complementing prior Sierra Club oral histories, our renewed collaboration agreed to continue long-form interviews, initially with former presidents of the Sierra Club. Each year since 2018, renewed funding from the Sierra Club enabled the Oral History Center to conduct several in-depth, multi-session, video-recorded oral history interviews with various Sierra Club leaders.

Now, as in the past, each interview in the Sierra Club Oral History Project is transcribed, lightly edited for clarity, and returned to the narrator for their review and approval to publish. Bound volumes of all narrator-approved interviews in the Sierra Club Oral History Project are deposited for research with The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and with the William E. Colby Memorial Library at the Sierra Club's headquarters in Oakland. A list of all published and forthcoming interviews in the Sierra Club Oral History Project follows this project history. Since the early 2000s, these transcripts are also available online for free via the Oral History Center website.

On behalf of the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library, I want to thank all narrators who, since the early 1970s, shared their precious memories in the Sierra Club Oral History Project. We also thank the Sierra Club Board of Directors for recognizing early on the long-term importance of preserving the Club's history and its evolution; to the past members of the Sierra Club's History Committee, especially its founding chair Marshall Kuhn; to special donors who provided funding for individual Sierra Club oral history interviews; and to the Trustees of the Sierra Club Foundation for providing the necessary funding to initiate, expand, and more recently renew this oral history project. Much appreciation goes to staff members of the Sierra Club and the Sierra Club Foundation who helped make these oral histories possible, most recently and notably to Therese Dunn. A special thanks, too, to all prior interviewers, and most importantly to Ann Lage for her more than three decades of exceptional work on this project.

I remain both grateful and excited to conduct new oral histories with volunteer and staff leaders of the Sierra Club, one of the most significant environmental organizations in history. And I appreciate deeply all the narrators who welcome me into their homes, who set aside significant time to conduct these oral histories, and who, in the process, share their meaningful memories of protecting the planet for all of us to explore and enjoy.

List of Interviews from the Sierra Club Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by the Oral History Center, University of California, Berkeley

Single-Interview Volumes

Ansel Adams, "Conversations with Ansel Adams," 1978.

Phillip S. Berry, "Sierra Club Leader, 1960s-1980s: A Broadened Agenda, A Bold Approach," 1988.

Phillip S. Berry, "Sierra Club President, 1991-1992: The Club, the Legal Defense Fund, and Leadership Issues, 1984-1993," 1997.

David R. Brower, "Environmental Activist, Publicist, and Prophet," 1980.

David R. Brower, "Reflections on the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and Earth Island Institute," 2012.

Doris Cellarius, "Sierra Club Volunteer Leader: Grassroots Activist and Organizer on Hazardous Waste Issues," 2005.

Richard Cellarius, "National Leader in the Sierra Club and the Sierra Club Foundation, 1970-2002, Sierra Club President, 1988-1990," 2005.

William E. Colby, "Reminiscences," 1954.

Robert Cox, "Sierra Club President 1994-96, 2000-01, and 2007-08, on Environmental Communications and Strategy," 2023.

Michael L. Fischer, "Sierra Club Executive Director, 1987-1992," 1997.

Richard M. Leonard, "Mountaineer, Lawyer, Environmentalist," 1975.

Norman B. Livermore, Jr., "Man in the Middle: High Sierra Packer, Timberman, Conservationist, and California Resources Secretary," 1983.

Aaron Mair, "Sierra Club President 2015-2017, on Heritage, Stewardship, and Environmental Justice," 2020.

Michael McCloskey, "Sierra Club Executive Director: The Evolving Club and the Environmental Movement," 1983.

Michael McCloskey, "Sierra Club Executive Director and Chairman, 1980s-1990s: A Perspective on Transitions in the Club and the Environmental Movement," 1999.

Susan D. Merrow, "Sierra Club President and Council Chair: Effective Volunteer Leadership, 1980s-1990s," 1994.

Laurence I. Moss, "Sierra Club President, 1973-1974, Nuclear Engineer: Energy and Environmental Policy," 2014.

Michele Perrault, "Sierra Club President 1984-1986 and 1993-1994, Environmental Educator, and Nature Protector," 2019.

Carl Pope, "Environmental and Progressive Politics: Sierra Club Executive Director, 1992-2010," 2014.

H. Anthony (Tony) Ruckel, "Sierra Club President 1992-1993, Pioneering Environmental Lawyer with Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund," 2021.

Doug Scott, "Campaigner for America's Wilderness, Sierra Club Associate Director," 2013.

Denny Shaffer, "Sierra Club Officer and Leader, 1970 to 1997: Focus on Membership, Finances, and Management," 2006.

William E. Siri, "Reflections on the Sierra Club, the Environment, and Mountaineering, 1950s-1970s," 1979.

Wallace Stegner, "The Artist as Environmental Advocate," 1983.

Gary J. Torre, "Labor and Tax Attorney, 1949-1982; Sierra Club Foundation Trustee, 1968-1981, 1994-1998," 1999.

Edgar Wayburn, "Sierra Club Statesman and Leader of the Parks and Wilderness Movement: Gaining Protection for Alaska, the Redwoods, and Golden Gate Parklands," 1985.

Edgar Wayburn, "Global Activist and Elder Statesman of the Sierra Club: Alaska, International Conservation, National Parks and Protected Areas, 1980-1992," 1996.

Peggy Wayburn, "Author and Environmental Advocate," 1992.

John Zierold, "Environmental Lobbyist in California's Capital, 1965-1984," 1988.

Single Interviews in process: Lawrence Downing, Debbie Sease, Bruce Hamilton, Vivien Li, Bruce Nilles, Verena Owen, Rhonda Anderson, Rita Harris

Multi-Interview Volumes

Building the Sierra Club's National Lobbying Program, 1967-1981. 1985.

Brock Evans, "Environmental Campaigner: From the Northwest Forests to the Halls of Congress."

W. Lloyd Tupling, "Sierra Club Washington Representative, 1967-1973."

Pacific Northwest Conservationists. 1986.

Polly Dyer, "Preserving Washington Parklands and Wilderness."

Patrick D. Goldsworthy, "Protecting the North Cascades, 1954-1983."

Sierra Club Leaders I, 1950s-1970s. 1982.

Alexander Hildebrand, "Sierra Club Leader and Critic: Perspective on Club Growth, Scope, and Tactics, 1950s-1970s."

Martin Litton, "Sierra Club Director and Uncompromising Preservationist, 1950s-1970s."

Raymond J. Sherwin, "Conservationist, Judge, and Sierra Club President, 1960s-1970s."

Theodore A. Snyder, Jr., "Southeast Conservation Leader and Sierra Club President, 1960s-1970s."

Sierra Club Leaders II, 1960s-1970s. 1985.

J. William Futrell, "'Love for the Land and Justice for Its People:' Sierra Club National and Southern Leader, 1968-1982."

David Sive, "Pioneering Environmental Lawyer, Atlantic Chapter Leader, 1961-1982."

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Sierra Club History Committee Oral History Series

Interviews conducted by volunteers for the Sierra Club History Committee

Single-Interview Volumes

Nathan Clark, "Sierra Club Leader, Outdoorsman, and Engineer," 1977.

James Moorman, "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.

Gordon Robinson, "Forestry Consultant to the Sierra Club," 1979.

Multi-Interview Volumes

The Sierra Club Nationwide I. 1983.

Alfred Forsyth, "The Sierra Club in New York and New Mexico."

Grant McConnell, "Conservation and Politics in the North Cascades."

Sierra Club Reminiscences I, 1900s-1960s. 1974.

Francis Farquhar, "Sierra Club Mountaineer and Editor."

Joel Hildebrand, "Sierra Club Leader and Ski Mountaineer."

Bestor Robinson, "Thoughts on Conservation and the Sierra Club."

James E. Rother, "The Sierra Club in the Early 1900s."

Sierra Club Reminiscences II, 1900s-1960s. 1975.

Philip S. Bernays, "Founding the Southern California Chapter."

Harold C. Bradley, "Furthering the Sierra Club Tradition."

Harold E. Crowe, "Sierra Club Physician, Baron, and President."

Glen Dawson, "Pioneer Rock Climber and Ski Mountaineer."

C. Nelson Hackett, "Lasting Impressions of the Early Sierra Club."

Sierra Club Reminiscences III, 1920s-1970s. 1984.

Lewis F. Clark, "Perdurable and Peripatetic Sierran: Club Officer and Outings Leader, 1928-1984."

Jules M. Eichorn, "Mountaineering and Music: Ansel Adams, Norman Clyde, and Pioneering Sierra Club Climbing."

Nina Eloesser, "Tales of High Trips in the Twenties."

H. Stewart Kimball, "New Routes For Sierra Club Outings, 1930s-1970s."

Joseph [N.] LeConte, "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.

Helen Burke, "Women's Issues in the Environmental Movement."

Patrick Colgan, "'Just One of the Kids Myself.'"

Jordan Hall, "Trial and Error: The Early Years."

Duff LaBoyteaux, "Towards a National Sierra Club Program."

Marlene Sarnat, "Laying the Foundations for ICO."

George Zuni, "From the Inner City Out."

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Marjory Bridge Farquhar, "Pioneer Woman Rock Climber and Sierra Club Director."

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Ruth E. Praeger, "Remembering the High Trips."

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Wanda B. Goody, "A Hiker's View of the Early Sierra Club."

Ethel Rose Taylor Horsfall, "On the Trail with the Sierra Club, 1920s-1960s."

Harriet T. Parsons, "A Half-Century of Sierra Club Involvement."

Interview 1: September 14, 2020

01-00:00:05
Eardley-Pryor: I am Roger Eardley-Pryor. Today is September 14, 2020. I have the pleasure of conducting our first interview session with Robert Cox—James Robert Cox—or Robbie. Robbie, it's great to see you. Today, can you tell me where you are?

01-00:00:21
Cox: I am nearby Chapel Hill, North Carolina, out in rural countryside in a small villa here in a nice, little community.

01-00:00:30
Eardley-Pryor: Wonderful, and I'm recording here—we're doing this over Zoom because, of course, we're in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. I am in Santa Rosa, California, and I am conducting this oral history as part of the Sierra Club Oral History Project on behalf of University of California, Berkeley's Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library. So, to get us going, Robbie, we almost always begin with this: can you tell me your birthdate and a little bit of the story where you were born and the family you were born into, please?

01-00:01:00
Cox: I was born on September 13, 1945, in a lovely Appalachian small town, Hinton, West Virginia. Its population is about 5,000 even to this day. Hinton is an old railroad town that exists at the confluence of the New River and the Greenbrier River in this mountain valley system that's just gorgeous. My father had just served in World War II and returned home and married my mother actually just before the war ended, and I was born then after that. My mother grew up as a city girl in the small town of Hinton. Her father worked for the railroads and was the general foreman for the roundhouse, which is where they repaired engines. My father's father was a man of many trades but had worked in the coal mines, and between the two grandfathers, there were many stories that helped shaped my boyhood, I think.

01-00:02:12
Eardley-Pryor: Well, on that, can you share for—just what the names of your parents were?

01-00:02:17
Cox: My father, James Robert Cox Sr.; and mother, Julia Jean Bransford Cox; and her parents, Robert Earl Bransford and Florence Alma Fredeking Bransford.

01-00:02:33
Eardley-Pryor: So, James—James's father was, again, who?

01-00:02:37
Cox: My father's father is—was John Harrison Cox, my grandfather, and my father's mother, Lottie Lee Harlow Cox.

01-00:02:44
Eardley-Pryor: Right. Great. And your mother's name was?

01-00:02:47
Cox: Julia Jean—with a *J*—Bransford.

01-00:02:53
Eardley-Pryor: I love it. Julia. So, you, James Robert Cox Jr., also later married a Julia?

01-00:02:59
Cox: That's true, that's true.

01-00:03:00
Eardley-Pryor: I love that, I love it. Good lineages. And you mentioned Julia's grandparents as well, what were their names?

01-00:03:07
Cox: Well, flipping over to her side, I was mentioning my other set of grandparents, the Bransfords. Yeah. But my partner, Julia Turbiville Wood's parents were—her mother from New York, Buffalo, I believe; her father was born in North Carolina, rural North Carolina, the son of an old tobacco farmer, who went to Duke law school. They met in the Navy, and he returned to practice law and became the county attorney near north of Durham, North Carolina.

01-00:03:39
Eardley-Pryor: I love it. There are rich stories to be told here among these family lineages. Would you share some of the stories that you remember being told about your grandparents, either from your mother's side or your father's side, about their early lives in West Virginia?

01-00:03:53
Cox: Yeah, sure. Well, I had been roaming the forest on the mountainside where I lived. And when my parents would leave to go shopping or my father was at work, they would often leave me with my Grandfather Cox, who lived right across the little dirt lane on the side of the mountain, to babysit me. And when I was four or five years old, I would be dropped off, and my grandfather would ask, "Would you like to hear some stories?" And what little kid doesn't mind hearing grandfather's stories? So, he would reach over and turn down the radio—it was probably a Cleveland Indians baseball game. And I remember one story, and it may be partly apocryphal, but I've researched enough of the detail to know that there's some truth to it. He had been working as a coal miner in the 1910s during that fierce labor organizing period. Mother Jones had been in West Virginia, and my grandfather told me that he listened to Mother speak on the steps of the state capitol urging miners to go out on strike. Later, I found that the miners called Mother Jones "Mother." She was known, of course, throughout the Midwest and the east for organizing the miners and standing up to the troops as this little old lady in a black hat. He went out on strike with the others, had a camp in the hills. Mother had told them to get their rifles, shoot for game, and hold out until the mining bosses gave in.

01-00:05:36

He told me, and this may be part of the apocryphal, that their camp was overrun by Pinkerton agents. He was knocked out and taken into the mines, handcuffed, and he remembers coming to with a pistol pointed at his head and a voice that said, "We're going to unshackle you, and you're going to dig coal." And my grandfather said, at that point at the end of the shift, he walked out of the mines down the road by the stream to Mother Jones's encampment and joined the efforts that Mother Jones was leading. And enough of that story remained with me that I think it was an early influence in my interest in studying social movements and issues of justice later.

01-00:06:26

Eardley-Pryor: That's an incredible story. So, it sounds to me like your family was left-leaning then as a result of some of that, is that correct?

01-00:06:34

Cox: Well, certainly on my Grandfather Cox's side, the Cox family. They had been early settlers of West Virginia. I've dated it back to the mid- to late-1700s when they first came into the area with a lot of conflict with the Indigenous peoples who lived in that area. My mother's family came from both Germany and England—they were just a couple of generations removed from that immigrant family—and lived in Hinton. My grandfather, however, told me a story that had a similar impact.

01-00:07:18

Eardley-Pryor: Which grandfather it is now, your mother's father?

01-00:07:19

Cox: Grandfather Bransford, Earl Bransford, my Grandfather Bransford. During World War II, the roundhouse where he worked—he was a foreman—repairing engines, well, that was speeded up because of the urgency of the war effort to get the engines turned around and out. And as a result, the overall supervisor was double timing, triple timing the work schedules, forcing men for example to feed coal into a furnace even faster and faster. Now, it got to the breaking point where one of workers, an African American man, was falling behind the kind of triple time being imposed, and the supervisor told my grandfather to fire him. My grandfather refused and was told that "It's either his job or yours." My grandfather then walked off of the site. When he did, the rest of the employees in the roundhouse followed him out, and they engaged in a lockout until the supervisor finally gave in [laughs] because he had to get the engines going again. I think that, in addition to my other grandfather, just fed the sense of right and wrong and that you struggle for it or you have to take a stand. I know those early stories, even as a kid, got through me somehow.

01-00:08:42

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, and they've stuck with you today still too, right?

01-00:08:45
Cox: Yeah, yeah.

01-00:08:46
Eardley-Pryor: When you were born, did you or do you have any siblings?

01-00:08:52
Cox: I have a sister who's two years younger than I am, Virginia Lee [Cox] McDonald and a brother about five years younger, Allan Bransford Cox. He used to work as a map reader when it entered the digital stage and helped pioneer some of the work in Montana where he moved with his wife and had contracts with The Wilderness Society and with the Forest Service helping them fight wildfires. He would plot the map for territories they had to go into as the fires were moving.

01-00:09:30
Eardley-Pryor: That's fascinating. So, he also had a love of nature that was instilled as a young man?

01-00:09:36
Cox: He did, he did. Yeah.

01-00:09:40
Eardley-Pryor: On that, can you tell me about some of those experience you said? I mean it's a beautiful part of West Virginia, southern West Virginia, very mountainous and rural, a small town. Can you tell me of some of your memories of that, along with the social justice imprinting that happened at a young age—your relationship with nature and its development?

01-00:09:58
Cox: Sure, sure. Well, I remember we lived high enough on the side of the mountain that we could look over the Greenbrier River, which flowed at the bottom of the mountain with mountains and ridges on the other side. And I remember walking along the ridge and finding a place to sit and just looking out over that landscape, and that I could see fields in the far distance that someone was farming. I would wonder who was doing that and what lay behind that ridge to the next ridge. And so I found a place where I would often return to and sit and just look at all of that lovely kind of mountain valley scenery.

01-00:10:39
There were other times where I got in trouble, and my sister and I when we were kids would be roaming in the forest and finding things to get into or get under an old canvas that had been left in the forest. And my Grandfather Cox came looking for us, found us under this rotting canvas out in the middle of the forest, playing hide and seek, drove us out and said, "Don't you ever do that again, there are copperhead snakes and rattlesnakes in this mountain," and gave us a spanking and dragged us home. [laughs] But I loved roaming the forest and fishing at the Greenbrier River with my parents often I think, so immersed in that whole environmental sensibility there.

01-00:11:28
Eardley-Pryor: It sounds like, in some ways, an idyllic childhood. Do you remember it that way?

01-00:11:33
Cox: I do, I do. There was never any real conflict. It was a loving family. I did get hit by a car when I was six years old and was almost killed with serious injuries that fortunately I recovered from. But I think that I have only the memory of having a cast on my leg and outracing my sister down the mountainside. So, it didn't leave a mental scar on me.

01-00:12:01
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, certainly not. On that note of mental capacity, you have become an incredibly internationally renowned scholar in, what, a field you helped develop on environmental communications as a professor at UNC [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill] later. So, on that, can you share your early memories of education in this rural West Virginia area?

01-00:12:23
Cox: I can. I remember vividly my grammar school years. It was in, actually, a four-room schoolhouse down in the lower part of Bellepoint, the small hamlet in the first, second, third, and fourth grades and incredibly devoted teachers. I give them praise. In fact, recently, I've made contact with the Hinton Area Foundation that works with education and have begun to try to work through them to support elementary school education in the Hinton and Summers County area. There are serious challenges for those kids often in families that have conflict, drug use in some cases, offline, digital desert in many areas. And I remember the formative influence on me of that elementary school beginning, and I've wanted to try to use some of my resources now to help them a bit.

01-00:13:33
Eardley-Pryor: That's beautiful. Well, I have a note, too, that in the early 1950s, around 1954, you're around nine years old when your family moved. What prompted the move, and where did y'all go?

01-00:13:45
Cox: My father was transferred. He was working for the Virginia Electric & Power Company, which is now Dominion Resources [Inc.]. He was transferred from Hinton to Warwick, Virginia—it's now incorporated as Newport News, Virginia. It was an advancement for him into more of a management area. I was traumatized. I did not want to leave my home in Bellepoint in West Virginia, and that memory lasts today for me because it was idyllic in so many ways. But I ended up doing well in the education there and particularly in high school. I became involved with the debate program, and that was a skill I think that has served me well—I went on to debate in college as well—learning that self-confidence and ability to respond to someone else's position to understand them. Also, I went to Boys State when I was in high school. That's a program that has intensive training in government, in the different

layers and operations of government, and so I was given exposure to that even still in my teens.

01-00:15:09
Eardley-Pryor: And this was in Virginia?

01-00:15:10
Cox: It was in Virginia. That was held in Blacksburg, Virginia at the military academy in Blacksburg, Virginia, VPI, [Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University]. And I think that began to open my eyes to a larger sense of a public affairs, governance, and such, which I would heavily be involved in later in my life.

01-00:15:31
Eardley-Pryor: It sounds like it. But the debate team—I'm wondering if Boys State was related to your work in debate as well?

01-00:15:37
Cox: Well, I think that was one of the reasons I was selected as a delegate from my high school. They selected, I don't recall, three, five of us. And I'm certain debate as well as my academic record helped.

01-00:15:53
Eardley-Pryor: I'm curious about this Warwick, the county where you moved to. Old Warwick is the city you moved to that became later Newport News, the city. What were some of your early memories of that place? I'm thinking it's geographically pitched right at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, right across from the big Norfolk military installations in Virginia. I'm just wondering what that space was like to grow up there through junior high and high school?

01-00:16:22
Cox: Oh, an absence of the natural world for one thing. It was a post-World War II expanding area of neighborhoods and shopping areas and so forth because Newport News was—is known globally as a premiere ship-building port across the Chesapeake from the Norfolk Naval air base of course. And so military, the government grants, the money coming in was rapidly expanding the region, so it was growing, growing, and absorbing Warwick as Newport News expanded.

01-00:16:59
I think I hungered for some experience with nature, and I was part of a small boys' club in my high school that would go camping sometimes just on the beach across the Chesapeake. But that remained with me as I went off to college in, I think, 1963 after I graduated to explore the areas around the University of Richmond campus, which was lovely and still is to this day.

01-00:17:30
Eardley-Pryor: Well, back in that Newport News area, I'm wondering also just a little bit about that social environment. You come from, what I imagine, would be

emotionally white space in southern West Virginia, perhaps not though. You told me that story about your grandfather standing up on behalf of the black coal worker. But I'm just wondering what the social relations were like in either of these places that you grew up.

01-00:17:54

Cox: In West Virginia, it was not particularly segregated. There was more interaction among families, though the elementary school was segregated. I can remember to this day water fountains that were labeled white or colored and so I know that made an impression on me. I do remember that as we drove into Warwick after our move, I saw black people walking along the sidewalk, and that struck me somehow as different. But my high school was totally segregated in 19—late fifties, early sixties, and race was absent from our consciousness.

01-00:18:44

The one formative moment I think came when I realized in college that my church that I had attended while I lived in Warwick was a totally segregated church with my father being told as an usher that if a black person came to the door to attend, that he was to escort them out. That stayed with me, and as I started questioning other issues of religion during my college years, I began to just grow angry at this kind of deception about human relations as well as some of the religious tenets of the Southern Baptist church I attended. I think those combined to really open a more social consciousness for me in college, and I participated in helping pass resolutions urging the college, Richmond College to begin to—desegregation. As a freshman, some of my upperclassmen friends pushed me out front, "You deliver the resolution in front of the chancellor." [laughs]

01-00:20:01

Eardley-Pryor: People around you knew even then, this is the guy we want to speak on our behalf. Take me back, if you don't mind—before we get too much into University of Richmond in that time—to the mid-1960s period of your high school experience. I have a note here that you attended Warwick High School from 1961 to '63, and that's just a three-year period. Did you graduate early?

01-00:20:24

Cox: No, no. I was there my sophomore, junior, and senior year, so I don't know how the dates work out, but I think that was the period.

01-00:20:36

Eardley-Pryor: And if you don't mind sharing, if you could. You mentioned debate being such a formative experience for you. It is something that helped you get into the University of Richmond eventually, and then, of course, throughout your career as a scholar and as an activist. What are some of the things that you remember from those early periods of debate, the topics that you were talking about and digging into? And what about it made it something you remained committed to?

01-00:21:02
Cox: Well, it was interesting because I had been an avid baseball player from the time I moved to Warwick until I graduated from high school. But I remember seeing a debate in my—when I was a sophomore in high school, and something struck me. I said, "I want to be able to do that." [laughs] I was so impressed with this boy's ability to stand up and respond and answer the argument of the other side with seemingly very little preparation—that verbal facility and confidence to make your way through this kind of controversy. And I was determined I was going to learn to debate, so I got one of my best friends at church to agree that we would start a debate program in our church. And we formed a two-person debate team and debated in front of the church. That was, I think, my early effort to try to get involved in this activity. I was finally promoted to join the debate team in high school and ended up traveling to different high schools in the region, debating and learning that skill. Some of the topics were federal aid to education, should strings be attached to the schools that receive federal aid? These were the early years of the debate over the federal local control of education. That's the one topic I definitely remember.

01-00:22:38
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, I'm just thinking, too—I mean you mentioned the federal dollars pouring into that Newport and Norfolk area in the fifties, the rise of the Cold War becoming such an established thing in the fifties and early sixties. I'm just saying I can see the federal influence in questions being something that would come up in high school debate.

01-00:22:58
Cox: Yeah. [laughs]

01-00:22:59
Eardley-Pryor: You also had mentioned a couple different times now the Southern Baptist religious environment. Can you share what—to what degree that was an influence on you or to what degree it was major factor in your social life at that time?

01-00:23:17
Cox: I think my social life through the church was more important than some of the theology that was coming from the pulpit. I entered that faith naturally through my parents. My father was raised as a Baptist. My mother was Methodist, but she agreed to raise the children in the Baptist Church. I didn't question it during my high school days. It just seemed that's what you grow into as most people, except religious views as part of their socialization. But a lot of friends, my first girlfriends, were through the church. It was later in college that a lot of that I began questioning.

01-00:24:04
Eardley-Pryor: Do you remember a moment where that questioning began for you? Is there a particular circumstance?

01-00:24:10
Cox: I do. In my first year or two in college at the University of Richmond, I was actually serving as a youth pastor at a nearby church, partly to supplement my income and help pay for college. And part of my duty was to teach young boys Sunday school class. And I remember one morning, I was just thinking aloud with them, "Why are we Christians? If we had been born in Israel, we may have been raised Jewish or in India, as a Hindu belief." And I paused for a moment, and one of the young boys said, "So why are we Christian then if it's just because of where we happen to be born?" And I could not answer him. And I realized if I had been born and had grown up in India, either Islam or Hinduism could have been as natural to me as my early absorption of Southern Baptist teachings. I thought about it for a while and anguished over it and finally went to the minister of that church and said, "I have to resign. I cannot, in conscience, continue to perform services here or teach kids in Sunday school when I'm doubting this set of principles." He was very—

01-00:25:41
Eardley-Pryor: It's an incredibly moral stance.

01-00:25:43
Cox: Yeah. Well, he—

01-00:25:43
Eardley-Pryor: I'm sorry, I was talking over you. Oh okay, it's just such a moral stance to take in that context, saying "I can't rightfully do this in good conscience," even at such a young age, especially as it was tied to your income.

01-00:25:55
Cox: [laughs] Well, there was that, but I was just in turmoil about it, and it was a part of growing anger at what I had been taught to believe in my early years in church. I couldn't accept, just increasingly started investigating some of the theological tenets, and it just didn't make sense to me. And, of course, college is this kind of expansive questioning period in your life, and I certainly went through that in college.

01-00:26:35
Eardley-Pryor: I can just see the expansion, the layers of expansion that are happening through your life of moving from Hinton, West Virginia to then Newport News to then the university and then having the sort of global perspective of questioning, and saying, "How would things be different when I think in a global term, what role do I play in this world?" I mean it seems like you're moving in this continually expanding consciousness.

01-00:27:00
Cox: I was, and that became more salient as some of the social issues that began to really unfold, for me at least, in the 1960s. I was at the University of Richmond from '63 to 1967, and during that period, civil rights was coming into its full force with Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] and others and the Vietnam War later—another year or two later beginning to really expand with

more and more military being shipped to Southeast Asia. And so I did begin thinking in more national and global terms about the issues of justice or the feelings of this isn't right, obviously.

01-00:27:50
Eardley-Pryor: What are some of those early memories that you have, either the civil rights activism on your radar or these international concerns vis-à-vis Cold War battles, like Vietnam for example?

01-00:28:02
Cox: Well, the conversations in the dorm, of course, about civil rights was occurring—that justice vehemently as it was than the rest of the society especially in the South, which Richmond was certainly the center of in the old confederacy. As a result, I participated in my first demonstration. It was a civil rights march in downtown Richmond, and I—TV cameras were filming it, and someone said to me, "You know your parents might see you." [laughs]

01-00:28:36
Eardley-Pryor: What were you feeling? What was your reaction to that?

01-00:28:38
Cox: Well, I thought, oh—you know, I kind of worried a little bit, but I just felt like okay, this is why I'm here. And I do know in terms of Vietnam, I remember a defining moment where I just grew angry in opposition to that war really sank into my head. News of what were called free-fire zones were coming out. Free-fire zones were those efforts in Vietnam where the American military would declare an area surrounding several villages as an area into which they could simply unload artillery, long-distance artillery fired—firing. It was a free-fire zone. The assumption was that village supports the Vietcong, so everyone in that village is an enemy, and it's demarcated as a free-fire zone. I thought that was so highly immoral. I could not understand that. And I remember intense debates in the evening with a friend—two friends about this tactic. And from that point on, I was interested in reading more about the history of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh and the nationalist sensibility of most of the communists that were nationalists as opposed to being interested in Soviet expansion. I borrowed history books reading to—because I was also participating in debate, and I knew that I had to be able to enunciate or defend the reasons why I would take a stance. And that certainly continued well into graduate school.

01-00:30:27
Eardley-Pryor: Well, you moved, you mentioned, from debate in high school as an avenue to getting into the University of Richmond. What's that story?

01-00:30:35
Cox: Well, the debate coach at the University of Richmond, Bert Bradley, was observing a high school tournament I believe in Charlottesville, Virginia. And I was debating in the tournament for Warwick High School, and I came to his attention apparently and talked with him. And he said, "Would you like to

debate at the University of Richmond?" I said, "I certainly would. I'm applying there now for admission. I hope to come." And I don't know if Bradley helped the admissions office or not—I like to think my high school records were acceptable. [laughs] But that—I knew that I had that contact in place even as I arrived as a very naïve young freshman and then joined the debate team at his invitation my first year and debated for four years there.

01-00:31:30
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. It sounds like you were already applying to college in high school. Is that something that was expected in your family? Had either of your parents attended university for example?

01-00:31:43
Cox: My father had attended the University of Vermont as part of officer candidate training school. He was an officer in the Army Air Force. My mother's family was a highly educated family. One of my great-great-grandmothers in Germany was a professor at Heidelberg University back in the 1800s. My mother's sister had wanted to attend college, I've read her college admissions paper, but she died young from pneumonia. My mother was unable to attend college because she developed tuberculosis, TB, and was placed in a sanitarium for health reasons for several years and didn't graduate even from her high school class. But she recovered after years and was a beautiful young woman and began dating my father.

01-00:32:41
Eardley-Pryor: And it sounds like they were strongly encouraging you to continue your own studies?

01-00:32:47
Cox: They were, but not in any high-pressured way. My mother began reading to me as a young child in West Virginia before I could read. Reading and books were always part of the house. I think it was simply a natural progression. And it was certainly a period when the federal government was spending a great deal of money for scholarships. Education was growing, expanding, and it was just part of the atmosphere I think that people growing up in a certain age and doing well in high school should think about college.

01-00:33:29
Eardley-Pryor: That debate experience, I'm sure, encouraged you to think about University of Richmond more specifically. But what was it about the University of Richmond that drew you there as opposed to other schools you might have gone to?

01-00:33:43
Cox: That's an interesting question. I know that the University of Richmond had a weekly radio program that was broadcast throughout the state, so I knew a great deal about the university. I had visited it, and it was an absolutely beautiful campus on the western edge of Richmond, not in an urban area at all. It was the beginning of the countryside. I don't think I was thinking very

broadly at the time about other colleges and universities. I did not have high school counselors that encouraged me to apply elsewhere. Richmond seemed almost a natural choice growing up in Virginia.

01-00:34:27
Eardley-Pryor: Did you know what you wanted to study when you began studying there?

01-00:34:31
Cox: Well, I assumed that I would be a religious studies major because I was still involved with the church. Because of debate, I became more and more interested in their communication major. It was actually called speech and dramatic arts at the time. I knew that I had a certain ability in speaking, and I thought that would be a natural area just to study more. But I was so committed to the humanities more generally and history especially. History, philosophy, religious studies ended up being minor areas and majored in communication and with that then thought more broadly about graduate schools elsewhere.

01-00:35:20
Eardley-Pryor: I'm wondering about social connections. In this transition where you began university, considered being in religious studies, went through this apostasy early on and really questioned your faith to the point that you left your work in youth ministry. But I'm wondering about social connections and whether there was some severing that happened. What kind of family dynamics might have happened as a result of you leaving this role in the church as you were going to college?

01-00:35:48
Cox: I did not experience or was aware of any tear in my family relationships. Like my parents were very understanding, my mother particularly who didn't think that a true spiritual sense was captured in an institution or church building. Not that she could accept this a little more easily. I did become somewhat distanced from my father during this period, and it was because in addition to leaving the church, I was beginning to differ from him on the Vietnam War. We didn't have major arguments about it. It was just kind of an unspoken difference that started emerging. But no, I'm glad I had good relations with my parents all through college.

01-00:36:44
Eardley-Pryor: Was that difference that emerged around Vietnam something that was patched later, or was that always a rift?

01-00:36:50
Cox: Oh, no, no, no. Both of my parents, we became very close, but I was increasingly living away from home at that point, college and then Chapel Hill, North Carolina at UNC. In later years, I became very close to my parents again, particularly as they grew older and needed some assistance. So, it started and ended on a very happy note.

01-00:37:22
Eardley-Pryor: That's nice. Thinking about some of these major events that you're experiencing while both in high school and through your undergraduate, one that stands out in my mind is the assassination of JFK [John F. Kennedy] in 1963. What are some of your memories of that moment?

01-00:37:39
Cox: Yeah. I had been supporting Eugene McCarthy principally because of his opposition to the Vietnam War. Bobby Kennedy—

01-00:37:48
Eardley-Pryor: I'm sorry, Robbie. I was thinking about JFK's assassination in 1963.

01-00:37:52
Cox: Oh, oh, yeah, well, all of those assassinations had major influence on me.

01-00:37:58
Eardley-Pryor: Yes, and RFK [Robert F. Kennedy], we can certainly get to as well.

01-00:38:00
Cox: Yeah. No, I remember the day it happened, I walked out of my English class and someone announced the news that he had been killed. I think it was shocking. I remember watching television with my parents when I returned home that weekend of the aftermath. It made an impression, but I don't have clear memory of exactly how it affected me. Just that it stayed with me. I think it began to open my eyes a little more to that broader social national scene because I remember I was a freshman in 1963 in November when he was assassinated, so that confluence of events, civil rights coming to my consciousness, then JFK being assassinated. That whole collage happened at this moment in US history where some very significant events impinged on all of our national consciousness.

01-00:39:10
Eardley-Pryor: Now, I'm thinking, too—even to step back to your senior year in '62 in the fall there—of the Cuban Missile Crisis and this real concern, at that moment, that this might be our last moments. There might be nuclear warfare that breaks out. Was that something that influenced you in any way, or that you have a memory of?

01-00:39:25
Cox: Well, I have a memory of this kind of looming doom hanging over us. We were practicing drills in school—getting under our desk and so forth. I do have a very clear memory of watching on black-and-white television with my parents the blockade and the announcement to the Russian ships getting closer, and it was an all-consuming consciousness for a number of days at that time.

01-00:39:56
Eardley-Pryor: Well, to move us through some other major events while you were in the university later. You'd mentioned Vietnam as a major factor with the draft

being initiated with troops on the ground in 1965, the increase of civil rights concerns and awareness, and your eventual participation in marches during university as well. Are there other events in the sixties that really stand out that you feel like had an influence on you in some way?

01-00:40:26
Cox: No, I think we've covered the civil rights, Vietnam, the alienation from my religious faith. I was just intensively involved in national collegiate debate. That absorbed a lot of my time and extensive travel during that period all over the country and then with professional career kinds of thinking by my junior, senior year.

01-00:40:55
Eardley-Pryor: What were you thinking in terms of career?

01-00:40:58
Cox: I was very consciously making a choice between law and graduate school in the humanities, and I remember thinking law, it's going to be just a drudgery. It's the hours that I just—it's—and it's not connected to these other interests I have. And I remember thinking that communication was such an interdisciplinary field in the humanities that I didn't have to make a decision yet. I could go to graduate school in communication studies, and that would become a more focused area as I got further along.

01-00:41:41
Eardley-Pryor: But grad school, in particular, was something that—it was almost assumed for you, in your mind?

01-00:41:46
Cox: It was, it was.

01-00:41:50
Eardley-Pryor: How did you end up deciding that University of Pittsburgh is where you would go to pursue graduate study?

01-00:41:56
Cox: By that point, because I was so angry at the deception over civil rights especially in my childhood and the sweltering sense of segregation in the South, I swore that I would not attend any university in the South. I would accept the first fellowship that I was offered in the north somewhere. [laughs] As an East Coast guy, I was thinking only in terms of north, south, not west. And the University of Georgia offered me a fellowship, but I turned it down. The University of Pittsburgh offered a fellowship, national defense fellowship that's relevant later, and I accepted it also because the director of the debate program there came to know of me through my intercollegiate debating that had a debate also. So, it felt an easy move into graduate school in the north and continuing to study more intensively those subjects that interested me most.

01-00:43:03
Eardley-Pryor: What were some of your colleagues for undergrad doing? What were their trajectories, and where did they go in relation to where you went?

01-00:43:12
Cox: I confess I only know of a few of them because unlike others that are avid alumni boosters, I was not. One of my best friends became a social justice minister who's still a minister today, standing outside of prison subjecting people to the death penalty. A young woman I briefly dated has become an international banker in London. You know most were going into other professional careers as opposed to trade skills or something. It was more of my grad school colleagues that I've stayed in touch with a little more.

01-00:43:59
Eardley-Pryor: That sounds to me like your step into grad school, especially to leave the South and to move to the north, was in some ways charting your own path.

01-00:44:06
Cox: Yeah, I was actually so ready for that. I realized that I was more of an intellectual. That sounds weird but I had—I was keenly interested in intellectual pursuits—study, reading, developing positions—that I knew that graduate school was the more advanced college in a sense. It just made sense. That was the trajectory.

01-00:44:36
Eardley-Pryor: And Pittsburgh offered you this fellowship, and you mentioned your interest in communications. What was it that you really dove into for your master's degree there in Pittsburgh?

01-00:44:46
Cox: I did not have to write a master's thesis. It was an arrangement, after the first year or so, you would continue into the doctoral program if you were performing well. So, by that point, I was heavily invested in studies interestingly of classical rhetorical theory from the Sophists, who were actually decent guys as opposed to their pejorative term today, Aristotle, Gorgias, and then the Latin scholars or orators, [Marcus Tullius] Cicero, and so forth. I had an intensive background in classical rhetorical theory, but I did not want to learn Latin and so I couldn't go further in studies in that area. So, I began to think through the relationship of rhetorical studies to what I was seeing within contemporary social movements. It started to fascinate me that the framing of messages, the speeches, the arguments being developed, this great contest in America and the arguments on the different sides, and of course that was part of my debate experience, argumentation. And since I was so heavily involved in the Vietnam antiwar protests by this point, my dissertation subject emerged out of that. I was attending massive demonstrations in Washington, DC, the march on the Pentagon in October 1967, and then later the big Moratorium March, in I think November of '69.

01-00:46:28
Eardley-Pryor: What are some of your memories of either of those marches? They were so important and also nationally influential, but then it sounds like they were very personal to you in the studies you were up to.

01-00:46:39
Cox: It just felt as part of my generation at the time through all colleges across America that we had to engage in that moment in opposition to the Vietnam War. And so, it was simply an extension of the kind of student consciousness that combined studies, in this case in the humanities, with just being out in the field working on civil rights or antiwar, peace initiatives, and such. I do remember the march on the Pentagon in 1967 was a pretty dramatic moment as massive numbers of people marched across the bridge into the Pentagon area and assembled. And we realized that there was an advanced group of demonstrators that intended to actually occupy the Pentagon, and as a result, military forces were arrayed around the perimeter of the Pentagon. And at a certain point, a number of protesters charged the doors of the Pentagon, and I have a vivid memory at that point of the doors of the Pentagon being flung open and thousands of soldiers flooding out of the Pentagon overwhelming these poor, little, peaceful demonstrators—you know, peaceful while they were charging the Pentagon. [laughs] It was a dramatic moment, and the country was just aflame literally in some cases, but in terms of division and polarization references being made to it today with our current polarization. So given the emotional affective investment I had in those issues, I thought I could bring my intellectual studies in communication and rhetorical theory to bear on this movement, what was happening, and then interrogate it as part of my project. So that became my dissertation.

01-00:48:41
Eardley-Pryor: How common was that at that time to have this sort of activist engagement in the world around you, and also then channel that through your scholastic pursuits as a graduate student?

01-00:48:54
Cox: Well, certainly, it was not in terms of my professors. The faculty at the time at the University of Pittsburgh, they were a very progressive, left faculty. They were introducing me to alternative histories, radical theories, and so forth, but they were not out in the streets. And some of my colleagues were at the demonstrations with me. A few of them became as actively involved in ongoing movements when they started their careers, many of them also at research universities, R1 universities. And I, in my first years at the University of North Carolina, was not as active in demonstrations because I was—initially I started a tenure track, but I was the director of the debate program. So, I was traveling a great deal and working with my debate students who were going to Harvard [University] and Northwestern [University] in Chicago, and so that was intensive. And I was also having to prepare for tenure of course, and I had to get my own research going, so I didn't give a lot

of thought to that involvement again until I had received tenure in 1979, I think.

01-00:50:18
Eardley-Pryor: It's cool to hear you talk about these Pitt professors you had encouraging your engagement and incorporation of that into your scholarship. And it makes me think about this generational framework I've heard that a lot of the professors in the late sixties and early seventies came of age during that radical moment of the 1930s during the Depression, and that they saw this next generation of radicalism as their opportunity to mentor. I'm wondering if that was something that you experienced at Pitt?

01-00:50:48
Cox: Only in a few cases. My major professor, mentor was a World War II vet, but he was picked out of his unit in Europe to attend Oxford and I think it—and became a historian and studied history in Oxford. And I think it was more that influence that it made sense to become adept at your discipline and to be able to speak to contemporary issues. Some of the other professors were relatively young, had not gone through the thirties.

01-00:51:30
Eardley-Pryor: Can you share a little bit—

01-00:51:30
Cox: They're old—

01-00:51:30
Eardley-Pryor: I'm sorry, go ahead.

01-00:51:32
Cox: No, I'm just going to say that they were older than I was, but they weren't the gray-haired professors that some of my older mentors were.

01-00:51:41
Eardley-Pryor: Hmm. I was going to ask if you would be able to share some of your dissertation research, and what you recall of that experience—of doing that research while being in the streets, and then coming back to write about the rhetorical structure of the Vietnam War and antiwar movement. Could you just share a little bit about your dissertation experience?

01-00:52:01
Cox: Yeah, a couple of quick events: I had to obtain the audiotapes of these speeches at the mass demonstrations because those became the text that I needed to study to work with. And I discovered a radio station—I think it was in Baltimore now—that had all of the audio archives. They had preserved them, and they graciously just shipped me all of their original audio tapes and so I had to find people to help transcribe them. So I have thousands of pages of transcribed audiotapes of Vietnam War speeches.

01-00:52:42

The other part of this was that I was campaigning for Eugene McCarthy as part of the antiwar movement, and as part of that, I was flying over to Cincinnati, your hometown—

01-00:52:53

Eardley-Pryor: My hometown, yeah.

01-00:52:55

Cox: I was canvassing door to door for Clean Gene McCarthy and was able to arrange a large rally at the University of Cincinnati where someone was able to get the actor Paul Newman to fly in, to speak at the rally we had organized. And I had the privilege of introducing Paul Newman to this cheering crowd of thousands of UC [University of Cincinnati] students. A short guy actually; he had a little podium he stood on or a stool behind the podium.

01-00:53:29

Eardley-Pryor: Great. But you were organizing these rallies to the tune of thousands of students in Cincinnati on behalf of Gene McCarthy?

01-00:53:36

Cox: Yeah. Well, I and three or four others that were working in Cincinnati were doing that.

01-00:53:41

Eardley-Pryor: How did you come to do this work on behalf of Eugene McCarthy's campaign in 1968?

01-00:53:47

Cox: Well, I had committed to supporting him just on my own but then hooked up with the McCarthy campaign in Pennsylvania, and they said they needed canvassers in Ohio, particularly Cincinnati. So that was close to Pittsburgh after you hop a quick flight over and to leave the car. Yeah, there I became aware that the arguments unfolding at the large demonstrations were either resonating or not on the streets as I talked one-on-one with individuals and became more sensitive to this dynamic, this communication dynamic. And I think that helped me appreciate or encouraged my use of a more critical lens and looking at some of the rhetorical strategies of the Vietnam antiwar movement.

01-00:54:41

Eardley-Pryor: When you were in the field doing this kind of engagement and really taking the things you're studying to the streets in that way, were you testing out theories? Were you testing out ideas as to what worked and what didn't, or were you just absorbing as a scholar would?

01-00:54:55

Cox: No, it was more the latter. I was never a quantitative social scientist. I've been trained as a rhetorical critic working with texts and the ability to do interpretive work that were respectful of the text. It was also not a period

where there was the kind of advanced field testing of theory and operationalizing of certain variables to be able to test in the field that a lot of grad students, of course, today are doing.

01-00:55:26
Eardley-Pryor: Nineteen sixty-eight was such a radical year in so many ways in part because of that election and social movements that just seemed to explode across the scene, including the assassinations that we talked about with Martin Luther King [Jr.] in '68, Robert Kennedy in '68. What are some of your memories of that time period being in grad school and doing some of this organizing of those powerful radical moments?

01-00:55:54
Cox: Yeah. Well, I think I and my generation were feeling very much alive on the cusp of danger and history-defining moments overlaid with the music of the sixties and a lot of the social events. It was a complete intense period of life, and it was certainly motivating most of my work either inside the academy or in the streets or at the Pentagon. I was keenly alive, I would say, intellectually as well as socially.

01-00:56:37
Eardley-Pryor: I have a note here that there was a Peace candidate named Norval [D.] Reece campaigning in Pennsylvania against US Senator Hugh [Doggett] Scott [Jr.], and you also were engaged in some activism around that?

01-00:56:49
Cox: Yeah, that was part of this period, and Norval Reece was Quaker who was running as a Peace candidate, and so I went to work. He had no chance against this incumbent, powerful senator Hugh Scott, but he named me his campaign coordinator for Pittsburgh. And so I organized voter education events, took literature out to canvass neighborhoods, and so forth. And on election eve, I remember going to a nearby women's college to watch the results of the Senate race, and I couldn't believe. I thought we were going to win because I was still so naïve about politics, electoral politics especially, and I just saw all the numbers piling up and the poor Peace candidate didn't have a prayer.

01-00:57:45
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, and [Richard Milhous] Nixon's victory, too, at that point in '68. But how is that a role in your life that—?

01-00:57:51
Cox: Well, that actually was a pivotal moment for me in terms of my political consciousness because I had switched from support of McCarthy to Robert F. Kennedy Jr. when he announced his candidacy. He was going to California to campaign, and it was clear that he was moving for a nomination, and I said, "I'm going to—after California, I'm going to work for Bobby Kennedy." And Kenney, of course, was assassinated, and I and others who considered ourselves part of what was called the New Left at the time swore we would not support Hubert [H.] Humphrey, the ultimate Democratic candidate who

had been Lyndon [B.] Johnson's vice president, the drugstore liberal we called him. He was compromised by his support of the Vietnam War. It was immoral to vote for Hubert Humphrey.

01-00:58:50

And I remember when I was in Cincinnati at one point that I listened to a lecture by an old-line party communist speaker, and he said, "You young, New Left people, you don't understand history." He said, "If you don't defeat Richard Nixon, the arc of history will be bent in a way that it will take decades and decades to straighten in the progressive arc that we are now in the cusp of achieving." And we sat in the audience young, knew-it-all, New Left and said, "You're an old man, that's old theory, we're the New Left. We're taking a moral stance." I did not vote in the 1968 election between Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon, and of course, Nixon won by a very slim margin, one or 200,000 votes I think, popular vote. I learned a lesson from that, and I have never sat out an election and have counseled my own graduate students who always were very progressive students, "Don't do this. Forget Ralph Nader, Al Gore versus [George W.] Bush, don't make the mistake I made."

01-01:00:15

Eardley-Pryor: Well, that's interesting. Yeah, I'm thinking Nader and Gore versus [George W.] Bush in 2000, even Hillary [Rodham] Clinton in 2016, and the conflict with Bernie Sanders within the Democratic Party at the time. This year if they're—Bernie Sanders, still holdovers that are wondering whether they're going to vote for [Joseph] Biden [Jr.] against [Donald] Trump, which—I mean all of that, these echoes seem to keep coming back.

01-01:00:37

Cox: No, I think that is a recurring theme in progressive circles—how much do you compromise and how much is this simply a kind of self-righteousness as opposed to an impact on history.

01-01:00:53

Eardley-Pryor: I had a really great conversation with Carl Pope in advance preparation for our discussion here. And one of the things he mentioned, that stood out for him, was that you are not an ideologue, that you were more of a philosopher, that you don't have an ideological point of view that you stay rigid to—except as we'll talk to later, on the anti-immigration battles that happened, with a very clear stance of where you wanted to be on that. It just sounds to me like this moment in 1968, this election around Nixon, was an opening for you, politically, in terms of thinking not so ideologically. Is that how you would describe it, too?

01-01:01:34

Cox: Well, it was certainly an education in political reality, political realism. I am deeply committed to this day and its set of progressive values, but it's not as an ideologue. It's the effort to move them. Well, one of Carl Pope's old

maxims I recall is that your purpose is to advance history one step further than where it would have gone without your efforts, to take it one step further. And if you are locked into a rigid ideology, you'll fail to advance it even that one further step when you had the opportunity to do so.

01-01:02:17

Eardley-Pryor: That's really beautiful. I want to talk a little bit about the draft. So, as you're winding down your graduate work, you're working on your dissertation and pouring over these texts you have, these transcribed speeches, I imagine that your draft number is still coming forward. The draft is still on all the way through the early seventies. So, what are your thoughts as to what's happening outside in the world, what your next steps would be beyond graduate school?

01-01:02:46

Cox: Well, I actually was reclassified 1-A. I lost my national defense fellowship. It was unrelated to defense, but it happened to be a federal fellowship available that I was—that I had. When the new General [Lewis Blaine] Hershey, head of the selective service board came in, eliminated deferments under the federal fellowship and so I was suddenly eligible for the draft, and my draft board sent me a notice. I have been reclassified 1-A; I was to report for physical examination on a certain date preparatory to being inducted.

01-01:03:33

Eardley-Pryor: And this is while you're in grad school?

01-01:03:34

Cox: I was in grad school, and I'm thinking not only do I want to finish graduate school, but this is an immoral war; I will not participate in this war. I had been at a debate in Montreal, Canada, and had made friends there, and they were telling me about the underground railroad there for the draft evaders in the US. I doubt I would have done that, but I wanted to find some way to resist this war by not serving.

01-01:04:05

But I'll tell you, even back in college, we had intensive debates over the ethics of even making that kind of choice because if you got a deferment or found a way to evade the draft, that same slot would go to someone else, most likely someone not in college, you know, that whole counter argument. And it tore us up in terms of the decisions we were trying to make, and some of my colleagues in graduate school did go into the military when they were drafted, and others were channeled, the phrase used at the time. Had been a brilliant, young political science graduate student intending to go on for a PhD at the University of Chicago I think it was or the University of Michigan, and he was being drafted. He became the principal of a local Catholic high school, which carried a deferment and remained until this day as the principal of that high school. And so he would tell us, "I was channeled. This was not my career choice, but I had to make that decision."

01-01:05:20

I was able to find a faculty position at a nearby women's college, Mount Mercy College and that carried a deferment, teaching deferment. So I continued to not be drafted, but it meant that I lost my fellowship. I had to supplement that income somewhere other than my faculty salary. They were paying me bare bottom because they knew that I was getting the deferment and that's why I was there. So I volunteered as a medical subject for the heart transplant team that was working at the University of Pittsburgh medical school. This was those early years in the study of heart transplants, and they were testing a new drug that would suppress the rejection of the new heart, and they needed human subjects that entered that phase three of the trial, but they were paying a lot of money for human subjects to do this because it was a rather risky phase three human subject experiment.

01-01:06:21

Eardley-Pryor: And so, you enrolled in this while also at this Catholic girls' school teaching?

01-01:06:25

Cox: I did, yes. So that was my second way of earning money. I went through three trial experiments where they were sticking tubes into me, injecting either the placebo or the experimental drug into my heart with the surgical team that was working on heart transplants overseeing this. And I was being advised by a medical student who lived in the apartment building where I lived not to do it. He said, "It's too risky." I said, "Man, I need the money. I was off my fellowship and Mount Mercy is not paying me enough to make the rent." So I did that for a while and taught at this women's school and—but I had to cut my graduate course load to the bare bottom, and as a result, I finished everything but the dissertation but got an offer from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill for a tenure track position because faculties were expanding during this era. And I said, "I haven't finished my dissertation." They said, "You will be here as an instructor until you finish your dissertation and then you'll become a tenure track assistant."

01-01:07:40

Eardley-Pryor: Wow, what an opportunity.

01-01:07:43

Cox: I was not going to accept the offer because it was in the South. It was in North Carolina, and I had sworn I would never return to the South because of segregation and racism. And a good friend of mine said, "Are you effing crazy? [laughs] The Vietnam War is still going on. UNC is a great research university."

01-01:08:05

Eardley-Pryor: And, "You're doing heart transplant medications to make ends meet, come on, man."

01-01:08:10
Cox: So I said, "Well, I'll go there for a couple of years until the war is over and then I'll find a position at another university elsewhere in the north." And I fell in love with UNC, Chapel Hill, the people's republic as we call it. It just became this wonderful, progressive but intensely an R-1 research university. We'll talk later I guess, but they allowed me to do a lot of things in terms of my fieldwork and activism to begin to merge those two in my publications.

01-01:08:48
Eardley-Pryor: God, what an amazing entrée into UNC in that period.

01-01:08:53
Cox: Yeah.

01-01:08:55
Eardley-Pryor: In that period is also another key moment that might have some sort of relevance for the work that you ended up doing, both as a scholar and an activist, and that's Earth Day, the first Earth Day in 1970. I'm wondering what are some of your memories of this burgeoning environmental moment while you were in school and amidst all of these other social conflicts that are happening?

01-01:09:16
Cox: Yeah, the first Earth Day was in April 1970, and I was preparing to move from Pittsburgh to Chapel Hill come January of '71. Earth Day was obviously a major media event, and I attended local events. I think I did something at Mount Mercy College for their students. But it was after I arrived at UNC that I began to think more in terms of working with what was then called the ecology movement. But I would not have as much opportunity until a few years later after I had finished my dissertation, finished coaching their debate team at UNC, which I was hired to do, and began my own scholarly work as an assistant professor. At that point, I became very interested. I wasn't doing anything with it for a while, but it was after I received tenure that I sat myself down and had a conversation with myself that I needed to return to this offering of myself beyond academe. I think that was just part of what I had become by that point. And so I started volunteering with the Sierra Club. That's an entirely different story in terms of how I got involved with Sierra Club. [laughs]

01-01:10:45
Eardley-Pryor: Well, yeah, before we dive into that, maybe this would be a point for us to take our first break. We've been talking for about an hour. We'll just step back for just a moment. Does that sound good to you?

01-01:10:55
Cox: That sounds good. Okay.

[break in audio]

01-01:11:00

Eardley-Pryor: Great. All right, Robbie, so you had just shared about this wildly intense period in around 1970 as you're finishing your dissertation, getting a job offer, moving to North Carolina into Chapel Hill, but wondering in your head whether you're going to stay there or not. What was that experience like as you did move into Chapel Hill and begin this new job while still trying to write your dissertation?

01-01:11:25

Cox: Well, two things: I was directing the debate program initially and traveling extensively with them. That delayed the completion of the dissertation a bit. I actually did not finish and defend it until 1973, two years later. I was becoming more and more interested in an area of research that came out of my studies of argumentation and rhetorical theory. And one of the early articles that I wrote that stays with me as I've entered the environmental field was something called "The Die Is Cast." ["The Die Is Cast: Topical and Ontological Dimensions of the Locus of the Irreparable," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68 (1982): 227–239.]

That's a reference to [Julius] Caesar's movement toward Rome when he crossed the Rubicon, and he said in Latin, "The die is cast, I'm now irretrievably, irreparably committed to going on to Rome." And I took this idea of the irreparable as a standalone construct that had enormous rhetorical power behind it, just the efficacy of an appeal to the irreparable because it conjured senses of finality and particularly in our own existential sense of being an irreparable being. We're finite, we will die, and knowing that future orientation gives special urgency to the choices we make now. And I was beginning to see that in relationship to endangered species, particularly the loss of ecosystems and wilderness that once extinct, it's forever. In fact, I used that in the research piece. And so I think before I thought of conjuring a new field of environmental communication, I was still trying to orient some of my early intellectual work in terms of rhetorical appeals that resonate with areas like environment, species, other finite but urgent and important values.

01-01:13:42

Eardley-Pryor: And your concern about this growing environmental awareness, it seems, through the seventies as you're moving through your early years in Chapel Hill, where are these influences coming from for you? I guess where that question is coming from is this argument around "the irreparable." Where did you latch on to that? What was the impetus in shaping your thoughts on it?

01-01:14:09

Cox: Well, one of the earlier intellectual influences I had in rhetorical theory was a Belgian philosopher, Chaïm Perelman, who wrote about these different constructs that underlay a lot of traditional rhetorical theory. He hinted at something dealing with the irreversible, the irreparable, but he didn't develop it. I gravitated toward that because I was sensing that in my—as I was backpacking in western forests in North Carolina and news of endangered

species, I'm sensing the irreparable had broad application undergirding the discourse around nature and the environment. So, I didn't take it that far with the environmental interest. I wanted to tease out first the theoretical underpinnings, and so I was bringing in [Martin] Heidegger and others to really try to flesh out this notion of the irreparable and human existential finality as a rhetorical appeal. [laughs]

01-01:15:13
Eardley-Pryor: That's fantastic. And rhetorical theory is the work you were doing, especially in that early period in the seventies, in establishing yourself as a scholar in a R1 university. What were some of the rhetorical theory courses that you were teaching and the things that you were really drawn to academically?

01-01:15:35
Cox: Okay. Can we pause for a second?

01-01:15:37
Eardley-Pryor: Of course.

01-01:15:39
Cox: My dog just came into the room and he's—

[break in audio]

01-01:15:44
Eardley-Pryor: You were saying about rhetorical theory and some of your interests in that 1970s period.

01-01:15:50
Cox: Yeah, it was principally developing the—these notions of argumentation of the different aspects of reasoning and how they're structured and such. Yeah, but I was quickly losing interest in that area of research and I think I was being drawn more and more to the study of social movements because that had been my academic training and increasingly in the late seventies in the environment, though I hadn't made the merger into my scholarship yet. The pivotal moment comes through my meeting of this lovely young graduate student named Julia, Julia [T.] Wood. I met Julia Wood when she was studying briefly at UNC as a graduate student. She went on for her PhD at the University of Pennsylvania—no, at Penn State [University], I'm sorry, in Happy Valley [State College], Pennsylvania. We decided to continue our relationship, and I would go up in the summers to be with her. She got a job offer from UNC-Chapel Hill in the same department that I was in, in the communication studies department. And so we informed the department chair that we were intending to marry, and the problem was that at that point in the late seventies, UNC, as many institutions, had an old nepotism rule, that married couples could not be on the same tenure track in the same department. And her ability to accept the job hinged on whether we'd be married or not, so we decided to challenge the nepotism rule, and she accepted the job offer, and the university backed down, and they made us sign a pledge that neither of us

could ever be the chair of the department while we were married, and we said, "Where do we sign?" We didn't want the administrative burden of chairing the department. So, we ended up being colleagues all these years in the same department. But I mention that because it was Julia that really introduced me to the Sierra Club.

01-01:18:09
Eardley-Pryor: How so?

01-01:18:09
Cox: At one period, we were racing in small, sailboat regattas, sloop-rigged sailboats, and we were at a regatta on Smith Mountain Lake in western Virginia, in a beautiful mountain lake area. And it was August, there was no wind, we were becalmed on this flat lake surface baking in the sun. I was looking at the forest in the mountains surrounding the lake and saying to Julia, "I would love to be just walking through this forest." She then surprised me a month later on my birthday by giving me a subscription to *Sierra* magazine, and in it were lists of backpacking trips in West Virginia, and I said, "Well, yeah, I'm going to do one of those." And so in 1979, I went on a backpacking trip to the Dolly Sods Wilderness area in northeastern West Virginia, met other Sierra Club members. You had to be a member of the Sierra Club to go on a backpacking trip with the Club. And I said, "You know this idea of wilderness, I want to just work with this idea," and they said, "Well, you know the Sierra Club has local groups in your area," and I didn't know that. And instead of a statewide organization called a chapter, there were local groups in Charlotte, and in my area, the area of The Research Triangle, Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill, there was a group called the Research Triangle Group. So, I said, "I'll attend one of those meetings and—"

01-01:19:52
Eardley-Pryor: And this is the late 1970s?

01-01:19:55
Cox: This was 1979.

01-01:19:57
Eardley-Pryor: Great. And this is around the time period where you also were obtaining tenure?

01-01:20:03
Cox: Exactly, the same year I believe. So, things merged. Thank you for calling that to my attention, because receiving tenure in '79 and experiencing this moment on this backpacking trip in the interest reawakened in protecting, working with wilderness, I remember sitting down in front of the fireplace in our home and saying, "Okay, I have this job security at tenure, I'll continue my research," but just my whole background was speaking, I needed to return something to give something back. And I think that early background in West Virginia we discussed loomed again, and I thought, wilderness, working with the ecology movement seemed so appropriate. I study social movements, I've

been in the Civil Rights Movement, I've studied the Vietnam movement, it seemed only natural as the ecology movement was becoming more and more a massive or a large environmental happening. And so, I made the commitment to move further both in my research and in beginning to work with the local Sierra Club.

01-01:21:23
Eardley-Pryor: That's fantastic. And it was in part because, as you mentioned, that Julia gave you this subscription from an offhand comment of just saying, "Gosh, those forests sure look nice?"

01-01:21:33
Cox: Yeah, and she kids that she's regretted that because it changed my life radically in terms of being away from home for so many years at a time. But just to finish one thing on the UNC side that's related to that, by the 1980s as I had become more involved in the Sierra Club, but I was beginning to turn more of my academic research to social movements again, I became interested in testing the idea of whether a subfield might emerge by articulating or joining communications studies with environmental studies, and I was calling it environmental communication. I started with a symposium in San Francisco with some colleagues around the country talking about the idea.

01-01:22:25
Eardley-Pryor: Why San Francisco?

01-01:22:27
Cox: Our national professional convention was held in San Francisco that year.

01-01:22:32
Eardley-Pryor: It just so happens that the headquarters of the Sierra Club was also there.

01-01:22:34
Cox: It just so happened. Well, and I managed to get the media director for the Sierra Club, whom I knew, to come in and speak to the symposium. And out of that came not only academic conferences, this attempting to begin developing the study of those who were interested but spread in different parts of the communication discipline initially. But ultimately this has become more of a transdisciplinary area of people in different disciplines with different training but working on a common set of problems that interest them in bringing together nature and media communication interests. And so that—

01-01:23:16
Eardley-Pryor: When—

01-01:23:17
Cox: Oh, go ahead, yeah?

01-01:23:18
Eardley-Pryor: When was that early conference that you initiated things in San Francisco?

01-01:23:23
Cox: Well, I think that probably was 19—or late—mid—somewhere in the mid to late eighties, I think.

01-01:23:36
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, just for a general sense of time, just trying to think about what was—

01-01:23:38
Cox: Yeah. And I'll get that for you and provide it. ["Environmental Advocacy and Habermas' 'System-World,'" seminar in "Issues in the Study of Environmental Advocacy," Speech Communication Association, San Francisco, Nov. 18, 1989.]

01-01:23:40
Eardley-Pryor: That's fantastic though. I want to go back and revisit the importance that Julia Wood plays in your life. You mentioned meeting her in 1972. And I'd just love to hear the story of how y'all met, and how that relationship evolved in this distance context while you're both studying communications. Can you tell me some of those early stories between you and Julia?

01-01:24:05
Cox: When she was studying on the UNC campus, she came by my building one day and happened to lean in my door as I was sitting there with one of my debate students. And it was summer, and I recall she was wearing a sundress, and she had her sandals holding them in her hand and long brunette hair and leaned against my door and just fortuitously said, "Are you Dr. Cox?" And I don't know if she knew of me. And I have this image that's still in my mind of that moment, and I said, "Oh, my Lord, that is someone I really want to know." [laughs] So that was a distinct, clear emotional moment for me. We began to see each other at some point later in the year and then she went away. But before she did, we said, "We'll write, we'll just keep in touch." Before the advent of social media, internet, so we were sending letters, and maybe every two weeks, a phone call if we could afford it, and then I would go up during the summers. And I would continue doing my research during the summers, but I would be there at State College as she was finishing. She actually completed her dissertation in record time at Penn State in two years—she's a very smart lady—and then received the job offer at UNC, which I spoke about. And when she joined the faculty, she was already producing research that was more than some of the older senior professors that were starting to just ease off.

01-01:25:57
Eardley-Pryor: In all of the research that I have done and people I have spoken with to prepare for our conversation, Robbie, everyone says what a dynamo Julia is, both as a person and just how wonderful she is, but also as an academic powerhouse, I mean as a real leader in her specialty.

01-01:26:14
Cox: She is. Her specialty is interpersonal communication and gender and culture as they influenced relationships. Her textbook, *Gendered Lives* [*Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, & Culture*, 13th ed., 2019, co-author, Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz] is in I think the thirteenth edition, and it's the premiere college textbooks in those—in that study area. She ended up receiving two different endowed [permanent] chairs at UNC and widely acknowledged. So she keeps me on my toes, and it's been interesting. We have no children, we were not able, and we—but we share enough of the academic culture and background that we understood each other's area and could be supportive of one another. And that certainly came to my selfish benefit when she supported me as I traveled away from home when I was Sierra Club president.

01-01:27:17
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, in order to do that kind of work that you ended up doing, you have to have a partner who is incredibly supportive. Yeah.

01-01:27:23
Cox: Yeah, sure.

01-01:27:22
Eardley-Pryor: Otherwise it wouldn't work.

01-01:27:25
Cox: No.

01-01:27:28
Eardley-Pryor: Tell me, if you would, a little bit more about this founding of the field that became the environmental communications. Who were some of the other people that were instrumental in your efforts to build this up as a subdiscipline and to become its own transdisciplinary field?

01-01:27:44
Cox: Well, one of the early colleagues in this effort was Professor Stephen [P.] Depoe. He's chair of the communication department at the University of Cincinnati actually. Steve and I worked to develop some of these conferences, others as well. But Steve ended up initiating an academic journal called *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*—nature and communication. As a result of that journal, more and more scholars became interested in attending these conferences we were beginning initially in the United States, but since then some of the conferences now are in Europe and other places.

01-01:28:33
And the field itself, I think the timing of it resonated with the growing interest of a number of scholars who were working in different disciplines but studying media or some aspect of communication like risk scholars were studying risk communication, urban planning scholars were studying the communication with stakeholders, governmental, political science people were studying EPA's [Environmental Protection Agency] communication with

stakeholders. And we were trying to bring all of this together to just ask some basic questions, how does—how do humans just represent or articulate what they sense of nature, or what constitutes an environmental problem? Because that's human—a human construct in a lot of ways to bring it to other's attention as a problem that demands attention. And so we wanted the field to center in this broader debate that happens in the public sphere. All of these different voices that are contending to represent their interest when it impinges upon what impacts nature or what environmental problems are addressed or in what ways.

01-01:29:49

So today, it has become an international association, International Environmental Communication Association, with scholars from all over the world globally, US, Europe certainly heavily but New Zealand, Australia, Japan, India, China now. One of my books was translated into Chinese recently. It's been gratifying to see that field really evolve. And even as a professor emeritus now, I'm still able to contribute some chapters or occasional articles, particularly when it comes to a kind of maintenance of the idea of the field and premises behind it.

01-01:30:32

Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean by that? What is it you see as your role in helping reclaim its roots?

01-01:30:40

Cox: Well, for example, at Routledge out of London came—asked me to coedit a volume that defined the field with the scholar Anders Hansen in England. And so, I wrote the introductory chapter that defined the growth and the premises underlying the field, the basic assumptions and the heuristic questions that give rise to research programs, and that was just 2015. I didn't really retire when I did that. Well now, they're doing a revision of that, so I'm currently revising that chapter, and in the last five years, the explosion of scholarship in this area in attempting to continually find what holds this transdisciplinary field together and to articulate that in a book that seeks to represent the field to a global audience now.

01-01:31:36

Eardley-Pryor: What are some of these themes that you've seen, from the basis of the field in your early years in the early eighties up to the present as it's continuing to evolve? What are some of those themes that you've seen change in, maybe, ways that you are not happy or that you are? What are some of the ways you've seen this field evolve in ways that you like or don't?

01-01:32:01

Cox: Well, I mean, the topics are environmental subjects—wind, nuclear energy, wilderness, species—so, they are always evolving, changing, and some remain the same. But what's interesting about an academic field is the way we approach this, how we study it. What is it that we claim to be finding as we

study this field? I'll give you an example with media studies that comes into environmental communication subjects. Initially, media studies of environmental media were content analysis, reading a text, but increasingly scholars are really demanding that we began to relate media coverage with outcomes. How does the particular framing of the risks around nuclear energy impact audience's perceptions of risk, or the credibility of scientists, or a willingness to take action on something to really bring this fully into the realm of communication in the public sphere in which different interests are striving to succeed in representing nature or problems in their manner?

01-01:33:16

Eardley-Pryor: That sounds to me—it echoes, in my mind, of your work on the article "Beyond Frames" ["Beyond Frames: Recovering the Strategic in Climate Communication," *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 4:1 (2010), 122–133] in which you're talking about how efforts are mobilized, how is it that the types of environmental communications is actually working towards mobilization, and what are the proper framing devices in this modern context. What you're saying there about these transitions that are happening over time, it sounds like you're deeply involved in helping shape.

01-01:33:43

Cox: I've been involved in some debates in the field. With the article you're referring to, I actually leveled a critique of the interest in framing because it was isolated from any kind of larger strategic design that would produce outcomes. And so, the thrust of that article was to reclaim the heuristic of the strategic, of strategy. Frames had to be related to a particular timing, the ability of an audience to intervene in some system of power arrangements that mattered and to bring all of this together in a more holistic way. So, in those ways, sometimes the field evolves. Right now, there's a huge evolution away from traditional print media to the study of new technologies, digital media and such, and even from photographs to 360-degree immersive technologies to appreciate nature.

01-01:34:49

Eardley-Pryor: That's wonderful. And hearing you talk about this transition, too, of moving beyond simply studying the actual content of the communication to the results, the implementation, and the outcomes of that communication, it makes me wonder about your study of social movements, especially your initial work in the Vietnam antiwar movements, and how you felt about that research and the results of the antiwar movement in the early seventies. Do you think it was successful? And how did that evolve over time, in the seventies, in your thinking on social movements?

01-01:35:27

Cox: I think all of that background was implicit. It was certainly there, but the proximate cause of my interest in studying outcomes really came because of colleagues here at UNC who I worked with in conservation biology. They

defined their field as a crisis discipline, and I said, "My God, that's what environmental communication is." So, the inaugural issue of that journal that Professor Depoe brought out in the *Journal of Environmental Communication*—he asked me to write the inaugural essay that would set it off. And so I proposed a frame to understand our own discipline as it begins and searches for its identity as a crisis discipline analogous to conservation biology, cancer biology, some of the other crisis disciplines that are defined by not only a sense of urgency to address real problems but to accept some uncertainty in it because of the need to find answers. And to be motivated by the desire of wanting to address what are the challenges facing society that are leading to destruction of nature or the poisoning of air and water? These are the reasons that call us out as a discipline because communication is the principal agency, the currency through which different interests in the public sphere are mediated. So that had some initial pushback in the fear that scholars would become advocates and that would taint the objectivity of scholarship. So we wrestled on that for a while, but the answer was do the rigorous scholarship. If the scholarship is in orientation to problems that are calling for solutions that only this discipline can provide, it's no different from medicine or engineering that sees a defect in a bridge and calls out for a remedy to it.

01-01:37:46

Eardley-Pryor: That's fabulous. So, with that orientation, that does include an activist bent to it. It can be applied, if you so desire. You so desired, throughout your career, to be an activist that was also doing this research, this rigorous scholarship that is informing your activism. And your activism is, in turn, informing your ongoing research as a scholar. I'm wondering how that was received throughout your career, either in your department or broadly in communications generally at this research-one, this elite university that you're a part of?

01-01:38:20

Cox: I was surprised. It was well received and supported. My department chair gave me a leave of absence when I became president of the national Sierra Club. The Sierra Club worked with my university to buy out my contract for another year in order for me to spend most of my time in San Francisco where our headquarters was. And at a certain point after I had been president for a couple of different terms, I discovered later that my department chair had been receiving death threats against me from particularly people out in the arid west, grazing interests, didn't like the Sierra Club because we didn't want grazing on public lands or timber companies on wilderness areas. And there's a lot of pushback from the Wise Use movement and some of these other very right-wing anti-environmental movements. My chair never mentioned those death threats. He protected me, he defended me when they came in, he made sure I was always safe.

01-01:39:33

And the ultimate came when system president of the University of North Carolina's sixteen-campus system, [William C.] Bill Friday took—invited me to join his television program. He had a weekly program as President Friday ["North Carolina People"], and we talked about this double identity I had as an engaged scholar. And I said, "Some people have complained to my department that I'm doing this," and he said, "Don't listen to them. You are bringing valuable experiences back into your classroom. Your students benefit from that, as does your scholarship." So I had that all taped on television [laughs] as my ultimate defense. But no, to answer your question, I had just enormous, wonderful support from my university. I love the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. They really appreciate innovative scholarship, and they protect professors who go out and serve in DC and government and come back—as you know, as Berkeley and other R-1 universities do.

01-01:40:46

Eardley-Pryor: A major moment you mentioned in your book that's still in print, *Environment Communication and the Public Sphere*, [*Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*, 6th ed., forthcoming in 2021, co-author Phaedra C. Pezzullo] and its translation, now, into Chinese, and its continued editions being released. It's the preeminent book as a textbook in your field. Can you tell me a little bit about beginning that process of writing that? What was going through your mind? How did that book project that has become so influential, how did that develop?

01-01:41:17

Cox: Well, I resisted the idea of a book project initially because it was a textbook, and an R-1 university does not really credit it that much. I continued with standalone research articles, and Julia kept suggesting gently that I knew—

01-01:41:37

Eardley-Pryor: I like Julia's role in your life.

01-01:41:39

Cox: [laughs] Right. Well, she urged me to merge these, that there was no credible textbook to help sustain this early nascent growing field, and a textbook could help a college faculty teach the area as a discipline or a subfield. But there was no textbook. People were collating different articles together. My publisher Todd [R.] Armstrong, who was with SAGE at the time, out of San Francisco, visited me on campus urging me as well, and I finally agreed to write one.

01-01:42:16

Eardley-Pryor: Now let me ask you, at this time, had Julia had written—she had written her textbook that had been so influential and helped establish her place in the field?

01-01:42:25

Cox: She had begun to put out several well-received textbooks in addition to her own research. And she writes—

01-01:42:33
Eardley-Pryor: She had the experience of saying to write them, to you.

01-01:42:37
Cox: She does, and she knew Todd [Armstrong]. He had published one of her first books. She writes beautifully. I am more of an oral person. I struggle sometimes with my writing, and I didn't have the persona to be a textbook author. And my first drafts were dry and too scholarly, and Julia said, "You've got to find your voice to be able to talk with students." I finally did, and I think the first edition came out in 2006, and Phaedra [Pezzullo] and I are now coauthoring the latest edition, which will be the sixth edition. It will come out next year.

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Eardley-Pryor: And can you tell me who Phaedra is?

01-01:43:17
Cox: Phaedra [C.] Pezzullo was one of my top PhD grad students at UNC. She graduated from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and came to UNC to study with me. I was just surprised and honored that she would ask, and we developed a really good mentor-mentee relationship. She ended up doing her PhD under me on the birth of the environmental justice movement by looking at the ways in which the discourses around justice are articulated to issues about the environment. And the birthplace [of environmental justice] was in Warren County, North Carolina, and then spread globally, of course. She is now an associate professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She is not only my co-author and taking over the lead on this new edition, she's become a leading figure in this disciplinary field of environmental communication herself and has been invited to lecture at the Sorbonne in Paris and in China. For old professors such as myself, it's always, there's a warm place in your heart to find your students that are doing that and outdistancing you. That's what you hope for.

01-01:44:46
Eardley-Pryor: That's lovely. I had the great opportunity to speak with Phaedra in a background interview in advance of our discussion here today, and she has wonderful, wonderful things to say about you as well, as a mentor and as an activist, as model of somebody taking their research, their scholarly work and implementing it.

01-01:45:06
Cox: Yeah. She's very involved in the environmental movement both locally in Boulder and nationally and globally. When I was president of the Sierra Club, I developed a tour, what we called a Toxic Tour. We would tour polluted areas to bring media attention to them. One that we planned in Matamoros, Mexico, across the border from Brownsville where the result of NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] led to a lot of these illegal *colonias*—the settlements of workers coming out for the industries fleeing the US but would work at the border. Horrible pollution of the Rio Grande river,

garbage piles of poisonous materials that little children would go through picking out something to resell, a tin can. And I invited Phaedra, who was my student at the time, a doctoral student, to join with me in the Sierra Club and on that tour. And she developed a strong interest in that phenomenon of the Toxic Tour and the discourse around it. And she developed that as her dissertation at UNC and then came out with an award-winning book on toxic tourism. [Phaedra Carmen Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice,* 2007; 2009.]

01-01:46:21

Eardley-Pryor: Just as a sidenote, a couple of years ago, I was beginning research in environmental justice and got her book out of the library and read it. It's wonderful, and it's great storytelling. It's beautifully written. And just to think that that emerged out of your collaborations together while she was your graduate student, it's just wonderful.

01-01:46:38

Cox: Yeah.

01-01:46:40

Eardley-Pryor: I do want to dig back into your work in the Club and transition our discussion towards some of your early involvement in the Club. You had mentioned in 1979 in the wake of getting tenure, in the midst of that, engaging in the Club for the first time and going on these backpacking trips. I want to first ask about the role of backpacking and camping in your life. What role has that played? When did you begin doing that, and why is it important to you?

01-01:47:10

Cox: Well, I had been wandering through the forest as a young boy even in West Virginia, but I had begun an interest in backpacking in the late seventies. And as a result of that one Sierra Club backpacking trip to Dolly Sods Wilderness in West Virginia, I wanted to become more involved with the Sierra Club. That was my introduction to it. "Oh, it works on things like this, protecting wilderness." So, I decided I would attend a local meeting of the Sierra Club, and I was met with frozen silence. No one greeted me, no one welcomed me, and I said, "Well, this is not a very friendly place." So, I left after the meeting, and I said, "I'll go back one more time," and that time I was welcomed. And there was a young man who delivered a committee report from the wilderness committee on this new area of interest, the study of roadless areas remaining in the national forest in North Carolina called RARE-II, or Roadless Area [Review and] Evaluation, and it was attempting to identify areas that were potentially able to be designated by the federal government as protected wilderness. I said, "That's where I want to be involved with the Sierra Club."

01-01:48:42

So, I went up to him and said, "If you'll give me a couple of books, I'll promise to study, and maybe you'll let me be a member of your committee." And he said, "Well, let's meet for coffee next week." I met him at the Carolina

Coffee House, and he came in with a large file box of files and said, "I've decided to resign as the wilderness committee chair. I'm going to law school. You're now the chair of the wilderness committee." [laughs] And this is after my second meeting with the Sierra Club. I knew nothing about anything, and he said, "Don't worry, you'll learn all this stuff. Here are the files." [laughs]

01-01:49:20
Eardley-Pryor: That's cool. Who was this person?

01-01:49:22
Cox: David Layland. He went on to become a very successful attorney, I believe. I heard from him. I think once he contacted me when I was president of the Sierra Club just to remark on our early meeting.

01-01:49:38
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. What a very Sierra Club moment of saying, "Oh, this person is interested. Here, take the reins now."

01-01:49:44
Cox: [laughs] Yeah. That is the true essence of the Sierra Club, at least during that period and often still today. But one of the former presidents of the Sierra Club, Sue Merrow from Connecticut, once said that "The Sierra Club makes democracy work for the environment by involving ordinary citizens in this organization." It's an intermediary between the isolated individual and power out there in the public sphere and in the governments. It enables you to have a democratic voice that matters on the environment. So, I really took that in and believed that, and I did go to work after that. I had found my second career, I think.

01-01:50:32
Eardley-Pryor: And I'm sure the Club is grateful that you did come back after that first cool reception, that unwelcomed first meeting you attended. It's interesting, I've heard other people tell similar stories that their first meeting didn't go well, and for whatever reason, they went back, and they then emerged to become major leaders within the Club. I wonder what that's about?

01-01:50:56
Cox: Well, it's not a good thing. This has actually become more relevant to me over the last ten or fifteen years or so. The Sierra Club struggles and has struggled for a long time to attract people of color, Indigenous peoples, and such. It's doing a far better job today. But the culture of an organization can be a filter that sends messages of "you're not welcome" to many people. And it's no surprise that a lot of people from diverse communities have not found the Sierra Club that welcoming, African American, Hispanic, I know particularly. Those are later episodes in the Sierra Club and my involvement, so we'll come back to that.

01-01:51:47
Eardley-Pryor: When you did involve yourself as the newly administered chair of the wilderness committee, what was the work that you began engaging in?

01-01:51:57
Cox: Well, I became very interested in in the congressional authorized review of wilderness areas, the RARE-II process. And I started talking with other activists in the Sierra Club and reading what I could find about it. I began to go backpacking in some of these proposed areas for wilderness and just falling in love with the diverse biosystems of North Carolina, from the Smoky Mountains to the coastal ecosystems of wetlands. And I became so interested that I developed a slideshow, because I thought, you know, I can bring my communication background to this issue because they really don't have a strategic campaign. They're not getting the word out to others. They're great experts in the issue areas that they work on, but it needs to be overlaid with this communication dimension. And so they authorized me to develop a slideshow of images of these fragile, endangered areas—the irreparable appeal again.

01-01:53:09
And I began traveling all over the state of North Carolina to give the slideshow and talk about the study, RARE-II [Roadless Area Review and Evaluation], that this was a timely moment. And I would get others interested and ship the slideshow out with a script for them to read—no internet then, this was all the early eighties. And ultimately it congealed into a campaign. So that was one of the first issues that I began to work on. And then shortly after that, after joining Sierra Club, they asked me to become the chair of the local group itself. It's called the Research Triangle Group. So that was one—

01-01:53:57
Eardley-Pryor: When you say—I'm sorry, go ahead, Robbie.

01-01:53:59
Cox: Well, that was about 1982 when that occurred.

01-01:54:03
Eardley-Pryor: And when you say "they"—you said "they" authorized me to use the slideshow and to travel around giving talks, and "they" then asked you to become the chair, who are we talking about?

01-01:54:14
Cox: Well, initially, the statewide Sierra Club—the North Carolina chapter—was directing this involvement with the federal government to study wilderness areas. I told them of my interest, and they supported my going forward with that. As a result of that activism, I think I came more to the attention of the leaders in my local Sierra Club group. The Research Triangle Group was Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill combined area group, and it was leaders in those groups that elected me as the chair of the group in 1982, I think.

01-01:54:53
Eardley-Pryor: And I'm thinking, just contextually in '82, this is also in the midst of the [Ronald] Reagan Revolution and his appointment of James Watt and [Anne] Gorsuch in EPA. And this is a really pregnant moment for the Club itself at a national level in terms of growth and trying to push back against that anti-environmental Reagan agenda. What are your memories of some of what was happening politically in the country or in North Carolina as you were engaging in this early wilderness work?

01-01:55:19
Cox: Well, I was certainly aware of the national politics around James Watt and the Reagan administration. I did receive a scholarship from the national Sierra Club in San Francisco to attend one of its annual meetings that it holds. And I was introduced to the national Sierra Club's work and programs and campaigns, and its efforts to collect a million signatures against James Watt and so forth. And I think the result of learning more about how Sierra Club thinks through strategy and designing campaigns led me to do more of that work locally, initially, and beginning to work on a potential wilderness bill for protection of North Carolina's four national forests for their wilderness areas. But it would have to be passed by the US Congress, so I was beginning to identify the resources and the people that could help in that effort.

01-01:56:23
Eardley-Pryor: Do you recall understanding that organizational structure within the Club? I mean it's such a dynamic and unique environmental organization from the local to the national in how power and authority and decision-making moves. What are some of your early memories of trying to understand that structure?

01-01:56:40
Cox: Well, I think one of the earliest memories was appreciating the difference between the Sierra Club and the other big national environmental organizations. Many of them are what we call pay-per-membership organizations. You send money, you become a member, but they have a professional staff in DC or in New York that works on issues and lobbies Congress. Sierra Club bills itself as the largest grassroots environmental organization in America because its members are sending their delegates to the national Sierra Club to help advise on policy, and the national Sierra Club's board of directors is directly elected by the membership. So, to be a director on this fifteen-member board, you have to have been elected by the members of the Sierra Club out in the country. Knowing that helped me understand the way the Sierra Club then structured its different entities, from national, down to statewide chapters, down to local groups that were best knowledgeable about local issues that could bring their expertise up to statewide issues, and that could inform the national Sierra Club on what works in their region or be a reservoir of activists for national campaigns. That's a beautiful system that other groups have been envious. I think so, at least.

01-01:58:14
Eardley-Pryor: What are sone of your memories in that early eighties period about what sort of staff there were that were working in the Club? I mean, at that time period, were there staff members that were a part of North Carolina or any of the other chapters?

01-01:58:29
Cox: There were staff members in some of the more established chapters in the west, California certainly being the first chapter at the state level. The Sierra Club in North Carolina had just emerged from a two-state chapter—South Carolina and North Carolina, called the LeConte chapter—I think a couple of years before I became involved with the Sierra Club, and it had no paid staff at all. And when I became involved at the chapter level, we had a young graduate from North Carolina State University who would ask for gas money for his car, and he would volunteer to go to the [North Carolina state] General Assembly to lobby. One of the things I did when I became chair of the statewide chapter was to negotiate a contract that, for the first time, would pay a staff lobbyist—that would be that same young man. His name was Bill Hollman by the way. When James [B.] Hunt became governor of North Carolina later, he named Bill Hollman as his Secretary of Natural Resources and the Environment. So, starting as a young lobbyist.

01-01:59:43
Eardley-Pryor: And as a young kid asking for gas money so he could do it.

01-01:59:47
Cox: Right. [laughs] So again, the Sierra Club really does empower people. As they develop skills in government and political affairs, they become quite valuable people.

01-01:59:57
Eardley-Pryor: Well, as you're engaging in this early 1980s period as the newly elected chair of the Research Triangle Group, those three group entities, and you're doing the slideshow, I'm wondering what kind of stories you might have about traveling around and delivering these slides that you're creating.

01-02:00:15
Cox: Well, there's certainly one story I remember. In 1982, I was asked to deliver the slideshow to a local 4-H group in Hillsborough, North Carolina. That happened to be the same night that UNC was playing Georgetown in the national finals of the NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] basketball championships.

01-02:00:40
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, no.

01-02:00:41
Cox: I said, "You know, I want to see that game, I want to see that game. But I've made this commitment, and it's one more group that we can mobilize to add to the base we're going to activate to really target the [US] Congress when the

vote comes before the Congress." So, I went up there dutifully, I gave my slideshow, got in the car afterward, and tuned into UNC radio and got the final moments of the game, Michael Jordan hits the shot and then North Carolina comes from a one-point deficit to win the game, sixty-three to sixty-two, I think it was.

01-02:01:24
Eardley-Pryor: Incredible.

01-02:01:27
Cox: And can we pause just for a moment?

01-02:01:29
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, of course.

[break in audio]

01-02:01:33
Eardley-Pryor: Okay, Robbie, it sounds like we'll—let's take a break for today. We've covered a lot of great stuff. We can start on Wednesday the next time for our next session with some of your work, elevating your wilderness work to beyond just this local framework.

01-02:01:46
Cox: Okay.

01-02:01:46
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Thank you.

01-02:01:46
Cox: That sounds good.

01-02:01:47
Eardley-Pryor: Have a good night. Thank you very much.

01-02:01:49
Cox: Okay, thanks.

Interview 2: September 16, 2020

02-00:00:06
Eardley-Pryor: Today is Wednesday, September 16, 2020. I'm Roger Eardley-Pryor from the UC [University of California] Berkeley' s Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library. This is interview session number two of an oral history with Robert Cox. Robbie, it's great to see you again in North Carolina.

02-00:00:25
Cox: Yes, it's good to see you again, Roger.

02-00:00:27
Eardley-Pryor: I am here in Santa Rosa, California. For today's session, we are going to pick up where we left off last time in the early 1980s when you began your period as chair of the Research Triangle Group of the Sierra Club there in North Carolina. Can you tell me a little bit about the structure of the groups there in the Research Triangle Group, and what happened over your two-year period as chair from '82 to '84?

02-00:00:52
Cox: Sure. The Research Triangle Group was named after the intensive research division of our geographical area, somewhat similar to Berkeley or Madison, for example. You've got the research university [UNC] in Chapel Hill on one side of the triangle, NC [North Carolina] State University nearby in Raleigh, and then Duke University over in Durham. They form a triangle, and within that triangle are a number of global research institutions, corporations, and the EPA's [Environmental Protection Agency] air quality division. So, the research triangle is an intensely research-oriented, intellectual, and cosmopolitan area. The first group formed in that area was therefore called the Research Triangle Group.

02-00:01:43
Well, I became chair of that group in 1982, and I thought, "Man, this is a growing area with people committed to the environment, why are we spread out in such a way?" It was large area encompassed by those three cities. And so I got the chapter to agree to split that group into three—a Durham group, a Raleigh group, and a Chapel Hill area group. And there was resistance at first because I think the chapter was hesitant. It didn't think the three smaller new groups could survive, but the opposite happened. It was a growth period for the environment in the 1980s under President [Ronald] Reagan and James Watt, and each of those three newly minted groups took off and grew, and they're still there today. I was proud of forcing that arrangement and restructuring to enable the group in North Carolina to grow and to give people a chance for involvement. Because that's the structure of the ethic of the Sierra Club is to give people the means and the tools to be involved in civic affairs from the grassroots up, and that's the identity of the Sierra Club, of course.

02-00:03:02
Eardley-Pryor: Yes, and so much of its political strength comes from that.

02-00:03:04
Cox: Absolutely, the power of grassroots.

02-00:03:07
Eardley-Pryor: And it's also—I'll need to hear you talk about restructuring the Club to make it work more efficiently in different ways. And that becomes thematic, of course, in your involvement within the Club later, up in national levels as well, within a decade, in the nineties. We'll talk about that later. What were some of the issues that were of primary interest to members in these Research Triangle groups, particularly the one that you were chair of in this early 1980s period?

02-00:03:33
Cox: Well, we were still in the midst of that campaign we discussed earlier for a North Carolina Wilderness Act that would target the United States Congress for federal designation of areas within four different national forests in North Carolina—the Pisgah, the Nantahala, the Croatan, and the Uwharrie National Forests. So, I continued my own personal involvement, but there was a lot of support within the local Chapel Hill group and the larger chapter.

02-00:04:09
I mentioned earlier that I had been traveling the state with a slideshow of those beautiful areas to mobilize a larger constituency throughout the state. But, at that point, the governor and the state congressional delegation was not yet signed on in support of this. And there was tension with the timber lobby out in the western part of the state. So I, with the help of a former chapter chair Anne Taylor, who was—happened to be an aide to the state Secretary of Natural Resources, [Joseph W.] Joe Grimsley, convinced the secretary to come with me and a few other local Sierra Club backpackers on a wilderness outing overnight in one of the proposed wilderness [study] areas, the Harper Creek-Lost Cove wilderness [study] area.

02-00:05:05
Eardley-Pryor: Now, you took Secretary Grimsley to this area, and he was the secretary of state for natural resources?

02-00:05:11
Cox: He was the North Carolina Secretary of Natural Resources, which was a prominent state department under Governor James [Baxter] Hunt [Jr.].

02-00:05:22
Eardley-Pryor: Maybe you could help me set the context for a couple things: One, I'm wondering why it needs Congress, U.S. Congress, to go forward. Is that because it's a national forest, and so it needs congressional distinction?

02-00:05:35
Cox: Correct.

02-00:05:36

Eardley-Pryor: And then the second question is more broadly helping me understand the context. North Carolina, as I imagine in the early 1980s, was a much different place than the dynamic, booming place that it is today with a growing population. Can you help me understand a little bit of what North Carolina was like in the 1980s, including its politics?

02-00:05:56

Cox: Sure. Well, it's a very large state actually, from the seacoast, the Atlantic Ocean, to the Smoky Mountains and beyond. It was principally a rural state still by the early eighties, but there were concentrations of industry development and banking in Charlotte, the research institutions in the middle of the state, Chapel Hill, Durham, and Raleigh. So, it was trending toward a kind of bi- or a two-part economy—agricultural, and some of the more leading professional industries. The state, at the time, was under Democratic control. It had just elected Jim Hunt as governor of North Carolina, a Democrat who had a principal passion for education. And so strategically, it was very important to get the support of the governor and his department heads—particularly the department of natural resources—behind us in support of a proposed wilderness bill in order to have any chance in the US Congress. Because they would defer, of course, to the governor or to the local state delegation. So that was the reason behind finding an opening or a little bit of leverage.

02-00:07:19

And so, with the help of Anne Taylor, we convinced a somewhat not-knowledgeable secretary of natural resources about wilderness to come with us on a backpacking trip. We led him through one of the beautiful areas that was proposed for wilderness. We showed him highlights from a cliff that overlooked a valley system, with forested ridges in every direction. He was quite influenced by that. That evening, around a campfire with our tents and having dinner, he talked about the impressions this has made on him. There was a pause in the conversation, and I asked, "So, Secretary, do you think the governor might be willing to support this?" And he paused for a moment. And then he said, "Do you Sierra Club folks happen to have a drink?" And one of my colleagues reached into his backpack and pulled out a bottle of bourbon, I think it was, and we passed that around, and he relaxed a little more. And he said, "I'll tell you what, when I get back to Raleigh on Monday, I'll have the governor call a session of the cabinet secretaries, and then I will ask the governor to consider supporting a proposed wilderness bill."

02-00:08:40

And so we got them. They went off to a conference at Quail Roost, the conference center, and the governor and Secretary Grimsley really whipped the votes and got the entire Hunt cabinet behind the idea that we were pitching for a wilderness bill.

02-00:08:59
Eardley-Pryor: That's so great! So, wait, so let me just get this straight: a little bit of hiking, a little backpacking, and a little bit of bourbon?

02-00:09:05
Cox: I think that's it, yeah, the secret strategy of Sierra Club. [laughs]

02-00:09:10
Eardley-Pryor: That's good North Carolina politics right there.

02-00:09:13
Cox: Now, at the same time, we had to get a congressman from North Carolina to actually introduce a draft bill, and so Representative [James] Jamie Clarke from the Ashville area agreed to introduce our bill in the US House of Representatives. That was in October of 1982. I was still chair of the local Sierra Club group, and I was asked by the chapter to attend a hearing, a congressional hearing on Clarke's bill for North Carolina. So, I testified before the US House Interior Committee on the merits of the bill. There were members of the timber industry and the governor's cabinet who were there. But by that point, because of Governor Hunt's support, the businesspeople and the timber industries and the Sierra Club had managed to come together to agree on the outlines of a bill that Clarke could then introduce.

02-00:10:17
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, wait, why do you think that's the case? I mean a part of me is thinking, how do you sell wilderness in a rural state with timber interests that run throughout that state in this period when you can't take every person on a backpacking trip and give them a little bourbon and have a nice chat?

02-00:10:33
Cox: That's a very good question. The leverage we had was that the Congress previously had mandated a study of the remaining roadless or potential wilderness areas throughout all of the national forests in the United States.

02-00:10:49
Eardley-Pryor: This is that RARE-II [Roadless Area Review and Evaluation] study?

02-00:10:50
Cox: That was the RARE-II study. And so that was going on at the same time, and so the timber people understood that the [US] Forest Service would be recommending parcels that would be wilderness areas. They knew they had to give somewhat in order to be able to still log other areas. And so it became a question of how much give, and how much could we get through the bargaining. But once we had the governor's support for something that was very close to our ideal proposal, they realized that they were outnumbered. And the other political factor was that, at the time, the North Carolina Congressional delegation still was largely Democratic, overwhelmingly Democratic in nature, and Hunt was the Democratic governor and able to really round up the other representatives to the U.S. House from North Carolina. So, we had a good delegation that outnumbered the timber people.

02-00:11:56
Eardley-Pryor: That's fascinating. So, it sounds to me like the timber industry knew that it needed to be at that table because it was going to happen with or without them, and they needed to be "with."

02-00:12:06
Cox: Right.

02-00:12:07
Eardley-Pryor: Tell me if you can, just briefly—I'm actually surprised to hear that North Carolina was still Democratic-controlled in the early eighties, even after the Reagan Revolution and the pushback against [Jimmy] Carter's leadership at the national level. What happened over time in North Carolina to be in this circumstance today with all these redistricting battles and this real conflict at the state level over political control?

02-00:12:32
Cox: Well, now, that is a distressing story. North Carolina had been Democratic for a number of decades, and as a rural southern state, it was slowly coming out of its legacy as a Democratic and more racist party. But in North Carolina, because of the leadership of Governor Hunt and the presence of universities in the state—there are a number of prestigious universities, statewide community college system—it was a purple state. It often was Democratic and then for a while went back and forth Republican, Democratic. It was only in the last ten years that the Republicans seized control of both houses of the state assembly and the governorship, and they did manage to pass some severe gerrymandering laws that have been challenged in court, some of them have now been ruled illegal. We're still fighting that battle.

02-00:13:37
Eardley-Pryor: That's great, and thank you for that context. So, bring me back into your story and to where we're at. The bill is being introduced into the US House Interior Committee, and you were asked to testify on its behalf?

02-00:13:49
Cox: Correct. So, I'm offering a testimony that describes each of the areas within each of the four national forests, the tourism that this would generate, the importance to the people of North Carolina, et cetera. So that's gone well, but once members of the committee started to question me, the Republican member from Alaska, Representative Don Young—who's still in Congress, quite a conservative character—he really pressed me, and he warned the other members of the committee, "If you let these people have this bill, they won't be satisfied. They'll come back for more." [laughs] And I kind of muttered under my breath, "You're darn right."

02-00:14:32
Eardley-Pryor: That's right, and that's exactly what did happen.

02-00:14:35

Cox: Yes, but he did not sway the committee. The House proceeded to pass the bill in the House. It would be another two years before we could get approval from the Senate, and that's another story.

02-00:14:51

Eardley-Pryor: Well, that's great. So in the meantime, in your own personal trajectory, what is happening in terms of your role within the Club as chair of what was the Research Triangle, now several North Carolina groups? What was your role within the [North Carolina] state Sierra Club? What happened next for you?

02-00:15:12

Cox: Well, I think largely because of my leadership—among others, I mean this was a broad-based movement. We had the support of The Wilderness Society as well, and the National Wildlife Federation. But within the Sierra Club, I think because of my work on the wilderness bill, I was asked to serve as the statewide chapter chair of Sierra Club. That was in 1984, and I did that for two years until 1986.

02-00:15:50

Eardley-Pryor: That's a big step up, though, from somebody who's just recently—I mean a few years earlier, deciding that you wanted to become a member, and to becoming the head of your local group, to then becoming the head of one of these state chapters.

02-00:16:04

Cox: Well, I think that's a testament to the Sierra Club that activists who really dedicate themselves to work, who are involved in the Sierra Club, find leadership opportunities. And the Club structure recognizes and rewards volunteers who want to take on more work and to give them the tools. So, I was very honored to be asked. And as a result, as the chapter chair, I had even greater ability then to help press for passage through the Congress of that wilderness bill, which had not yet passed the US Senate, and that was going to be a harder struggle.

02-00:16:47

Eardley-Pryor: Before we get into that story of that moving through the US Senate and your role in that, I'd like to pause and just talk a little bit, if you could, to hear a little bit about the structure of the Club at this time within the state chapter, about what was called then the Regional Conservation [Committees, or RCCs] and its relationship to national Sierra Club leadership. Because that [structure] evolves and changes over time, and it evolves throughout your tenure in the Club. So, what was it like in this mid-eighties period, this relationship, now that you are the president of the state chapter? What was your relationship with the national headquarters or with these regional district leaderships as well?

02-00:17:28

Cox: Yeah, as I mentioned before I believe, the national club had moved to organize chapters in every state in the country, and only a few years earlier had the North Carolina portion broken off from the South Carolina portion. They had been a joint chapter as Sierra Club expanded membership into the eastern United States, and we formed the North Carolina chapter in around 1980 or so. And within it, it organized groups, about twelve groups at the time throughout the state of North Carolina. Even as the local group chair, I sat on the statewide executive committee. That's how the state chapter executive committee was constituted, as the chairs of all the local groups, plus elected officers of statewide. So, I was already interacting with leaders at the state level. I knew them, they knew me. I had them working on the wilderness campaign. So, it was a somewhat easy transition to make into chairing the chapter.

02-00:18:41

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. One other contextual question. Your passion was certainly around wilderness areas and concern with these national forests within North Carolina, at that time. What were some of the other issues that were of interest to other groups within the state or within that region of the organized southeast?

02-00:19:02

Cox: Well, in addition to wilderness, there were other forest issues. The National Forests were mandated to develop management plans, and others were interested in working with the Forest Service to get the best of biologically rich, protected, recreational kind of management objectives as they could under the management plans for these forests. Others were interested in local preservation efforts of local rivers or waterfalls. The Horsepasture River in western North Carolina was a big global campaign. On the coast, there were other issues related to coastal management. And in Raleigh, there were interests beginning with water quality issues and pollution of streams whose headwaters were in the Piedmont in the central part of the state that flowed toward the coast. Issues of energy and climate change weren't—hadn't registered at this point.

02-00:20:12

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. That's good to have that context. Okay, with regard to the way things are structured, you had told me earlier that getting involved at this chapter level and becoming the chair of the state chapter gave you an opportunity to see the Club's strategic approach to campaigning from more of a bird's-eye view of the state level. Can you share a little bit about what you mean by that? What was, perhaps—because I'm sure it's changed over time—what was the Sierra Club's strategic approach to campaigns in this period in the mid-eighties?

02-00:20:47

Cox: Well, in this period under Reagan, we were playing a lot of defense at times. And so the strategic design was often trying to block legislation or going to court to challenge a regulation, on the defensive side. However, in North Carolina, we were still playing offense because we had a Democratic state leadership and a Democratic delegation in the House. So within that context, we set an objective, which was the passage of the [North Carolina] wilderness bill in the Congress, and then we had to work backward to see what would lead to that, step-by-step. And most importantly was to identify a point of leverage that would help move larger forces and interests. And that leverage for us became getting the governor's support behind it through his secretary of natural resources. And some of the tactics that then implemented the strategy included such things as taking Joe Grimsley on a backpacking trip.

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But there are other parts of a strategic design. We knew we had to mobilize voters throughout the state to bring support to those of congressional delegations in Congress so that they were not in trouble with the voters if they did something like a "crazy" environmental vote. They had to know they had support back home. So part of the strategy was through the vehicle of the slideshows. And the mobilizing in each of the groups with their members is to develop a list of names, telephone numbers, and mailing addresses. This was before social media, so we were doing things the old-fashioned way through mail and telephone and personal visits. But we knew we didn't want these who were mobilized just to start writing and calling on their own at any time and all the time, a diffused kind of hearing from the grassroots. We said, "Hold on, there will come a moment when we can bring together the power of all of you to intervene at the moment where it matters in the congressional process. There will be a moment called the markup of the bill in committee, and that's when they need to hear an avalanche of support." So, it was bringing those pieces together, aligning them just right, looking at the timing of it, and working always from that main point of leverage we had.

02-00:23:31

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Hearing you talk about these leverage points and finding the right point and, as you mentioned now, the time to push those things to actually make change happen within a network, it does have echoes of what you talk about in your 2010 article "Beyond Frames" ["Beyond Frames: Recovering the Strategic in Climate Communication" (2010). *Environmental Communication, 4*:1, 122–133]—finding the right leverage point and having the proper strategy involved.

02-00:23:52

Cox: It is, and so I was beginning to bring some of my experience working in the field into my own research back at the University of North Carolina. I think the best maxim to summarize strategy was that old maxim from Archimedes, the ancient mathematician who said, "If you give me a lever and a place to

stand with a fulcrum, I can move the world." It's finding that place to stand with the leverage to exercise it, and you can move powerful forces.

02-00:24:27

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. I had the pleasure, upon your introduction, of speaking to Molly Diggins, the first [Sierra Club] staff member that North Carolina, the chapter, hired, not including Bill Hollman as the lobbyist, a part-time lobbyist. And she had mentioned that she was involved as a volunteer with you over a number of these years before she finally was hired as the staff person—I can't actually remember the date when she became the first staff member hired by the Club within North Carolina. So, what I'm thinking and what I want to hear from you is, what was it like creating these strategic plans when it was purely volunteer leadership that was involved in this? Where were you getting guidance? How is a national and very dynamic organization, even just at the state level, how are you organizing this strategy?

02-00:25:21

Cox: Yeah, that's a great point because the Club in North Carolina at that time was entirely volunteer-driven, no staff support at all. However, by the time I was chapter chair and working with the Congress, especially on the Senate side, I began to have support from the national club. And there was a staff member in Washington, DC, with the Club, Tim Mahoney, who was assigned to work with me in North Carolina to help guide me through, give me advice and counsel as we moved the bill through the US Senate. And it was being able to draw on that national support from someone who had a lot of experience in working on wilderness and the whereto process from working the politics in DC, in the Congress. And that was part of my own learning curve as a result of that association with Tim.

02-00:26:18

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Share if you would, what were your feelings about getting involved in this? I mean it seems like you're just leaning further and further into this as you go. What was it about it that was so exciting that continued to motivate you for further engagement?

02-00:26:35

Cox: I think it was a sense of efficacy. You felt like you could actually get things done, that the Sierra Club was giving you the resources in order to work for something that you have a passion about. And to work with others, that sense of an organization that was intermediate between you as the sole individual and the larger power that you had to affect. To have that intermediary set of resources was empowering for an individual. I was excited, and I was having a great time, and it was rewarding. And as I said before, I believe my university was very supportive of my doing this work because they saw that it benefited my teaching and writing back in Chapel Hill.

02-00:27:27
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. So, what did happen with this wilderness bill as it moved up from the US House into the US Senate? How did you propel it forward?

02-00:27:37
Cox: Well, at that time in 1984 when we finally got the bill introduced in the Senate from a friendly Democratic senator, the Senate had been captured by the Republicans. And as a result, the Republicans were chairs of all the important committees. The wilderness bill, since it dealt with national forest, fell under the Agriculture Committee, with the Forest Service under the Department of Agriculture. Well, the chair of the Agriculture Committee was North Carolina's own Senator Jesse [A.] Helms [Jr.].

02-00:28:15
Eardley-Pryor: A notorious figure.

02-00:28:15
Cox: A notorious figure, very conservative senator who did not like the idea of wilderness. His son or son-in-law, I believe, was a forester who worked with the national forest and with timber industries, and Helms was quoted in local media as saying that wilderness was a sore spot on the landscape. So, we knew we had a challenge because he ran the committee, and we had to get this out of his committee if it had a chance to pair up with the House and be reconciled. So Helms called a congressional hearing on the North Carolina Wilderness Bill. But he dismissed the larger Agriculture Committee, and he went to the subcommittee on national forests and basically moved aside the chair of that subcommittee, and he chaired it himself alone—no other member of the committees was with him—in a small room. And I was invited to testify on the panel in support of the bill along with two other environmental groups.

02-00:29:24
Eardley-Pryor: Just so I have the picture here, this is Jesse Helms in a room in DC and then whoever is testifying on behalf of the bill. It's just him? He's had the subcommittee and the broader committee not even there. It's just him and you and a few other people testifying?

02-00:29:39
Cox: Correct. We were all at the same long table. He's sitting at the end of it. I'm sitting to his immediate right, at his elbow, at the corner. The others were right around the table. He was the only member of the Senate there. He had his aide with him.

02-00:29:56
Eardley-Pryor: So you have to win him over at this moment?

02-00:29:58
Cox: [laughs] Well, I presented my testimony. He listened very closely. When I finished, he began the following colloquy with me. He says, "Now, Dr. Cox," and he said, "Is that correct, you're a doctor?" I said, "Yes, Senator." He said, "That's because you are a professor at—let me see—the University of North

Carolina at Chapel Hill." And I said, "Yes, Senator." He said, "Chapel Hill, that liberal university. And it's a state university. So you're being paid by the state of North Carolina?" "Yes, Senator, my salary is through the state university." He says, "So you're using public taxpayer money to come up here and lock up parts of our national forest that are going to throw loggers out of work out in Swain County and the other counties in the western part of the state?" And I said, "Senator, I don't believe we're going to throw them out of work. May I share with you a report that has just emerged from your alma mater, North Carolina State University?" And he paused and sat back.

02-00:31:04

I had just been given, before flying up to DC, a cost-benefit study of the effect of designating areas in western North Carolina as federal wilderness areas by an economist at NC State. I presented the report, "The report basically said the only other treatment of those areas of the forest that would generate more income for those counties would be to turn the national forest all into Christmas-tree-growing farms for a monoculture of spruce trees, and we're not going to do that. Wilderness does generate an economic benefit greater than logging because of tourism, the fishing, the hunting, the campers, the recreational uses. People come from all over the state and other states to enjoy the wilderness experience, and they're spending money on hotels and restaurants and gas stations and buying curios, gifts. Here's the report."

02-00:32:08

At that point, his aide started scribbling notes to refute me and handing them to the senator. And to Senator Helms's credit—and he was often a gracious man—he waved his aide off and asked for a copy of the report, and then went on to another witness in the testimony. So he let me off the hook at that point. What then happened is that the committee went into a markup session. The other senators on the Agriculture Committee supported the bill, but they would defer to the chair of the committee whose state it was. And a Democratic senator from Tennessee, I believe, said, "Senator Helms, what say ye?" And Helms paused for a moment, and then he waved his arm and said, "Let it pass, let it go through."

02-00:33:01

And I'll tell you one reason for that was, after the committee testimony I presented, Helms asked one question. He said, "How many members do you have in North Carolina?" And I said, "Around five thousand." He said, "I think I heard from every one of them three times."

02-00:33:19

Eardley-Pryor: That was that right timing at that markup point, wasn't it?

02-00:33:23

Cox: They had mobilized and intervened at the moment we needed. So, from there, it went to the full Senate. It was approved and reconciled with the House, and

President Reagan signed it into law in June 1984 as the North Carolina Wilderness Act.

02-00:33:43

Eardley-Pryor: That is a great story. That's great. Senator Helms has, in some ways, a sordid reputation in terms of his issues on race, but he is a prominent figure that was dominant at a national level. What were your interactions with him like? I mean you talk about this intimate moment where he actually was able to listen to you, which is surprising to me. What were your interactions with him like on a personal level?

02-00:34:11

Cox: Well, personally, I was actually surprised. After the meeting was adjourned, he walked over to me—we were still in the small room, I was getting my coat, it was in the winter—and he asked how my family was doing. He knew that I had had trouble flying up because the DC airport was fogged in for hours, and I was late arriving for testimony, and he apologized for the delay. He was glad that I could be there. He was very courteous. He had a reputation for that.

02-00:34:45

I read an article yesterday in our local newspaper. He was good friends with [Joseph] Joe Biden [Jr.]. Biden learned that Senator Helms and his wife [Dorothy] Dot [Helms] had adopted a handicapped child who appeared in an ad with leg supports and arm supports because of—I think it was—polio. And the ad was sponsored by a nonprofit group with the caption of the little boy saying, "All I want for Christmas is someone to love me." Helms spoke with his wife, and they approached the organization and asked to adopt the young boy and raised him in their home. On a personal level, he was known as a warmhearted, gracious person, but politically was very conservative.

02-00:35:37

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. So, people surprise you, don't they?

02-00:35:40

Cox: They do, they do. [laughs]

02-00:35:42

Eardley-Pryor: Well, back to the narrative as to what's happening within the Sierra Club at the North Carolina chapter level. What else? I mean, that's a huge victory to have that happen, especially as you're at the helm during your time as chapter chair, right, when you were able to get that bill passed, especially with all the work you've put into it. What else was on your mind as chapter chair? What other things were you interested in working on?

02-00:36:03

Cox: Well, there were several other issues that stand out in my memory. First of all, as we've noted, we had no staff at that time, and yet, more and more bills and issues were coming before the state general assembly. So, we needed to have a presence, a continuing, daily presence in the general assembly, a lobbyist.

We had a young man who had just graduated from NC State University in chemistry who said he was tired of working in the lab, and he was interested in politics. And he was willing to represent the Sierra Club if we would give him some gas money in order to drive back and forth. So, we did that initially.

02-00:36:48
Eardley-Pryor: And this is Bill Hollman, is that right?

02-00:36:50
Cox: This is Bill Hollman, who would later become the [North Carolina] Secretary of Natural Resources in a later administration. When I became chapter chair, after a year of this, I convinced my executive committee that it was time for us to give him a contract as a paid contract employee to represent us in the general assembly. The only way we could make that work because of the finances—we didn't have a large budget in those days—there were other environmental groups, the smaller groups who went in together to also hire him as a contract lobbyist, so that he would be lobbying generally for the environment but would maintain his duty of loyalty to each group on their issue and not contradict them. We were able to work with that arrangement really for years to come, paying him a little more year after year, of course. I was really proud of that achievement.

02-00:37:56
The Sierra Club nationally was beginning to add staff. There were staff in some of the larger chapters, particularly in California, but in other areas, staff was a new issue for the Sierra Club. And there was a lot of pushback at first among many of the traditional leaders in the Club.

02-00:38:16
Eardley-Pryor: Are you talking pushback at the state level, or are we talking nationally?

02-00:38:20
Cox: Principally at the state level.

02-00:38:23
Eardley-Pryor: Why do you think that was?

02-00:38:24
Cox: I think the state level was—they saw themselves as almost autonomous in many ways. They had their agenda, and national shouldn't interfere with it, and they had their volunteers working those issues. And I discovered that tension increasingly as I moved up through the levels of the Sierra Club.

02-00:38:46
Eardley-Pryor: Well, that brings up a question for me. You mentioned about Bill Hollman and cobbling together a salary for him to represent the Club and other state environmental interests. Where was that funding coming from, and what was national [Sierra Club's] funding relationship with the chapter level in North Carolina?

02-00:39:02
Cox: Well, under the structure of the Sierra Club, a share of each member's annual dues is returned to the state where that person lives as income for the chapter. And then the chapters had their own annual fundraising drives to appeal to their membership to contribute, and then, occasionally, they would get grants or donations from special donors—friends of the Club that can give them a little more money. And it was cobbling these sources together that maintained expenses for volunteers that were working and then eventually for staff as we began to hire staff.

02-00:39:43
Eardley-Pryor: Just so I'm hearing you properly, the bulk of the funding that came for the North Carolina state chapter did come from North Carolina state members. A portion of their national Sierra Club membership went back to the North Carolina chapter?

02-00:39:59
Cox: That's correct, and their individual donations directly to the chapter in addition to their membership dues.

02-00:40:05
Eardley-Pryor: I see. So national did have a pretty important role in helping fund the operations out of the North Carolina chapter?

02-00:40:12
Cox: Oh yes, in all the chapters. That's the same arrangement in all chapters. Yeah.

02-00:40:18
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, what were some of those issues that you wanted Bill Hollman and the rest of the state membership to be working on that was of interest to you during your time as chapter chair in the mid-eighties?

02-00:40:30
Cox: Well, one of the big issues still remain with forest issues, the management plan for the two biggest forests, the Nantahala and the Pisgah National Forest in the western part of state in the Appalachian Mountain range. That management plan was coming out in draft form, and we realized we didn't have the technical depth in order to do a close reading and scrutiny of it. So we managed to get enough money together to hire a technical analyst, Randal O'Toole from, I think, Seattle or Portland—Randal O'Toole, to come in as a consultant and to work down at the Forest Service office to have access to all of their data and to scrub the draft management plan for us and to make recommendations back to the chapter so that we could then enter the official record in support of or in opposition to certain portions of the management plan. I think we did such a good job on that that Bruce Hamilton, the national conservation director of the Sierra Club, called it one of the most sophisticated technical analyses in the Sierra Club.

02-00:41:51
Eardley-Pryor: That's high honor. He carries a lot of weight.

02-00:41:52
Cox: Yeah, we were quite pleased to have Bruce's support. That was one of the issues. There was another issue emerging in national forests throughout the nation, and that's something called below-cost timber sales. So apart from wilderness, there were other portions of the national forest that were available for logging from private firms. But what happened was that the Forest Service, with public taxpayer money, would develop the road systems into the national forests for the private firms to be able to use and gain entry into the forest. The income from the logging companies when they sold their timber out on the market was kept entirely within the private firms. They never reimbursed the US Treasury for the money expended on their behalf to construct roads. So that came to be called low-cost timber sales. The Forest Service, in effect, was losing money in order to sell timber off of public lands.

02-00:43:04
Eardley-Pryor: It sounds to me like the federal government is subsidizing the roadbuilding that enables these private lumber companies to harvest?

02-00:43:10
Cox: Spot on, you've got it.

02-00:43:11
Eardley-Pryor: And that, I assume, also relates directly to that RARE-II study that you were trying to preserve on what roadless areas still existed in North Carolina?

02-00:43:20
Cox: Well, that's correct. In order to preserve as many of the roadless areas that met other eligibility criteria for wilderness, and then to fight for the best sustainable management that we can get on the other areas that were not wilderness. As that moved up to the Congress to make a decision about the below-cost timber sales issue, I was asked to testify again this time for the US House of Representatives before one of these committees considering legislation to address the below-cost nature of its timber sales. And those were the issues that I principally worked with. Yeah, I did testify and worked with a few issues at the state capitol, and frankly, I have less memory of some of those. I know I testified on one bill that would ban phosphates from detergents going into the streams and waters because that contributed to algae growth blooms and so forth. So, a number of issues like air and water quality were big at the time.

02-00:44:32
Eardley-Pryor: It sounds to me that, especially, your passions at this time were a real strong interest around wilderness preservation and forest management. But also, I mean, when you come to the fore in your political activism, you of course bring your training as a scholar of rhetoric and an understanding of communications and strategy. But your sense of wilderness preservation and [with forest] management, it sounds like that would be of a bit of a learning curve to become an expert on this to the level where you're testifying on behalf of these legislations at a national level and at the state level. So, can

you share a little bit about your experience in helping and coming up to speed on those issues of wilderness and forestry?

02-00:45:15
Cox: Well, I think that's what happens to many Sierra Club activists who become interested in certain issues. You really have to go through a learning process to become as much informed as you can. You'll never be the equivalent of someone trained in the sciences of those issues—hydrology or forest management, ecology, and so forth. I was trained in the humanities, for goodness' sake, in classical rhetorical theory. [laughs] But I loved learning. And I had enormous help from my colleagues in the Sierra Club.

02-00:45:55
One of my good friends at the time was Robert Smythe, who was a consultant for environmental organizations and now lives in DC. He took the lead for the chapter in developing the knowledge base on the management plan and then got the consultant in for us. Basically, as we were driving the car, as we were learning how to drive. And I've had to do that later with climate science on the national scene when I became president later. It was fascinating. I loved this other career I had apart from my paid job at UNC [University of North Carolina].

02-00:46:38
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, I was going to say, you're keeping up with the academic literature and your specialty on rhetoric and the eventual development of environmental communications, and at the same time, also building this whole new subset. You could have written a dissertation on wilderness, and then on climate now.

02-00:46:54
Cox: Well, not quite. I will always defer to the ones that were really trained in the area.

02-00:47:01
Eardley-Pryor: I have a note here that in 1986, as a result of this massive activism you had both at the group and then at the chapter level, that you were awarded an outstanding leadership award on behalf of the chapter. What was that?

02-00:47:14
Cox: That was called the Joseph LeConte Award for Excellence in Leadership. Yeah, I was pleased to get that. I felt quite honored and appreciative of it. It was the highest award that the chapter gave to its leaders, and it was the end of my career as chapter chair. I was about to become more involved with the national club.

02-00:47:40
Eardley-Pryor: It's quite an honor.

02-00:47:40
Cox: It's quite an honor. Though later, in fact only recently in the last couple of years, I and the Sierra Club itself learned through archival research into

LeConte's history that he had quite a racist past. He was involved with the science of eugenics, or the pseudoscience of eugenics, and involved with other racist organizations. And so the Sierra Club has backed away from recognizing Dr. LeConte in its awards and naming processes.

02-00:48:17
Eardley-Pryor: I can say the same thing is happening here at [the University of California] Berkeley because the [John and Joseph] LeConte brothers, after they left the Carolinas, moved out West, and became some of the first hires, the first professors at Berkeley. And right now, as a matter of fact, LeConte Hall, the physics building where Robert Oppenheimer was, is undergoing a formal name-changing process, finally. It's happening now.

02-00:48:39
Cox: Well, I think we are living through a significant moment in US history with this deep self-examination and acknowledgement of our racist history.

02-00:48:49
Eardley-Pryor: Indeed, and long overdue at that. Well, let's take a little break here, Robbie, if you don't mind, before we take our next step into talking about some nature travel and then your work at the national level. Is that okay for you?

02-00:49:01
Cox: That would be fine.

02-00:49:02
Eardley-Pryor: Great, thanks.

[break in audio]

02-00:49:08
Eardley-Pryor: All right, Robbie. I have a note here that around this time, during your period as chapter chair of the North Carolina chapter, you also began doing some international travel, including mountain travel to Asia. Can you share a little bit about that experience, and what it meant to you?

02-00:49:25
Cox: I did begin some travel. I had just turned forty in 1985, and I despised the idea of feeling sorry for myself turning forty, sitting in some café in Europe. That didn't appeal to me. I was from West Virginia, a beautiful, mountainous state, and my thought was, well, let's go climb the highest mountains on Earth. So, I joined a Sierra Club international trip to Nepal to trek through the Gorkha region—the Gorkha Himal region of the Himalayas outside of Kathmandu. This was December of 1985 through January of 1986. I was fortunate to have, as the leader of that trek, an ethnic Tibetan man named Jagat Man Lama, whom I have become lifelong friends with. He had led a BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] team on Everest, quite experienced as a mountaineer himself, but had agreed to lead a Sierra Club trek through the Himalayas.

02-00:50:42
Eardley-Pryor: What is the BBC team?

02-00:50:44
Cox: There was a BBC expedition on Everest, a climbing expedition and—

02-00:50:49
Eardley-Pryor: Like the British Broadcasting Company?

02-00:50:50
Cox: Right, yes, the BBC—

02-00:50:51
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, cool.

02-00:50:52
Cox: —and Jagat Man was one of the leading sirdars, as they're called, leaders of a support group carrying packs and equipment, and so forth. So, he's experienced. He was also a very politically engaged member of the political parties in Nepal. He cared a great deal about his small, rural village in the mountains. We stayed in touch, and years later, I would be engaged with him in a variety of projects supporting some of the water projects to bring water piping into his village, which was still roadless, a remote trek into it, as well as education, and so forth.

02-00:51:42
Eardley-Pryor: That's beautiful.

02-00:51:42
Cox: I'm still in touch with him today.

02-00:51:44
Eardley-Pryor: When you first met each other on this trip, in this '85-'86 transition, how is it that y'all kept in touch together?

02-00:51:54
Cox: How did we communicate internationally? Through letters initially, seriously. And then of course more recently, with social media, email, and so forth. But I would return. I've been back to Nepal, and then also Tibet, about six or seven times now, so I continually renewed the friendship in person. When I would be there, I would often travel to his village and met his family and children. Julia [T. Wood] came with me on one of the trips into his village, and she and I met one of his daughters, six years old, who initially tried to speak Japanese to Julia to find what ethnicity she was. She natively spoke Nepalese, but because of her father leading international trekking groups, she had learned the languages of different countries. She then switched, I think, to French to see if Julia spoke French, and finally settled on English and conversed with her in English.

02-00:53:03
Eardley-Pryor: Wow, at six years old.

02-00:53:06
Cox: Jagat Man has three daughters and one son. His three daughters today have advanced professional degrees and are working in three different countries. He was very progressive for his time, I mean that—

02-00:53:23
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, I was going to ask you about what was the class status, or social status of women in Nepal in this time period?

02-00:53:31
Cox: Well, and especially in the Hindu system. Jagat Man as a Tibetan, in an ethnic Tibetan group [Tamang] living in Nepal, was Buddhist as his tradition. And I must say, Jagat Man's Buddhism became influential with me.

02-00:53:49
Eardley-Pryor: How so?

02-00:53:50
Cox: On that first trek, I recall passing, in the High Himalayas on one snowy trail in December, a group of Tibetans coming out of Tibet walking hundreds and hundreds of miles into India to attend a lecture about the Dalai Lama, a special teaching. And I was so struck by the demeanor of the Tibetans, the sense of inner peace, of nobility, and calmness. It was a kind of a noble bearing, not of pride but of a kind of compassion and peace radiating. And that so struck me on an affective level that I began to read again in Buddhism and eventually came to adopt certain Buddhist meditative practices and ethical behavior.

02-00:54:52
Eardley-Pryor: Do you consider yourself a Buddhist today?

02-00:54:54
Cox: I do.

02-00:54:55
Eardley-Pryor: And you trace it back to that first trip in the Himalayas?

02-00:54:59
Cox: Very clearly back to that.

02-00:55:04
Eardley-Pryor: How does your practice of Buddhism relate to your relationship to either political activism or wilderness preservation, to your environmental efforts?

02-00:55:16
Cox: Well, one of the core tenets of Buddhism, the two pillars essentially being wisdom—overcoming ignorance of ego and such—and compassion. The two wings of the eagle, wisdom and compassion, enable you then to fly higher and live a more enlightened life. Well, compassion is compassion for all sentient or feeling beings, not just the human species, but the animal realm, and an appreciation, a deep appreciation, for vegetative life as well. So, wilderness

really was a direct correlation to a practice that wanted to engage in compassionate, ethical behavior toward sentient beings by preserving the ecosystems in which they lived and reproduced and survived. And it would also become a motivation as I became increasingly interested in environmental justice and the human suffering under poisoning of chemicals and other degradation of their communities.

02-00:56:29
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. You mentioned that Julia joined you in one of these trips that you made, one of these five or six trips when you said you've gone back. What was that experience like? Is she much of a backpacker or much of a mountaineer?

02-00:56:42
Cox: Not at all. [laughs] No, Julia was not at all a backpacker. She was enthralled with my friendship with Jagat Man and wanted not only to meet him but to see what it was that drew me back to Nepal and that culture and the landscape. So, she agreed to come with me on one of my trips. She was, I think, somewhat hesitant and told one of her feminist reading groups that she feared she may not come back because she was afraid of the danger of this.

02-00:57:17
Eardley-Pryor: Was there danger involved in this travel?

02-00:57:20
Cox: Only at one point. We were trekking through the remote high mountain area toward Jagat Man's village, and at that one point, we were on a trail that had very extreme exposure on one side, that is to say a sheer drop-off of several thousand feet down to a river far, far below. And Julia slipped at one point and started to tilt toward the edge, and one of Jagat Man's village members, who was a sirdar also, immediately grabbed her arm and held it like an iron fist and re-straightened her on the trail. And she credits him to this day with saving her life.

02-00:58:10
Eardley-Pryor: That is harrowing.

02-00:58:11
Cox: Yeah, it was, it was quite harrowing.

02-00:58:13
Eardley-Pryor: You mentioned that there was some work that you did together in bringing water and also education. Can you share a little bit more about the details of what that was? And also, just for context, what is the name of Jagat Man's village?

02-00:58:26
Cox: Baldy village [Bolde village].

02-00:58:28
Eardley-Pryor: And is that where you did some of these educational and water projects that you got engaged in?

02-00:58:31
Cox: Yes, it is. The big interest among a lot of villagers was having a clean water source. The women of the village would have to trek back down that sheer mountainside cliff, down to the river thousands of feet below, with jars to fill them each day. And then, having the jars, carrying it on their head and on their backs in wicker baskets, would have to then trudge back up the side of that mountain again, every day, just for the water supply. But Jagat Man had identified a spring higher up above the village in the Himalayan Mountains that, if there was sufficient, basic engineering for a little pool, a reservoir of water, and a pump, and some PCB piping, he could bring that water source downhill into the village by the sheer force of gravity once the water was pumped out of that little reservoir. He had to raise money for the supplies. He and I had a number of conversations about this, and he was very skeptical of large NGOs [nongovernmental organization] that would come into Nepal and do village projects and then leave. And he said, they never—

02-00:59:54
Eardley-Pryor: Why?

02-00:59:55
Cox: He said, "Well, they would do the projects themselves rather than training local villagers to be able to manage the projects after they left." And so as a result, some of the machinery would break down, no one knew how to repair it or operate it. He said, "I—"

02-01:00:12
Eardley-Pryor: This is like teaching a person how to fish rather than giving them the fish.

02-01:00:16
Cox: Well, that's right. He says, "If I can raise enough money to buy the supplies to build the reservoir and the pump and the piping, I'm going to train—have my villagers trained in maintenance and operation of it." And so, I agreed to work with him to raise money for it, and I and some of the other supporters of Jagat Man in the United States came in together to bring him to the US for a speaking tour. I had him speak at UNC Chapel Hill, and we had a huge audience and raised money there, and Julia and I contributed as well. And through this combined effort, we were able to purchase all of the equipment, the pumps and the piping and the training. We lashed the piping to a raft on the Sun Kosi River that flowed outside of Kathmandu through the mountains, down below his village, high above on the mountainside, and then off-loaded the piping there. And so, I had the experience of traveling with him to get the piping and then take it down the river, a kind of a whitewater experience where I was thrown overboard and hit by an oar and my forehead slashed. [laughs]

02-01:01:37
Eardley-Pryor: Whoa! This is a heck of an experience.

02-01:01:40
Cox: Yeah. Well, they got me over to the shore, and at that point, a couple of Nepalese women who were gathering plants at the riverside saw me and came over, looked at my forehead, didn't speak a word, but immediately made a poultice out of some mustard plants and applied it to the open wound. It stung like hell, but it actually helped cauterize the vessels, the bleeding. It stopped, it healed beautifully afterward, and I continued on to the village.

02-01:02:17
Eardley-Pryor: What an adventure.

02-01:02:19
Cox: When Julia came with me later to the village, she was able to witness women around the little spout at the end of the waterpipe that had brought the water from up above down into a square in the village, washing their hair in this cold, Himalayan water, and they were joyous. Julia said she couldn't imagine having that cold, icy water on her head, but they were no longer making that trek each day down to get water in jars and carry it back. They had it outside of their homes.

02-01:02:58
Eardley-Pryor: That's a beautiful story. I mean the experiences of you traveling abroad just sound incredible. How did you internalize it? I mean, you talked about your spiritual journey being informed by these treks. How did this international travel, how else did it inform your life back here in the States?

02-01:03:15
Cox: Well, I think as anyone who does foreign travel, you begin to realize that you're not sitting in this special kingdom, some exceptional state of existence here in the United States, that we were one among many. And often the experience of being a minority in a crowd or in a community with others speaking a different language, a different ethnicity, I think you learn humility and appreciation for diversity. And, through some of these projects I was involved in, a sense of wanting to be part of helping others achieve something as well.

02-01:03:56
You know, there is science on the two different neurological sources of happiness in human brain: One is pleasurable events, going to a movie, having a party, eating and drinking, but those sensors in the brain don't tend to last; they ease out. Altruism, however, brings to the forefront other brain processes that have a deeper, more lasting sense of happiness within a person. And I think I was beginning to learn that difference through my involvement with some of the projects with Jagat Man.

02-01:04:36
Eardley-Pryor: That's beautiful. You mentioned a lot of these treks in Nepal. Are there other places that you travel to after you had turned forty that were involved in your international explorations?

02-01:04:47
Cox: Well, several years later, I think it was in the early nineties when the Chinese government allowed foreigners for the first time to enter into Tibet, which they had occupied after 1959 and the Dalai Lima, of course, fleeing to India at that point. I had an invitation from Jagat Man to join an expedition that he was putting together to enter this land of— well, actually, there are two parts to the story. We entered this area of Nepal that was up on the Tibetan Plateau that was called the Kingdom of Lo, or [Upper] Mustang as it's called in English. And so, we were the first foreigners to go into that area as well.

02-01:05:37
I had a parallel invitation from a professor at another university to join an expedition that would actually travel overland from Kathmandu through the Himalayas into Lhasa, Tibet, and other portions of Tibet. I think this was in 1986, so just a couple of years after I began this travel. China had just opened that area to foreign travel, and again, I was one of the first groups to go in before the heavy influx of the Han Chinese ethnicity moving into Lhasa and throughout Tibet. So still seeing a real sense of Tibet during the life of the Dalai Lama and of Tibetan sovereignty before it was fully encompassed, but you could see signs of that encroachment already.

02-01:06:36
Eardley-Pryor: What was it like being in Tibet versus Nepal, for example?

02-01:06:40
Cox: Very different ambience because it was an ancient practice of Buddhism, and you could see it in the people. There was no caste system. There was great kindness exhibited by the Tibetans toward us and towards each other. Workmen who were working on a repair of a water line in Lhasa hesitated to dig further when they saw earthworms because they didn't want to kill the worms because they were sentient beings. So visiting the monasteries, talking with some of the monks who were there—with some subterfuge, like taking color photographs of His Holiness the Dalai Lama with me under my parka as I entered into Tibet—it was forbidden at the time and still is today—but being able to give them carefully to Tibetans out in the countryside, to a Tibetan grandmother who was sitting in the shadow of the Potala Palace in Lhasa with her two young grandchildren with her prayer beads, you know, "*om mani padme hum.*" And I sat with her for a while and with sign language tried to talk with her a little bit. And then I reached under my parka and passed her a photograph of the Dalai Lama, and her eyes just opened. She quickly put it under her *chuba*, or robe. And before that, she touched it to her forehead in respect and then hid it from any of the Chinese soldiers that may have been walking around the Potala Palace.

02-01:08:24
Eardley-Pryor: That's amazing.

02-01:08:26
Cox: So, a wonderful experience. It stays with me to this day, just the influence of being in the presence of that culture and its history.

02-01:08:34
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. Well, let's move things back into the Sierra Club narrative that's happening as you continued these international experiences that are—that sound, in some ways, really life-altering for you and for the people that you were engaging with. I'm interested in moving your trajectory from the state North Carolina chapter up to this national Sierra Club. How did you bridge your work from this focus on the state up to the national? How did you become involved in national Sierra Club work?

02-01:09:06
Cox: The current president in 1986, when I had finished my tenure as chair of the North Carolina chapter after a couple of years, was [Lawrence] Larry Downing. Larry got to know me when he visited North Carolina as a speaker on behalf of the national Sierra Club, as president of the Club. And later, he wrote to me and asked if I would agree to serve as a member of the new committee he was establishing in San Francisco called the Public Affairs Committee. It would be chaired by a woman by the name of Joanne Hurley, and it was an attempt to build a communication capacity into the Club that could represent it—its identity, its programs—outward to the media and to other constituencies. The Sierra Club was still building that capacity at the time. I was very grateful—

02-01:10:01
Eardley-Pryor: Well—oh, I'm sorry—okay, I was going to say, I would think the Club already would have had a pretty strong media presence—I mean, shoot, since the days of [David] Brower even, in the fifties and the sixties. So, what was it that Larry wanted to accomplish with the creation of Joanne's committee, and what was your role in it?

02-01:10:19
Cox: Well, with Brower and the Sierra Club Books program and in *Sierra* magazine, it was more either a personal media talent—David Brower certainly had that—or through its books and print media, an educational purpose. The idea behind the Public Affairs Committee was to speak to current issues, as they were breaking, to help represent the Sierra Club's view. We had a media presence in Washington, DC, but the national club wanted a more general media source representing the national club out in its San Francisco office. I was very pleased to have an opportunity to work at the national level, or to volunteer, and so I agreed and began to travel out to the Bay Area to work with Joanne and to help build that Public Affairs Committee.

02-01:11:17
Eardley-Pryor: How did that work, I mean, just even mechanically? I mean, you would fly out to San Francisco, how long would you stay, where would you stay, how did all that function?

02-01:11:26
Cox: Well, at the time, the Sierra Club headquarters was over in the Tenderloin district actually, yeah, in a building that it owned. It would later sell that building because of safety threats to employees that were growing in the area. But I would stay in small hotels—of course, San Francisco has hundreds of them throughout the city—stay for several days, two, three, four days at a time for committee work and such. I know on one of the occasions, I recall, Joanne who was a friend of George Lucas, the filmmaker, got an invitation to visit his ranch outside of San Francisco—

02-01:12:14
Eardley-Pryor: Skywalker Ranch?

02-01:12:15
Cox: Skywalker Ranch. The Lucas trilogy films were coming out, and so we traveled out and met with his media people, learned about his operations. As the result, George Lucas offered to give the rights to one of his principal characters from *Star Wars,* the Ewoks, to the Sierra Club as our mascot.

02-01:12:42
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, this is just right after *Return of the Jedi* comes out. The Ewoks are featured prominently.

02-01:12:47
Cox: It was. So, a hot property.

02-01:12:50
Eardley-Pryor: What did you think?

02-01:12:50
Cox: You know, I was naïve in terms of the Club brand and protection of its image and such, but Joanne was really pushing this, and the committee was willing to support her recommendation to the board of directors. When the motion was made at a board meeting, [Phillip] Phil Berry, a longtime member of the Sierra Club and a former president of the Club, immediately objected and said, "We are not going to have a fictional character representing the identity of the Sierra Club." [laughs] And in hindsight, his wisdom was, of course, the correct wisdom, to steer the Sierra Club long term in a wise way.

02-01:13:34
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. But the Ewok was almost released, or on the table, as a possible mascot for the Club?

02-01:13:40
Cox: Yeah, that cuddly, little creature that children would identify with. But it was a failure to align strategic objectives to the images that would represent us. It was misaligned.

02-01:13:54
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, that's great. You were involved in this committee work at the national level, flying out occasionally to San Francisco. What was that like for your life back in North Carolina—with Julia, and with your schoolwork, and your commitments at UNC—to have this kind of bicoastal experience introduced?

02-01:14:15
Cox: Well, I was tenured faculty at the time. I was an associate professor—I probably had become full professor by that point. So, I had a great deal of discretion in scheduling my classes or seminars and could occasionally miss a Thursday class and just extended weekends, three- or four-day weekends. Long flights out and back, of course, that consumed a lot of time. Julia was so supportive during that period, and later when I became president of the Club. I couldn't have done it without her. We have no children, and so that also made it more possible for me to be away at a time. And, of course as I mentioned, Julia had her career at UNC as well. She left to me matters of the environment, and I left to her issues of women's politics. So, we had an arrangement.

02-01:15:11
Eardley-Pryor: That's great, that's great. Well, I want to ask respectfully about that—you've mentioned a couple times now—you do not have children. Was that something that you aspired to or had thought about? Do you want to share much about your experience with that, the story behind that?

02-01:15:27
Cox: I think, at the time, we wanted to have children. It just didn't work out; it wasn't really possible. And of course, as many professors do, our students and particularly our graduate students became our virtual children, and many remain that way. [laughs]

02-01:15:49
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, very much. So, yeah, mentoring and being a mentor figure, a parental-type figure for these students is an emotional and intellectually powerful journey for sure.

02-01:16:01
Cox: It is, yes.

02-01:16:02
Eardley-Pryor: Well, I want to ask more about your other commitments at the national level within the Club. You did this Public Affairs Committee for a while. Were there other—?

02-01:16:11

Cox: I did. Well, in 1991, I was—oh well, let me go back one step. Based on some of my international travel, I came to the attention of Michele Perrault [Sierra Club president in 1984–1986, 1993–1994] who was then the international vice president of the Sierra Club, and she was chairing an International Committee. I had, by chance, traveled in Malaysia at one point in the early nineties after trekking in the Mount Everest region and had linked up with some forest activist in Penang, a city in Malaysia. And I came to the attention of Michele, and I reported back to her that experience. She was interested in any Club member that had developed relationships internationally.

02-01:17:01

Eardley-Pryor: When you go on these trips, either to Nepal or this trip to Malaysia, were they through the Sierra Club? You mentioned that first one was, but are the follow-up trips that you're doing Sierra Club-related?

02-01:17:11

Cox: No. The Sierra Club backpacking trip in 1985 was the only Sierra Club trip to Nepal I participated in. Once I made contact with Jagat Man, he and I organized all of my subsequent trekking and climbing in Nepal. And I would round up friends and colleagues, and students in some cases, and get a group together. And Jagat Man would make the local arrangements and supply the sirdar and packers for us. That was the arrangement.

02-01:17:47

But Michele asked me then to become a member of the International Committee, which I did that for a while. But by that point, I came to the attention of the board of directors' Nominating Committee, and they asked me to interview as a possible candidate for the board of directors. That was in 1991.

02-01:18:06

Eardley-Pryor: What were your thoughts whenever you were asked about that?

02-01:18:09

Cox: I'm sorry, what was that?

02-01:18:11

Eardley-Pryor: What were your thoughts when you were asked? You're beginning to do this International Committee work, in fact, you're now on two different national committees and one of them is even internationally focused. What were you thinking in terms of your engagement with the Club? Did you want to have that kind of national role and continue with it?

02-01:18:26

Cox: To be honest, I was interested. I thought it was a challenge. I enjoyed very much just seeing what I might be able to do in that capacity, so I was open to the possibility. I had a good interview, but they, in their wisdom, told me I probably did not have enough experience at the national level. So they recommended that I join yet another national committee, the Planning

Committee that was chaired by my North Carolina colleague Denny Shaffer, who himself had become president of the Sierra Club [1982–1984].

02-01:19:02
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, Denny. In his role as treasurer, he's a legendary figure in the Club at this time period.

02-01:19:07
Cox: He is absolutely.

02-01:19:09
Eardley-Pryor: Did you two ever cross paths before this moment, through your North Carolina connections?

02-01:19:13
Cox: We did, we did. When I was the chapter chair, I was campaigning for Jim Hunt in 1980 when he was running for governor. And Denny was [treasurer] of the national Sierra Club time at the time, and he joined me at a ceremony when I gave the Sierra Club's endorsement of Governor Hunt. And Denny, of course being a resident, would attend North Carolina conferences and conclaves. So, yeah, I developed a relationship with Denny, and he was very supportive of me coming on to the national scene as well.

02-01:19:49
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. What was the Planning Committee's work? What kind of things did that committee do?

02-01:19:55
Cox: Well, at first I think, it was striving to identify what its work would be. It settled upon identifying certain metrics that it could monitor as a kind of dashboard to be able to check on the health of the Club, its membership growth, its—the number of direct mail, the drops that it made. That was one of the membership media that we were using at the time, direct mail. Denny knew Roger Craver, who had developed the part of the direct mail—and it [the Planning Committee] was at least a principal part of that and helped sponsor that increasingly inside the Sierra Club. So, developing metrics to measure the growth and to monitor the health of the Club's membership and its financial sustainability.

02-01:20:47
Eardley-Pryor: This to me sounds like it was really financially involved in trying almost to help supplement the role that the treasurer played?

02-01:20:55
Cox: I think that was part of Denny's interest in chairing this.

02-01:21:01
Eardley-Pryor: As you moved into this role within national committee membership, how did your perspective change as to how the Club operates? And especially now

being in San Francisco, how did your relationship and your understanding of the relationship between volunteers and staff evolve?

02-01:21:20
Cox: Yeah. Well, I certainly began to appreciate the breadth of campaign issues that the Club was invested in, beginning to develop relationships at the national level, and a greater depth of understanding of strategy behind campaigns. I was fascinated with this as a citizen, nongovernmental organization that was having an impact on national policy. I think the political sensibility in me just resonated with that kind of opportunity.

02-01:22:02
Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

02-01:22:03
Cox: So, yeah, the upshot of all of this was that I was asked the following year in 1992 to interview again as a candidate for the board of directors, and I was nominated and placed on the ballot. Of course, Sierra Club elects its fifteen-member board by direct vote of its members, so I had to stand for the membership and write a compelling message for my written statement on the national Sierra Club's ballot that was sent out.

02-01:22:33
Eardley-Pryor: I want to ask a little bit more about the details of that. What does it mean to run at the national level, to be asked or to be elected to the board? How does that work?

02-01:22:43
Cox: Well, the board of directors is fifteen members. The terms are terms of, what, three years? So, there's a rotation. Every year, a certain subset of the board comes up for renomination for a second term, which is permitted. And then, if they serve a second term after that, they're term-limited for at least one year before they're eligible to run again. So, I was part of the five candidates that came up that year in the spring of 1993, and the rules of the Club are that you really have to have at least seven nominees on the ballot for voters to consider, and they would vote for their top five choices.

02-01:23:42
Eardley-Pryor: And those folks that are put forward on this ballot, for members across the nation to vote upon, are put there by this Nominating Committee that you had interviewed with a few times, right?

02-01:23:53
Cox: That's correct. The Nominating Committee was independent of the board. The board couldn't change the nominees. The Nominating Committee reported to the board, presented its list of nominees, and the board then put forth a ballot to all of [the Sierra Club's] hundreds of thousands of members that could vote for any one of those nominated candidates.

02-01:24:15
Eardley-Pryor: I mean, this gets a little bit at the internal dynamics of the Club and the politics of it at a national level, but it sounds to me like that Nominating Committee is a pretty powerful committee.

02-01:24:25
Cox: Oh, it is very powerful. It was the funnel through which rising leaders would pass through in order to have an opportunity to be considered by the members for service on the board. So, I was very happy—

02-01:24:41
Eardley-Pryor: Right, and—sorry. You mentioned having to write some sort of statement to represent yourself?

02-01:24:46
Cox: I did. Each candidate was given a space for a written statement on the ballot. I developed a statement that then put forth, I think, three principal points that I—my experience, I would bring certain experience and abilities but wanted to prioritize these areas and thought they would resonate with the membership.

02-01:25:13
Eardley-Pryor: What were those three?

02-01:25:14
Cox: Well, I foregrounded the importance of environmental justice. I was one of the early candidates and national leaders to speak to that. And that came from some of my own work locally in North Carolina with the emerging issue of environmental justice, which had grown out of North Carolina at Warren County and the controversy over the disposal of PCBs [polychlorinated biphenyls] on a poor, predominantly black community, rural community.

02-01:25:44
Eardley-Pryor: That was a big moment. And that happened, that [Warren County PCB-dumping] event that you're talking about, it is often considered one of the founding events of the environmental justice movement, even though, of course, it does have deeper roots. But that's such a prominent event in the timeline of the environmental justice story. But it happened in the early eighties, that event in North Carolina. When did that come on to your radar as somebody involved in environmental activism?

02-01:26:08
Cox: I think because I was more invested at the time in wilderness issues, I was not as attentive to that happening. I knew of it from news broadcasts and, to my chagrin, was not as responsive as I now wished I had been when that first evolved. I became involved several years later as the issue of environmental justice began to spread in other communities in North Carolina and met with some local communities and began to speak to a number of civic groups in the area about the importance of understanding environment as the places not just out in nature, but where people lived and worked and raised their children and went to school. And that these places could be despoiled just as a forest could

be. I thought that was emerging as an issue more broadly throughout the South, and I feared that the national Sierra Club, with its focus on western environmental issues and forest and wilderness, was not yet attuned to this issue. Of course, it became so. Now, of course, many organizations, Greenpeace among others, were beginning to work with this. But I think because of that local work, I came to the attention of an organizer, an EJ [environmental justice] organizer for Greenpeace, named Damu [Amiri Imara] Smith. And he put me on a list to be invited to a conference of civil rights leaders in Washington, DC, which came to be known as the First People of Color National Environmental Justice Leadership Conference [First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit].

02-01:28:01

Eardley-Pryor: This is great, and I want to hear that because it's important. I want to hear it, and it's important to your own story as well. But just for me to go back, so I can have, in my head, everything together. The three pillars that you put forth on your ballot in '93, a couple of years after the First People of Color [Environmental Leadership] Summit—what were those issues? I would like to dive into environmental justice with you in just a bit. But just to put all of that together as to what were your ballot points. One of them was environmental justice, and what else?

02-01:28:31

Cox: The second had to do with working with other interests such as labor, faith groups, coalition building, which would expand Sierra Club power, the ability to move its issues. And the third issue was youth environmentalism that was beginning to be an interest, but this national Sierra Club did not yet have an organized youth component. I think the combination of those three interests helped enormously, and I was elected to the board of directors in 1993 as a first-time member.

02-01:29:16

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. And then, of course, you served on the national Sierra Club board of directors for the next twenty years, after that point.

02-01:29:24

Cox: Yeah, taking an occasional year off when I was term-limited after each two- to three-year terms that I served. But yeah, for the next twenty years, I would serve on the board of directors.

02-01:29:34

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, we'll dive into this next twenty-year period. But before we do, maybe we could take just a quick break here, if you don't mind?

02-01:29:42

Cox: Okay.

02-01:29:42

Eardley-Pryor: Thank you.

[break in audio]

02-01:29:46

Eardley-Pryor: All right, great, Robbie. So, you'd mention you joined the Sierra Club's board of directors in 1993. You had these three pillars that included environmental justice, a sense of the role that the South could play, and also in student organizing. Tell me a little bit about the work that you did on this student organizing task force at the national level. What kind of work were you doing, and how did that relate to your experience as a professor mentoring young people as well?

02-01:30:15

Cox: Sure. Well, I think because of my background as a professor at UNC, I came to the attention of a really bright, energetic, young man, Adam Werbach, who would later become president of the Sierra Club [from 1996 to 1998] following my first term [from 1994 to 1996]. But Adam had been working with students in California even as a high school student, and he thought there was a place in the Sierra Club to organize, to recognize students who were becoming impassioned about the environment. So when I joined the board of directors in 1993, I was asked to work with Adam on an environmental student task force to study the possibility of the Sierra Club officially endorsing a framework of student environmental members or a separate entity that would be aligned with the Sierra Club.

02-01:31:11

Eardley-Pryor: Now, before you engage in this work with Adam, was there much of any kind of organization for young high school activists like Adam at that time to come in for involvement in the Club?

02-01:31:22

Cox: No, not really. There had been sporadic attempts to try to organize student clubs here and there. They never really scaled up to be of interest to the national Club. There was an Environmental Education Committee at the time that worked with schoolteachers, but it was a limited effort. The educational field is so massive, to have an impact there would require enormous resources, so it never became a priority campaign for the national Sierra Club. It was an interest of a particular committee. But Adam was pushing the envelope to have something better or recognized on a larger scale, and I think the board felt it natural to ask me to cochair a task force to look into this. And I got to know Adam. I thought he had a very reasonable proposal of a potential Sierra Student Coalition, as he proposed to name it. And he had plans to organize across high schools, initially, and ultimately into colleges. He had contacts he'd developed already. It was clear Adam was on the move, that he could organize, get things done, so I was very impressed with him and had confidence he could make this work if the board would give him support.

02-01:32:48

So, at an early board meeting, I had had time to bring this to fruition. And I took a great deal of pride in the fact that the first motion I made as a member of the board of directors was to move to recognize the recommendation of the student task force to create the Sierra Student Coalition, and I got a second. But then there was debate, and some of the older members on the board were very hesitant to go down this path.

02-01:33:22

Eardley-Pryor: Why?

02-01:33:23

Cox: Well, they had seen the failed experiences earlier of small, ephemeral efforts to organize students, and they didn't think it was going to work. They just didn't believe in the possibility. So, I and a couple of the other board members who believed in this, and Adam, who made a presentation—I think his enthusiasm swung some votes—we got this approved. And at that point, there was a great cheer out in the hallway. Adam had assembled dozens of students with him standing in the doorway to the boardroom, and the roar went up when the board approved the Sierra Student Coalition in 1993.

02-01:34:05

Eardley-Pryor: What a moment.

02-01:34:06

Cox: Of course, we had to make arrangements for the funding of it, and a senior staff person who would be the liaison to work with them, but it was done.

02-01:34:15

Eardley-Pryor: You helped make it happen. I think, today, about some of the high school student activism around climate issues and even around gun-control issues today that have become such a prominent part of American politics, at least how the media represents it, especially through social media today. I'm wondering what you think the Sierra Club's role was in taking a step forward in the early 1990s in relation to today's efforts for youth and their political activism?

02-01:34:43

Cox: Oh, I'm very clear on this, and so is Adam. The Sierra Student Coalition became an early model because they could demonstrate how it could happen. It was grassroots and empowered, and they had training sessions and training summers and a training academy, and increasingly, other student organizations came into being. And today you have everything from 350.org to the Sunrise [Movement] alliance, to Greta Thunberg, and using social media. But early on, the Sierra Student Coalition had an influence in helping to suggest the possibilities of this.

02-01:35:28

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Another thing that I want to hear stories about is in that first year, that 1993 period for your first year on the national board of directors, you've

told me about a trip that you took involving environmental justice activism down to Mississippi. What's the story there? Well, let me pause. Maybe, before we get into the details of that environmental justice work that you're doing in '93, we can pick up the story that you started to tell that I paused you on, which is the 1991 People of Color Summit [the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit]. Can you share what happened? What was that summit? You just mentioned being invited to attend. What was your experience there?

02-01:36:10
Cox: Sure. Well, I think as a result of the work I was doing locally in North Carolina, I came to the attention of one of the organizers, a Greenpeace EJ [environmental justice] organizer, Damu Smith, who I mentioned was part of organizing a national summit in Washington, DC, of environmental justice leaders coming out of the Civil Rights Movement and other progressive movements. It was called the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. And I was invited initially as a participant in it.

02-01:36:48
Eardley-Pryor: How did you come on to Damu's radar to be invited as a participant?

02-01:36:52
Cox: I was attending a meeting in a nearby community outside of Chapel Hill and Raleigh working on environmental justice issues for sanitation workers at the time, and Damu Smith had been sent by Greenpeace to represent the organization at this local meeting. I came to the attention of Damu at the meeting, I believe, and I think he added me to a list that he then sent in of many activists from around the country he had met to help the invitations for the summit.

02-01:37:33
Eardley-Pryor: What were your thoughts about attending this People of Color Summit in DC?

02-01:37:39
Cox: I was excited, I was honored, and I was nervous. [laughs] I mean, I'm this Caucasian guy, and it was to be the National People of Color Summit. I was uncertain how I would be received, but I was very excited to go because I thought this was such an important issue that should be on the agenda of more of the national environmental organizations. When I arrived at the hotel in DC to sign in on the first day of the conference, the woman working the registration table looked at me, got my name, looked down at the list, looked back at me, and said, "Oh, I recognize Robert Cox. We're going to assign you the status of observer." I was not to be a participant. And the only difference was participants would have voting rights in adopting what came to be known as the Principles of Environmental Justice. I was quietly and gently moved to the status of observer, which was fine because I was there to learn, to provide support, and then to take that back into my community, which was the Sierra Club. The one thing that struck me, in addition to the empowering stories of

people of color working in communities across the nation, was the ways in which they were linking the discourses of Civil Rights Movement and justice to the discourses of environmental protection to forge this new language about environmental justice and environmental racism. And at the time, I believe a report had just come out by the United Church of Christ called *Race—*

02-01:39:42
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*. [1987]

02-01:39:43
Cox: *Toxic Wastes and Race*. [Benjamin] Ben Chavis [Jr.] and a coauthor [Charles Lee] brought that out, and that came out of the environmental justice birth in Warren County, North Carolina as it began to spread. And the federal government began to study the location of communities of color near hazardous waste facilities and beginning to document the overlap of these environmental injuries to people of color communities.

02-01:40:14
Eardley-Pryor: Had you been introduced to the *Toxic Wastes and Race* report before attending this People of Color Summit in '91?

02-01:40:22
Cox: You know, I'm not sure I had read it then. I quickly learned of it at the summit or by that time, and it became part of my own pedagogy as I began to introduce courses at the University of North Carolina in environmental communication.

02-01:40:40
Eardley-Pryor: That's the next question I wanted to ask you. You have years of training and studying social movements, and teaching social movements, and just what was in your mind and your experience of being in that space in '91? What was it like having that training with what you were seeing? What were you thinking about, and where did you take it?

02-01:41:02
Cox: Well, the activist side of me was excited to see this development occurring with a broader movement possible. The academic side of me saw this exciting birth of a new movement when they were articulating or bringing together these different discourses to a coherent new movement that could be understood and taught and studied, so, I brought it into my research and my teaching and such. But that was part of this background that I was continually beginning to be introduced to that led me to include environmental justice on my ballot when I ran for the Sierra Club's board of directors in 1993. I had an opportunity to act on this then.

02-01:41:56
Eardley-Pryor: What was your perception as to how the Club would—after, in the wake of your attendance at this foundational People of Color [Environmental Leadership] Summit, the first in '91, what was your perception of how the

Club took on the mantle of EJ [environmental justice] work at that time to the point where you felt comfortable putting that as one of your pillars of your ballot?

02-01:42:17
Cox: Sure. Well, Michael Fischer was the executive director of the Sierra Club at that time, and he was one of the invited speakers as a leader of a national environmental organization at the [1991] People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. And one of the statements Michael made, which is now part of the history of environmental justice that's been preserved in articles and histories, Michael said at one point from the stage to the assembly, or perhaps it was a year later in his 1992 centennial address, "It's time for people of color to have a friendly takeover of the Sierra Club," and invited an alliance coming into the Sierra Club. The Sierra Club in San Francisco by that time had been the recipient of a letter from a lot of these environmental justice groups. It was called the letter to the Big Ten Environmental Groups accusing them of environmental racism.

02-01:43:17
Eardley-Pryor: This is the SWOP letter, the Southwest Organizing—

02-01:43:19
Cox: The Southwest Organizing Project, SWOP—

02-01:43:22
Eardley-Pryor: In 1990, I believe.

02-01:43:24
Cox: Yes, 1990, and to the Sierra Club's credit, the national—the executive director and the conservation director, whom I think it was Carl Pope at the time, invited the leaders, these principal signatories of that letter, to come to San Francisco and to meet with the Sierra Club and have the Sierra Club listen to their concerns in a one-to-one, personal relationship across the table in the library at the Sierra Club headquarters there on Polk Street in the Tenderloin district. So that occurred, and the Sierra Club began to become more aware of EJ [environmental justice]. And by the time I joined the board of directors in 1993, the Sierra Club had hired grassroots organizers to work on environmental justice, hiring EJ organizers from within the communities that would be potentially inviting us to come into their community to listen and for us to learn ways we could be supportive of their agenda within their communities. And then—

02-01:44:36
Eardley-Pryor: So, it sounds to me like this is something that was clearly on your radar as to where the Club was moving on this, and it felt like that's something you could help engage in your own way?

02-01:44:46
Cox: Well, that. And that it turned out that one of the eco-regions or Regional Conservation Committees of the Sierra Club was in the southeast United States. It was chaired by a Florida water scientist, [Nicholas] Nick Aumen, who was vice president for the southeastern Regional Conservation Committee. Nick had received interest feelers from the EJ [environmental justice] organizer in the southeast, John McCown, that a community in southern Mississippi, in Columbia, Mississippi, wanted to begin a dialogue with the Sierra Club, that they began to think that the Sierra Club might be able to help their struggle on a local issue in Mississippi. And Nick brought that to the attention of the board of directors. And the board of directors, in turn, asked me, as a director from that region of the nation, to join with Nick Aumen and members of that Southeastern Regional Conservation Committee to journey down to Columbia, Mississippi, and to have an initial meeting with that community. And I agreed to do that.

02-01:46:06
Eardley-Pryor: You had mentioned, as well, a person involved in this was John McCown?

02-01:46:09
Cox: Yeah.

02-01:46:10
Eardley-Pryor: Can you share a little bit of his background? Who was he, and what was his role within the Club?

02-01:46:15
Cox: John had been, I believe, a chemical specialist in the US military, in the Army, and when he left the Army, he worked basically on environmental justice issues within his community. And I think that was in Georgia—it could have been Alabama or South Carolina, but I think Georgia. He came to the interest of the Sierra Club as we were beginning to fund an EJ [environmental justice] grassroots organizing presence. And so, John agreed to come into the Sierra Club as an employee, and he began to work with Nick Aumen in that Southeast Regional Committee. And John developed a relationship with leaders from that biracial but predominantly African American, small community in Columbia, Mississippi. And it was through that, he came to the attention of the national Sierra Club, and it lent support to John as the local organizer agenda and to Nick Aumen, the volunteer leader in the area. And I was asked as a director to be the liaison for the national club to that initiative.

02-01:47:29
Eardley-Pryor: What was your experience when you joined, I assume, Nick and John in Columbia?

02-01:47:35
Cox: It was an eye-opening moment. It was truly a consciousness-raising moment. We gathered in a small motel in Columbia, Mississippi, prior to meeting with a community meeting of the Concerned Citizens of Columbia, who lived near

a toxic waste dump essentially, an abandoned chemical plant that Reichhold Chemicals company had abandoned and left leaking toxic chemical drums on the property and scattered throughout the county. But before we met with that community meeting, John took us aside and counseled us in the dynamics of meeting with this community and the power imbalances and issues of racial sensibilities. He said, "Listen, you're there to listen to this community and its grievances. You're not there to tell them what the solution is. You're there to listen to them propose how you might help. But they're going to tell stories, and they're going to be angry because the national environmental organizations have neglected them. They've not been here. We're the first to come in. And so, you're going receive the brunt of that anger and frustration, and you should—you've got to get over feeling defensive and remain silent. You're to listen." He really drove the point home.

02-01:49:13

So, we met with the community. There was a principal leader of the community by the name of Charlotte Keys. She had experienced a fire at that abandoned plant when she was in high school and poisonous noxious fume—a toxic fume spreading over the community, and then Reichhold Chemical[s], the owner of the plant, leaving. And increasingly, she began to organize a biracial community because surrounding that chemical plant property were African American neighborhoods and lower-income white neighborhoods as well as a lower-income set of communities around it, neighborhoods around it. So they came together in that community meeting. But they also found the resources of the Civil Rights Law [Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law], a nonprofit group in Washington, DC, and were able to bring in an African American attorney [Deeohn Ferris] from Washington and asked the Sierra Club to sponsor her and pay for her plane fare and lodging to stand with the community in order to help redress what they perceived as the power imbalances between the local powerless community, in a sense, and the national Sierra Club, whom they saw as this powerful, white, monied organization. And we agreed to that arrangement.

02-01:50:46

Eardley-Pryor: Just so I—so, this woman from DC is brought in by Charlotte [Keys] and her group, which I think you listed as the Concerned Citizens of Columbia? Was that her organizing group?

02-01:50:55

Cox: No, the Columbia group was called the Jesus People Against Pollution, or the acronym was JPAP.

02-01:51:02

Eardley-Pryor: Okay, and so that's where Charlotte Keyes was connected through?

02-01:51:06

Cox: Right, yes.

02-01:51:06
Eardley-Pryor: And Charlotte Keyes's coalition, the JPAP [Jesus People Against Pollution] group, they brought in an African American lawyer from Washington, DC, to participate in this meeting, which you were a part of representing the national Sierra Club, all together in Columbia?

02-01:51:20
Cox: Yes.

02-01:51:21
Eardley-Pryor: And John, you said John McCown had coached all of you within the Sierra Club side to be good listeners?

02-01:51:29
Cox: Yes.

02-01:51:30
Eardley-Pryor: All right, who else was involved in this meeting that was representing the Sierra Club, along with you and John?

02-01:51:36
Cox: Well, Nick Aumen as the regional vice president for the Sierra Club and, I would say, perhaps five or six other Sierra Club members from that area, and I can get those names later. [Bob Haskins; Michele Klaes; Bill Kulick; Carolyn Carr, Sierra Club board member; and Jim Price, Southeast field manager in the Sierra Club; and a few others.]

02-01:51:48
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. So, what happened then when you did have this meeting, after John had coached you through what to anticipate?

02-01:51:56
Cox: Well, I can add one other preliminary point, and that was that somehow, the *Wall Street Journal* got wind of this meeting, and it sent one of its reporters to be a journalist witness of the meeting. He was not there in the capacity of either the Sierra Club or the community. He was there as a journalist. So, he's sitting there as well. The meeting unfolded, and it was a continuing cry of frustration and anger about the sicknesses in the community that they believe were traced to exposure to these leaking chemicals that were getting in their groundwater, and the initial exposure to the toxic air pollution that had led to long-term illnesses. There had been no real study of their health and no offers to help redress either their health concerns or simply having to continue to live there in proximity to a toxic site that was not yet cleaned up by EPA. Now, I should add that previously, a federal agency had visited the community. It was the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, the ATSDR, I think. I forget the acronym. But they refused to do long-term exposure of symptoms to toxic substances. They did only test for acute suffering.

02-01:53:44
Eardley-Pryor: Do you understand why that was the decision made from the federal level?

02-01:53:47

Cox: Yes. The community said that they were told it was budget limitations, and the agency did not have sufficient budget to do the more chronic symptom test for their health, and continuing to fail—the EPA failed to develop a real program for cleanup of the site. So, they [JPAP, or Jesus People Against Pollution] turned to the Sierra Club at that point.

02-01:54:13

There were tense moments where some of the Sierra Club delegation felt so defensive. They tried to argue back, and John and I and Nick quietly tried to get them to relax and to listen. We then walked through the community and heard stories of residents and their sickness, the symptoms they were experiencing. We then visited a nursing home that was built on the site of a previous toxic waste dump, literally built on that site, because the city funded it because they could get the land cheap because the corporation was willing to get rid of it and—

02-01:54:57

Eardley-Pryor: Was it a brownfield? Had it been reclaimed in any way?

02-01:55:00

Cox: I, frankly, do not know the status. It was most likely—I won't say it was even a brownfield. I can't document that it was ever detoxified. And I was talking with an elderly African American client at this nursing home who was telling me about his symptoms and him suffering greatly, and the *Wall Street Journal* reporter was sitting right there. And I said to the man—because I wanted that *Wall Street* guy to have some sound bite, something to make a story that would give him exposure in that outlet so that that story, that community, could be reported more widely. And it happened to be the anniversary of the assassination [June 12, 1963], I believe it was, of Medgar Evers in Mississippi. And I remember saying to this patient in trying to be supportive of his grievance and what he was telling me, to echo that I understood it. I said, "As surely as Medgar Evers was assassinated, the chemicals that are leaching through this toxic waste field that this nursing home is now built on is poisoning you as well." And that reporter did pick up that quote, and it was pegged to hang some of the narrative on for a story that did get out in *Wall Street Journal.* Though parts of his framing of that story was a bit patronizing, of a white environmentalist taking a tour through a poor, black neighborhood, that kind of patronization.

02-01:56:38

Eardley-Pryor: Well, let me just ask about the racial dynamics of this meeting as well. You've mentioned John McCown as a Sierra Club black organizer. Were any of the other delegation members that you were a part of either black or people of color?

02-01:56:53

Cox: No, no. It was entirely a white process.

02-01:56:58
Eardley-Pryor: How do you think that shaped the dynamic of that meeting then?

02-01:57:03
Cox: Well, it defined it at the beginning as a tense confrontation. And so, we took a lot of time, we spent hours in August, in southern Mississippi, in a very hot, sweltering, enclosed community center. And then we spent time walking through the community and then going to the nursing home. And we came back to the community center, and at that point, there had been enough trust developed that we could move toward a discussion about how we could be helpful. And John had said to us in advance, "Do not promise that you can do something if you know you cannot meet it. And if you promise to do something, you damn well better deliver on it." He said, "Because that will either break trust or establish trust by your actions and following through."

02-01:58:07
And so, we had a lot of conversation. At first, they were asking us for large grant money. I didn't have the authority to pledge that. What we could pledge was support for getting them communication equipment, office equipment, fax machines, copier machines, travel money, whatever the infrastructure needs were to help them really consolidate as a community organization to be able to sustain themselves. And we promised a continuing relationship, that we would form a partnership with them. And Charlotte Keys picked up on that language and said, "Yes, what we are forming is a partnership with the Sierra Club," and that's how we went forth, both the community and Sierra Club to represent it later. We would have continuing relationships with them. The Sierra Club stayed involved and delivered resources through John and the local Sierra Club regional committee. There would be more later we can come back to, but that was the initial encounter with JPAP [Jesus People Against Pollution] and Charlotte Keys in Mississippi.

02-01:59:17
Eardley-Pryor: Emotionally, what was that experience like for you, being there?

02-01:59:20
Cox: It was draining emotionally because of the intensity of it and the importance and the learning that was really broadening your horizon and sensibilities in so many unexpected ways.

02-01:59:38
Eardley-Pryor: When you returned to the national board of directors' meeting next, what was that experience like? What did you bring back to share with the other directors?

02-01:59:49
Cox: Well, the most important thing that I brought back and continued to be an advocate for was robust funding of the environmental justice grassroots organizing program in the Sierra Club. And to be part of the fight each year for the budget, as we considered budgeting on an annual basis, to make sure

that we were funding and that we continue to fund and expand, to hire more EJ [environmental justice] organizers in other parts of the country, in Tennessee, in Chicago, in Detroit, in Los Angeles. We were hiring more and more EJ organizers, and I think the experience in Columbia with JPAP [Jesus People Against Pollution] helped create a template for how the relationships could be structured. So, that became a continuing interest of mine in serving on the [Sierra Club] board of directors.

02-02:00:43
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, I see we're nearing the end of our time for this session today, and we can pick up more of the story because it does continue. As you say, you're building this partnership and this relationship with JPAP [Jesus People Against Pollution] with your continued work within the Club on the board of directors, but then soon becoming president of the Club.

02-02:01:01
Cox: Right.

02-02:01:01
Eardley-Pryor: So, this has been great. Is there anything else that comes to mind right now that you want to reflect upon from that early experience of joining the board and moving from the chapter to national work?

02-02:01:12
Cox: I think those were the principal commitments of my first year, the Sierra Student Coalition and then working with JPAP [Jesus People Against Pollution] and environmental justice.

02-02:01:22
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, it sounds like powerful experiences that continue to echo through the rest of your time in the Club.

02-02:01:27
Cox: It certainly did with me.

02-02:01:29
Eardley-Pryor: Great. Well, thank you for today, Robbie, I look forward to our next session together.

02-02:01:32
Cox: Thank you, Roger.

Interview 3: September 18, 2020

03-00:00:04
Eardley-Pryor: Today is Friday, September 18, 2020. I'm Roger Eardley-Pryor from UC [University of California] Berkeley's Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library. Today is interview session number three with Robert Cox. Robbie, it's great to see you. Tell me again where you are?

03-00:00:19
Cox: I am outside of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in a lovely, forested area here near where we live.

03-00:00:25
Eardley-Pryor: Beautiful. And I am in Sonoma County in Santa Rosa, California. We are conducting this session, as with our previous ones, over Zoom because of the global pandemic that we're all experiencing. We're going to cover so much great stuff today. I'm really excited about it. The thing that I would love to hear, to start us off, is that in '93, you joined the Sierra Club board of directors. Within a year, you're asked to become president of the Sierra Club. Share with me, if you can, the story about how you were asked, and what your thoughts were upon being asked.

03-00:01:04
Cox: This is true. I almost did not become president of the Sierra Club—I had not been planning, that is. As you said, I had just begun to end my first year on the board of directors by spring of 1994, joining in May of '93. A number of the directors had begun to approach me by spring of '94 asking if I would serve as president. Michele Perrault had been the president before me, and she did a really good job. She had a very different leadership style from me. I was not sure that I could mimic that style. I had also just signed a book contract with the University of South Carolina Press for a book on environmental justice. And, of course, had my faculty teaching load as well as my ongoing research. So, I was not preparing to run for president of the Sierra Club when the board met after the elections of 1994 in May at the board retreat.

03-00:02:16
But as the results of the election came out and some new directors joined the board as well, they also began to approach me to ask if I would serve as president. I was resistant still. I began to think about it and had talked with Julia [T. Wood]. I wasn't sure how I would balance these other responsibilities. What finally tipped the scale for me was that I got from Carl Pope before I boarded the plane to fly to out to San Francisco for that May board retreat, and Carl asked me to consider this position. He said he was reluctant to involve himself in board politics, but the Club, as he and I both agreed at the time, was facing financial hardship, struggle with governance bureaucracy that was really cumbersome and not efficient. So, we were seeing some of the same set of challenges similarly, and I think he and some of the

other directors appreciated that sentiment as part of the leadership that had to go forward in 1994 and for the next year or so.

03-00:03:34
Eardley-Pryor: Let me pause you for a second, Robbie, and ask you about leadership. You had mentioned that Michele [Perrault] did a great job as president, but her leadership style is different than yours, and so what do you mean by that? Why do you think it was that the other board members were coming to you saying, "We think you might be the person for this next step for the Club"?

03-00:03:53
Cox: Sure. Well, and Michele, understand, was not planning to run for reelection as president, so I was not challenging her. I thought she did a superb job. Michele just had her fingers in so many different issues, internationally especially as well as domestic issues, local, national with other organizations, and so forth. My sense was that Michele did not always prioritize issues in a way that perhaps I would have. Not that they were wrong but that we had a different sense of how leadership might operate in this particular moment in the Club's history where some hard decisions had to be made.

03-00:04:36
Eardley-Pryor: I see, so in terms of just narrowing focus on a few of these priorities.

03-00:04:41
Cox: Right, yes.

03-00:04:42
Eardley-Pryor: Well, on this topic of leadership, too, in the context of you becoming president and the story of whether you will accept this and what will the election be, I also know that Carl [Pope], who called you, had just really taken on the mantle of being [Sierra Club] executive director himself in 1992.

03-00:05:01
Cox: He had the year before, right.

03-00:05:00
Eardley-Pryor: So, he's fairly new in his leadership, right. Longtime Sierra Club member and staff member, and he knew how the Club operated from the inside to then become the executive director. And then, over the next twenty years, you two both are involved in Sierra Club leadership together. So, if we can take this moment, I'd love to hear you reflect on Carl's leadership style and your observations of his role as leader of the Sierra Club as its executive director.

03-00:05:31
Cox: Sure, sure. I would start, I believe, by characterizing Carl as visionary in the sense that he saw the big picture. Carl once told me—we were in an elevator going up to the second floor of the headquarters building, and I happen to mention, "Carl, you are a Harvard undergraduate graduate, why didn't you go on to graduate school, law school, or in one of the professions?" And he said,

"Robbie, I wanted to change the world," and he had a plan for doing that by the time he was twenty-one.

03-00:06:11
Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean he had a plan?

03-00:06:13
Cox: Well, he and his first wife Lucy [Blake], who later became a MacArthur genius recipient, they were committed to big system-level changes in terms of population, technology, the environment. And Carl began his career working for Zero Population Growth thinking globally at that time and then became hired by the Sierra Club in the conservation program and had risen by the time I met him as the conservation director of the Sierra Club, overseeing all of the Club's campaigns and priority issues of course. He became executive director about a year and a half before I became president. I thought we would work well together because we tended to see the challenges and what needed to be done in the Sierra Club if it was to be a sustainable, ongoing proposition. I think we thought similarly about such issues as strategy, the positioning of the Sierra Club vis-à-vis national politics, Congress, and how to achieve some of these things. I felt very comfortable working with Carl for that reason. We both wanted to engineer some changes that were equivalent to challenges that we saw before us.

03-00:07:47
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. That's great context for Carl as a visionary. Would you share a little bit about the mechanics of his leadership? You mentioned your similarity in thinking strategically. How did he implement the changes that he wanted to make?

03-00:08:02
Cox: Well, I don't want to speak too much for Carl's internal staff decision-making process and how he implemented things on the staff side. But our interaction was principally at the governance and policy level. My responsibility was to mobilize the volunteer membership, to help them understand changes, to convey the explanation or rationale for change to be transparent. And when we could bring the board of directors on board with support from the volunteer leaders and the chapter delegates that were sent to San Francisco, then Carl had clear direction in going forward. And I think it might be easier to talk about this in terms of some of the hard decisions on finances and Project Renewal [Restructuring Task Force] and so forth, and particularly the [Newt] Gingrich Congress that came into being later that year in late 1994. That's where I thought Carl's strategic brilliance really shown.

03-00:09:16
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well then, maybe take me back, if you will, to that moment in May of '94 at the [Sierra Club] board retreat gathering where the opportunity to become president seems like it's increasingly massing itself in front of you.

03-00:09:32

Cox: Yeah. Well, one of the things that I did at the retreat prior to the informal vote that happened at the end of the retreat for officers of the Club, I asked for time to present some of the challenges with the Club's structure, its governance structure. And what I would plan to propose if I were elected president because by that point, it had become assumed, I think, that I would be elected president. Carl went through some of his background concern about finances, so we were preparing the board prior to the actual election. It would be the day after the retreat ended when we went back into San Francisco and convened, the board meeting itself.

03-00:10:21

The financial crisis was looming on the side. It wasn't a major discussion in the May meeting; it was unfolding alongside of it. There were general statements about it in the May meeting. The one thing that came out of the May meeting, which we can discuss in a moment, was a clear direction to me, which I asked the board to authorize to put a task force together to begin to rethink the structure of the Sierra Club. So, let's go back to finances and how that unfolded.

03-00:11:02

Eardley-Pryor: Before we dive right into that, I would still love to hear how you are internalizing these questions about if you will become president at the very beginning of your terms on the board, what those discussions were like with Julia, and what did that entail for you personally in the midst of book contracts and teaching loads and all those things.

03-00:11:23

Cox: That's a very good question. After a number of directors had approached me and then when I received Carl's phone call, Julia and I had several heart-to-heart conversations. She ended up telling me that these sorts of opportunities don't happen that often, and that it was before us now, and that her advice was that I should accept the offer. I went to my department chair and said—it was Dr. [V.] William Balthrop, Bill Balthrop. I said, "Bill, I'm going to have to request a reduction in my teaching load, and it's possible the Sierra Club may be able to buy out my contract for a year for me to devote time in my office in San Francisco," which was a four- to six-hour flight to those days out and back. So, Balthrop worked out that arrangement with the Sierra Club, and my contract was bought out.

03-00:12:33

Eardley-Pryor: Bill seems like a great guy.

03-00:12:37

Cox: Yeah. I then notified the university press that I had a contract with that I needed to exercise my exit clause. I realized I could not do that and invest the time that I knew I was going to have to invest. The Sierra Club's president, unlike some of the presidents of nonprofit boards that meet quarterly and that's their commitment of time, it is potentially a full-time job if you take it

seriously. And given the challenges before the Club in '94, I realized I was going to have to devote a considerable amount of my time to it. It was not an easy decision, but with Julia's support and my chair's support back at UNC [University of North Carolina], I felt I could shift my emotional worry over to the Club's side now and begin work on those problems.

03-00:13:37

Eardley-Pryor: That's great, that's great. So, among those problems, as you said, was this financial—this looming financial crisis. I just wanted to frame this contextually. I mean, this is a couple years after the recession at the end of the Cold War that sweeps [William] Bill [J.] Clinton into office, with [Ross] Perot splitting the Republican votes so that Clinton surprisingly wins the '92 election for president. And the economy seems like it's recovering, in my mind, by 1994 at a national scale. So, what are the challenges that the Club is having with its finances at this time?

03-00:14:14

Cox: Well, they were interrelated because the Club actually had begun to assume accumulated deficits for the previous several years, and that was not sustainable. Part of the reason for the accumulated operating deficits was the decline in membership from, oh, almost a hundred-thousand-member decline. And one of the reasons for that, in addition to the previous recession of the economy, was that with the election of Bill Clinton and his vice president [Albert] Al Gore [Jr.], there was such assurance that the environment would be well taken care of. And there has been this phenomenon in the Sierra Club, and in many environmental organizations, with a favorable administration in Washington, there is less of an urgency, [less of] a sense to renew your membership in an environmental advocacy group. So, there were multiple forces combining to lead us with declining revenue, the beginning of operating deficits, and for the foreseeable future, it was not clear that there would be something on the horizon to save us. Al Gore was going to be there for the next couple of years.

03-00:15:41

So, when I walked into the [Sierra Club] presidency, I was informed by Carl and the CFO [Sierra Club's chief financial officer, Lou Barnes] that our year-end operating deficit was projected at that point, almost midyear, to be about $1.7 million, and that was below what we had budgeted. We would come in $2 million less than what we were hoping to actually raise as an operating budget. And this was forewarned at the May board meeting in 1994. But when I returned home, I began to have a series of conference calls with Carl and [Deborah] Debbie Sorondo [Sierra Club's chief operating and development officer], who was one of the principal financial advisors, and other senior staff, and it became clear that by the summer, by the board meeting later in July and then particularly by September, as we had to put together an FY-'95 budget, that we were looking at significant cuts in staff. We had about 257 staff in the national office at that time, national staff. And one of the figures Carl gave me at the time was a projection of having to, either through attrition,

retirement, or layoff, reduce staff by about fifty-eight staff members out of 250-some.

03-00:17:23
Eardley-Pryor: That's a big chunk.

03-00:17:24
Cox: That's a big chunk.

03-00:17:26
Eardley-Pryor: Let me just structurally ask, is that the role of the president and the executive committee of the board of directors to authorize those staff losses? Or does Carl [Pope], as executive director of the Club, have the authority to do that himself?

03-00:17:41
Cox: No, Carl operates under the budget that's adopted that authorizes his expenditures and a budget that sets certain priorities, and therefore is a set of values as well given the amount of money allocated for certain programs. But the executive director and the president really have to work closely in the preparation of that budget in order to have buy-in from the board of directors, since the president has the responsibility to ensure that the board is supporting the budget that's being recommended.

03-00:18:15
Eardley-Pryor: I got you. And who else is in the executive committee during your presidency that—like, for example, the treasurer who would be working closely with somebody like—was Lou Barnes the chief financial officer at this time?

03-00:18:28
Cox: Lou Barnes was the CFO at the time, Debbie Sorondo was head of our development or marketing program. In terms of the board officers, the treasurer was Denny Shaffer, who had been a previous president of the Sierra Club and a fellow North Carolinian.

03-00:18:44
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. The Tar Heels strength there.

03-00:18:47
Cox: It was. So those, those were the key actors in trying to bring together the best estimate that would underlie the preparation of the budget by the fall of '94. By the time we got to the September board meeting—which is also part of the big annual meeting of the Sierra Club's leadership, the [Sierra Club] Council that's represented by chapter delegates, all in the same room together—at that point, Carl and I had enough clarity about what we would have to do, to recommend, that we called a meeting of the full Council and spoke to them in a very somber way about what to expect and what led to this moment with the accumulated deficits projection at the end of $1.7 million operating deficit. In addition to, on the staff side, the cuts that we would have to make, chapters would have to receive less income from national. Chapter revenue is the result

of a portion of each member's dues that are returned to the chapters. And so, at that point, chapters became very concerned and really were fearing a much greater cut would have to be made. We ended up somewhere in the ballpark of around 17 to 20 percent reduction in the return of chapter dues to the chapters.

03-00:20:28

Eardley-Pryor: That's a big cut, too. So, not only is this large number of staff being let go, but also, the money that goes to the chapters is being significantly cut, by a fifth, almost.

03-00:20:37

Cox: It was. And I can tell you the third source of funding we had to look at. At this point, we had by one estimate 100 or more volunteer "issue" committees in the Sierra Club. That's an unfathomable number. It was so large that we had to have what was called a "Committee on Committees" simply to keep track of them. And each of those committees had a budget, and their budgets were principally spent on travel to have meetings. And I'm going to be really honest in recording this for documentation, I felt that that was a misallocation of money in some important ways. That what was important to come out of issue committees was impact or outcomes out in the real world, in terms of a committee. Well, what are the organizing elements that come out of that to intervene with decisions being made at the state level or at the national level on its issues? There were committees doing great work in many areas, in forest issues and wilderness preservation and nuclear affairs. But a lot of them simply were meeting and using money just to meet once or twice, or sometimes more, a year. So, the money had to be cut from that area of Club expenditure, but as long as that structure existed, there would be built-in constituencies each year asking for money in the budget process. And given some of the inefficiencies of a hundred or more committees, that was leading to the realization, we need to do some restructuring of governance and how we involved volunteers who were experts about issues in the overall Club itself.

03-00:22:47

Eardley-Pryor: And now, this need to make these changes is something—it sounds to me like you had a sense that these changes needed to happen. And you had asked, you mentioned at the May board meeting, for a task force to be created to address some of these issues. [Project Renewal Restructuring Task Force]

03-00:23:04

Cox: That's correct, that's correct.

03-00:23:06

Eardley-Pryor: So, you talked about sharing [this financial information] in a somber way at the national [Sierra Club] Council meeting in September. What happens between May and September with this task force to come to these realizations that you can present to the full Club by September?

03-00:23:20
Cox: Sure. Well, if this was going to happen—and there was a growing sense among directors and some of the Club leaders that the Club had become, over the years, just accretion, accumulation of many committees and the custom ways of doing things, and that it was spending a lot of money. And so, there was a willingness from most of the stakeholders that would be involved to be part of a process of developing recommendations. I sensed as a communication professor that I needed to involve key people from each of the potentially impacted constituencies to be part of the decision process. So, we developed a set of members of the task force [Project Renewal Restructuring Task Force] that represented many of those.

03-00:24:12
Eardley-Pryor: Great. And I have a list here of some of the people in that [Project Renewal Restructuring] Task Force. Maybe if I read them off, maybe you can share your memories of what role you thought they might have played or did play?

03-00:24:21
Cox: Sure.

03-00:24:22
Eardley-Pryor: So, with yourself as chair of the task force, Joni Bosh was also member?

03-00:24:27
Cox: Joni Bosh was a conservation activist supreme coming out of the southwest. She was in the lead, not only in her state of Arizona, but a voice on the national level in terms of being aware of threats to environmental law and regulations that existed. Joni became a trusted confidant for years for me.

03-00:24:54
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Gene Coan was also member.

03-00:24:57
Cox: Gene Coan was the historical conscience of the Sierra Club. He was a longtime staff member who worked in the executive office as an assistant to the executive director. Gene knew the history of the Club, its bylaws, every board amendment that had ever been approved. He was fount of knowledge, and also a calm, really decent, wonderful man. And so, his knowledge from inside the details of the Club structure and its history and a lot of the personalities, that was a resource I wanted to have close on the [Project Renewal Restructuring] Task Force.

03-00:25:42
Eardley-Pryor: And then also is [Lawrence] Larry Downing, the former president of the Club who, in fact, while president, invited you to participate in some of your first national club work.

03-00:25:53
Cox: He did. Larry was an excellent leader as president of the Sierra Club. He was very involved in Club affairs. He had an interest in the governance of the

Club. I thought he would also lend a lot of credibility to the [Project Renewal Restructuring] Task Force as a recent president himself.

03-00:26:15
Eardley-Pryor: And Sue Lowry?

03-00:26:17
Cox: Sue Lowry was very involved with the Sierra Club's regional conservation efforts, and since that was part of the area we would be evaluating, I wanted to make sure I had someone who was respected as a leader coming out of the existing—what are called RCCs or Regional Conservation Committees.

03-00:26:40
Eardley-Pryor: The Regional Conservation Committees, is that something different from these hundreds of "issue committees" that you talked about?

03-00:26:46
Cox: They are [different], though they were more of the committees that made up the Sierra Club, and they were also distinct from what had come to be called ecoregions. So that became part of the problem. We were looking at this overlap and confusion about authority within the different regions of the country. You've got statewide chapters overlaid with ecoregions of the larger region, such as Appalachia and then you've got regional—formally constituted Regional Conservation Committees that had a history of their own. They had had existed from—for decades.

03-00:27:25
Eardley-Pryor: So, this ecoregion, there were a set of committees, it sounds like, that were ecoregion committees, on top of the Regional Conservation Committees, or separate from the Regional Conservation Committees?

03-00:27:35
Cox: Yes.

03-00:27:35
Eardley-Pryor: In addition to the hundreds of issue committees?

03-00:27:38
Cox: In addition to the chapters. [laughter]

03-00:27:41
Eardley-Pryor: This reminds me that I spoke with [H. Anthony] Tony Ruckel about the Club and its structure, and he said, "Now, I don't how this thing survives, the Sierra Club. It's democracy run amok, but it's a beautiful thing." [laughter] Also in the Task Force in '94—for what became Project Renewal—is Ed Paynter?

03-00:28:02
Cox: Ed Paynter was the one of the leaders of the Sierra Club Council and was respected by many of the chapters who sent delegates to San Francisco as part of the Council that represented the chapters to the national Club.

03-00:28:20
Eardley-Pryor: And that Council, maybe—can you tell me how it operated? Was that something that happened every year, multiple times a year? What did the Council entail?

03-00:28:28
Cox: Well, the Council, up to that point, had operated somewhat autonomously in terms of setting their own agenda, meeting separately, and occasionally advising Sierra Club on an issue that they had a resolution on. And part of our challenge was to integrate the levels of the Club a little better, and that would be one of the areas we would examine in Project Renewal.

03-00:28:59
Eardley-Pryor: And Adam Werbach was also a member?

03-00:29:02
Cox: Yeah. Adam, a smart, energetic young man just out of college. He may have been just out of high school a few years earlier. He and I had worked together the year before on the Environmental Youth Task Force that led to the establishment of the Sierra Student Coalition the previous year. I had enormous respect for Adam. I wanted him on my side because he represented the future, and he also had enormous support within the Sierra Club. He was an exciting, young man to be working with.

03-00:29:43
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. And then Annie, Anne or Annie Wi—Woiwode?

03-00:29:49
Cox: Well, Anne Woiwode.

03-00:29:50
Eardley-Pryor: Woiwode.

03-00:29:51
Cox: Anne Woiwode, she was the chapter director from Michigan and well-respected among the other chapter directors and chapter chairs around country. So, she had a really good knowledge of the chapter culture, which was the other component of this multilegged stool.

03-00:30:12
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. And that task force that led to the Project Renewal report put before the board before this September meeting, who was in charge of picking and choosing the task force members? Was that something that you were able to do as chair?

03-00:30:30
Cox: Yes. It was a task force of the board of directors, and they had authorized me to establish the task force. So, I wanted these people because, in my judgment, they were the best representatives of the different dimensions of the Club and with enormous credibility inside the Sierra Club.

03-00:30:51
Eardley-Pryor: Great. And then I also see that there were advisers to the task force that included [Nicholas] Nick Aumen?

03-00:30:57
Cox: Nick was one of the regional vice presidents of the Sierra Club. I had begun to work with Nick when I traveled to Mississippi in 1993 to meet with the Jesus People Against Pollution, or JPAP, and I had gotten to know Nick and valued his wisdom. He was a marine scientist from Florida. And again, I wanted to bring in that regional and state-level experience as well.

03-00:31:25
Eardley-Pryor: And [Richard] Dick Cellarius was involved as an advisor.

03-00:31:29
Cox: Dick Cellarius had also been a previous president of the Sierra Club. He had an enormous capacity for the history of the Club, its bylaws, its traditions, and he came out of the southwest at the time, previously he'd been in the Northwest, and who was also respected. Richard was really good about the details, particularly, of a proposal, and I needed that kind of lens looking at it.

03-00:32:01
Eardley-Pryor: And Don Morris was also an advisor?

03-00:32:04
Cox: Don Morris was from North Carolina. He was a leader in the state chapter and someone that I knew had a good experience at the chapter level because I knew this North Carolina chapter and had been part of it, and so I wanted someone other than myself to be able to speak for that culture.

03-00:32:25
Eardley-Pryor: And then, of course, Carl Pope was involved as an advisor as well.

03-00:32:28
Cox: Right.

03-00:32:29
Eardley-Pryor: So, how did the task force operate? How did you move forward to create what became the Project Renewal report?

03-00:32:39
Cox: Well, we were beginning to use email at the time more intensely at the national level, particularly.

03-00:32:47
Eardley-Pryor: Let me ask you about that, actually, because it's just a fascinating historical moment. When was the first time that you used email? What's the context for you getting online for the first time?

03-00:32:58
Cox: I would estimate about '91—'90, '91 the email started. We were using a software system called cc:Mail, the letter "cc" mail. I have no idea what that stood for.

03-00:33:14
Eardley-Pryor: When you say "we," is this within the Club, or was this in connection to UNC?

03-00:33:19
Cox: It was within the Club. So, it was one of the early generations of email.

03-00:33:24
Eardley-Pryor: Before you used email through the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, you used email through the [Sierra] Club?

03-00:33:31
Cox: You know, that's correct, it was before I used email at UNC.

03-00:33:35
Eardley-Pryor: That's fascinating.

03-00:33:38
Cox: I got on email because Michele [Perrault], who was chairing the International Committee at the time I was on that committee with her, recommended our use of email for better communication. She was also using it for our international contacts.

03-00:33:56
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. That's great.

03-00:33:56
Cox: But by '94, the Club had developed a much wider system of email. We were used to using it. So, conference calls, email, and then there were several in-person meetings, multiday meetings to flesh this out.

03-00:34:14
Eardley-Pryor: Some of the big recommendations that you had as a part of the Project Renewal report, from my reading on it, includes a suggestion of creating biennial gatherings of the Sierra Club. What was the vision on that, and what was it meant to replace or change?

03-00:34:32
Cox: Well, that particular proposal didn't really occur, I guess is my foreword [sic]. Project Renewal, when it was adopted in the June board meeting, was a set of proposals of governance from the top down through. Some of them were enacted and rolled into the '95 budget and implemented on the ground, but the most important beginning was the national governance structure itself that dealt with the board of directors itself and the different committees spread throughout the Sierra Club on multiple issues.

03-00:35:15
Eardley-Pryor: So, share with me then what changes you proposed to deal with these committees of committees, and this regional, this chapter, and all these different organizational issues—

03-00:35:25
Cox: Well, this was probably the biggest change that was implemented. The board of directors had discussions about the idea of governance itself and the multiple responsibilities of the board. And it made a decision that, years later, was revisited. But at the time, there was unanimity in the decision, and that was that the board could operate more efficiently if it delegated discrete areas of governance—in terms of the advice being developed and then brought to the board—where the board would operate more at the final level of decisions and policy making. And it was also a way of trying to bring together the core areas the Club worked on in a more streamlined way that could represent all of those issue areas of the Club. So we ended up recommending, I believe, six—seven, what we called, Governance Committees that would advise the board of directors. Volunteer administration: that would work with volunteer members. Finance: that would be the principal advisory group to the CFO and the board in developing budgets and handling income, revenue, and so forth. Conservation: it was the big one that would develop priority campaigns, advise us on multiple conservation issues. Chapter and Group Effectiveness: that would pay attention to the health of the chapters and, below them, the groups, and to be a sounding board for them to have a voice to the national Club. Development: principal fund raising, and marketing strategies.

03-00:37:32
Eardley-Pryor: Let me pause on that because—Development. I haven't heard exactly from you yet about the financial crisis. We mentioned some of the structural reasons that were happening within the Club and people backing away from their commitments to environmental organizations in the wake of the Clinton and Gore administration. But how did the Sierra Club generate most of its revenue that it was suddenly losing? And what was the shift that was made to compensate for those losses?

03-00:37:58
Cox: Sure, of course. A major portion of our income came from member dues. It's a membership organization that is annually renewed. The second source of income would be from foundations, and we had foundation officers who would apply for grants to increase or enhance Sierra Club's diverse revenue stream. We had individual donors who supported the Sierra Club either in their major gifts or in their estates, and so estate gifts were a major source of income as well. And we had briefings on the information of the coming wealth transfer with the demographics of the nation. As people were becoming older, then we should start planning for the years ahead as people would be aging and leaving their estates and to make sure that the Sierra Club was a part of their estates. And as I pointed out, the decline in membership came because of the assumption [Vice President Al] Gore would be handling

the environment. That would change several months later with the turnover of the US Congress.

03-00:39:20
Eardley-Pryor: Right. In the context of finances for the Club, something I've heard played a major role in the eighties was direct mail. What role did direct mail play in Club finances, and was there a change that was happening at this time?

03-00:39:36
Cox: Well, direct mail was really coming into its own in the eighties and early nineties, and one of the Sierra Club's friends was Roger Craver, who was of a close friend of Denny Shaffer, our treasurer. Direct mail was used to recruit new members to the Sierra Club. That's one of the principal ways we gained new members. So, we invested a considerable amount of money in that operation in order to bring in even greater amounts of revenue through the new membership dues' revenue stream.

03-00:40:14
Eardley-Pryor: It seems like there's a declining membership whether that's related to how direct mail operates or not. But the declining revenues from lower membership was the big crisis?

03-00:40:25
Cox: Yeah, yeah.

03-00:40:26
Eardley-Pryor: So, this suggestion that Project Renewal has—to include one of its major seven committees—is around Development?

03-00:40:36
Cox: Yes.

03-00:40:38
Eardley-Pryor: It sounds like it's really thinking differently about how the Sierra Club brings in revenue.

03-00:40:43
Cox: Well, there was always a challenge to identify the best target audience to be mailing to and what would be the messaging. I mean, it's an art form in itself, a science some would argue, to be tested and refined and changed over time. We also had the sister organization, The Sierra Club Foundation, and it was also a source of revenue for the Sierra Club through its granting to the Sierra Club of money for different programs that met its educational IRS tax status parameters. The Sierra Club Foundation was what's called, under IRS rules, a 501(c)(3) organization. If you gave money to the foundation, you could take a tax deduction for it. The Sierra Club lost its tax-deductible status when David Brower fought the [Lyndon B.] Johnson administration over building a dam in the Grand Canyon, and we became a 501(c)(4) organization, which was an advocacy organization. You didn't get a tax deduction if you supported us.

03-00:41:57
Eardley-Pryor: Right, yeah. But that money could then be used for political campaigns because of that.

03-00:42:01
Cox: Yes, direct lobbying.

03-00:42:04
Eardley-Pryor: In the context of the Sierra Club Foundation being involved in the finances and the operations of the Club itself and what it can or can't do with those monies, I'm wondering—stepping back, I understand that there are also some challenges in the nineties where the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund is also trying to decide what its role is within the Club, and some of that involves money. Was that issue, or the Foundation's relationship with the Club and its fiduciary responsibilities, are these issues all also coming to the fore at this time? Or is that something that happens later?

03-00:42:43
Cox: No, they began to arise during this time. The Foundation always scrutinized its gifts to the Sierra Club for its financial fiduciary responsibility. We realized that our political enemies would love to find a way to target the Sierra Club Foundation and put it out of business, so it had to be extra careful, and it always was. The Sierra Club Legal Defense program—a child of [Phillip] Phil Barry, former president of the Sierra Club, an attorney himself—it was growing. It was successful, and there was a question of whether or not it should remain within the Sierra Club structure or become an independent law firm that would—the Sierra Club would give birth to. And eventually, it was birthed out of the Sierra Club and became Earthjustice.

03-00:43:48
Eardley-Pryor: Right, yeah, and that spin-off [Earthjustice], my memory is it happens around '97, so I just didn't know if this is at the time or if this is one of the causing agents for that spin-off to happen?

03-00:43:53
Cox: Well, I don't know that it was a causing agent. I know Phil Berry was always worried about the budget, Sierra Club's budget, and whether it would be reducing the revenue to the legal program. And that, I think that was, as I think about it, one of the causes that led Phil to begin conversations with other attorneys and organizations to make sure the legal program was protected. And I recall Phil talking with me several times, "Robbie, don't cut the budget for the law program," and I assured him I wouldn't.

03-00:44:38
Eardley-Pryor: Good. So back to Project Renewal because this is just such good context for what's happening, what's happening inside the Club and the thoughts behind it. In addition to streamlining, you mentioned the Regional Conservation Committees and this ecoregion, trying to combine them in some ways. There's

also something called the Global Challenges Strategy Teams. What role did that play in helping restructure the Club?

03-00:45:04
Cox: Oh, okay, so several different sections here. Oh, by the way, there were two other governance committee's—

03-00:45:11
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, thank you. I'm sorry, yes.

03-00:45:12
Cox: The Communication and Education [governance committee], and the Outdoor Activities governance committee, so that we covered all of the operations and programs of the Club in a way that, at the highest level, had active people looking at them and closely advising the board of directors. Hence, they were called governance advisory committees. Now, on the—

03-00:45:34
Eardley-Pryor: And those seven, those major seven functions of the Club, is a way to try to dissipate some of these issue committees, is that correct?

03-00:45:43
Cox: Yes, but not entirely. So, when you're ready, we should talk about how we're going to take care of all of these issue committees through an activist network.

03-00:45:50
Eardley-Pryor: I'll follow your lead.

03-00:45:52
Cox: Under the Conservation governance committee, we had many or perhaps most of the issue committees. And so, what we did, because these were governance advisory committees, we needed to recognize that the daily activist work and the expertise and interest of so many volunteers would not be on the governance committees. So, we developed these strategy teams, and the emphasis was upon the development of strategy. The governance committees were developing goals and objectives for the board to embrace. But a goal or an objective has to be followed by the development of strategy that sees it through, that accomplishes the goal.

03-00:46:46
Eardley-Pryor: So, let me say how I'm hearing you say this. These seven governance committees were really about deciding upon priorities, whereas the strategy teams were more about implementing or making change around those priority issues?

03-00:47:01
Cox: Yes, but it was both ways. They were also developing the issues to be considered by governance committees. You know, there's a difference between strategic planning and strategic thinking that I think the Club appreciates perhaps more than many organizations. Strategic thinking is the

ability to look over the horizon and to identify both those emerging threats and opportunities and what their strategic implications are for the decisions that are being made now, on this side of the horizon. So the global strategy teams attempted to consolidate the stream of expertise coming into the national Sierra Club through appropriate entities that could really whittle those out, consider those as the best strategic pathways to recommend, to lay out, to bring forth to governance-level considerations.

03-00:48:02

Now, I will say this. Phil Berry objected to that because he thought it was creating too many layers within the Sierra Club, and of course, Phil had a long history in the Sierra Club with many of its issue committees. But I have to give Phil credit because over the years when a second reorganization was undertaken—I think it was under the presidency of Allison Chin many years later—those were eliminated in the—in an attempt to further streamline and flatten the organization.

03-00:48:41

Now, let me come back to your other two questions dealing with the—what happens to all those issue committees then. We wanted to find a way that kept the issue activists in communication with each other and to be able to share their expertise and bring the new information to bear upon their conversations. And so we were in this era now of developing of multiple modes of communication with email and conference calls and such, and so we wanted to create within the Sierra Club an activist network, a kind of—I think the early terms were electronic bulletin board or a space for them to discuss and exchange information and to have the data—the databases of contact information for all of the experts. So it would no longer be their siloed committee working on issue X, but they would be within a broader network of activists who might also have interest in that area in other states or another aspect of that issue. And the ideal, the vision was to make it possible to bring more people together but not in physical committees that had travel budgets that we had to find ways to reduce in terms of the operating revenue that was available.

03-00:50:20

Eardley-Pryor: It sounds, from the way I'm hearing you say it, is the idea was to actually broaden the involvement of volunteer members that might be interested in various topics, but to do so in a way that they didn't have to meet in person?

03-00:50:34

Cox: That's precisely it. That's one of the reasons for it. And some of these issue committees tended to be—some tended to be insular in that they had the same people on them year after year. And others within the Sierra Club, activists who had an interest in that area didn't find a way to be involved. So we wanted to open the doors and the windows a little bit by having the activist network and making it more transparent so that others who are interested

could get in touch with those that were working within this area of the network on nuclear or clean water and so forth.

03-00:51:13
Eardley-Pryor: That this is all happening in 1994 is just fascinating to me. I'm wondering if you can remember where this idea for a network, or "a net that works," as I've seen you term it in some of your writing—where this idea for a network was arising from, for the task force to try to implement it in this big way.

03-00:51:24
Cox: Right. That's a good question. I'm not sure I fully remember the origin or the concept. I suspect it came out of conversations in San Francisco among senior staff and senior leaders who had experience with some of the technology. But once I grasped the concept of this, "a net that works"—and Carl [Pope] was very helpful in fleshing this out and helping it through, and I know that there were other senior leaders that were part of the conversation of seeing the potential for this and were excited by it. Now, I would also say we struggled to roll this out. It was approved by the board, but making it happen remained its own challenge to—

03-00:52:19
Eardley-Pryor: I was going to ask you—how did this play out? Because creating an infrastructure like that, let alone having the membership have the technical knowledge of how to work within that infrastructure, even if it's created technologically, those are big challenges.

03-00:52:34
Cox: They were a big challenge. It was developed slowly, and there were complaints that such and such were not connected to it, or there was a technical problem, and there was the desire to still have the meetings. Because of the budgetary crisis, we actually had some influence in getting acceptance from the representatives of a lot of the conservation groups that we had to move in this direction in order to have a sustainable organization financially, but enhance our abilities to be the premiere conservation organization at the same time.

03-00:53:19
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, all of these changes that you're trying to deal with, the [financial] crisis and also think beyond the hill that's in front of you, is just—it really is—there is some really visionary thinking in this. I want to ask you about another part that's part of Project Renewal that gets into the chapter, group, and activist support, on these suggestions for Project Renewal's restructuring. And that has to do with a broader context. Where my question is coming from is accusations I've heard from Club members that say Project Renewal—and then a year later, we'll talk about Project Act—in their minds, in these people's minds, it signifies a shift for the Club from its volunteer-oriented structure, or from a grassroots organization to a staff-oriented organization. That, in some ways, people identify [the Sierra Club] today as more staff driven than it is

volunteer driven. And so, I ask you in the context of that critique whether you think that's valid, and whether you think—where do you think that's coming from? And what's your vision of how the Club did evolve from this point?

03-00:54:28

Cox: Okay. There are multiple levels to that. First, I will cut to the bottom line. I would say that today in 2020, there is more valid concern about shifting more towards a staff organization and less volunteer, though it remains a grassroots volunteer organization, but the balance has definitely shifted at this point. In 1994, I would say this was more of hyperbole. You have to understand that the history of the Sierra Club was almost entirely volunteer-led outside of the small cadre around John Muir and then the successive officers and boards that met in the Bay Area, up until the 1960s and seventies. But with a growing need to meet the political and complex challenges of the society in which we live, the Club was growing, and to maintain it, we were adding more staff at the national level. Part of the concern that some—and I think your phrase is the better phrase, it's more accurate—"some people" were always fearing that it was becoming more of a staff organization. For example, in North Carolina when we hired just our first chapter director, a single-staff person, there were some that were saying, "Oh, we're going to become a staff organization." Well, we remained a vibrant volunteer organization, but a chapter director enabled it to actually be even more successful because it could coordinate a presence in the state capitol always when activists couldn't be there all the time, every day, and so forth. So, this is an ongoing—it's a chronic tension inside the Sierra Club because it's a grassroots organization, but it has to have staff for such a large, complex organization to operate. So, from the beginning of having those two components, there had been that tension among some members.

03-00:56:45

Now back to Project Renewal. Project Renewal was all about governance on the volunteer side of the Sierra Club in terms of committee structures, eco-regions, the communication of issue people, activist networks, and such. On the staff side, we were actually cutting staff instead of adding more staff because of the budgetary crisis. Now, one of the recommendations of Project Renewal, as you pointed out in opening this line of questioning, was a recommendation that we give more resources to chapters and their groups, including the possibility of more staff support because the chapters themselves were asking for more chapter staff support. So, this should caution us that some who were complaining about staff were not talking to their colleagues in the same chapter who were asking us for more staff.

03-00:57:52

Eardley-Pryor: That's great, and I've also heard from other people that the conflicts or the challenges or tensions within the Club are less staff versus volunteer. I've heard them framed differently that they're more national versus chapters. And that conflict within the volunteer structure is actually a little bit more prominent than a staff-volunteer conflict.

03-00:58:18
Cox: And that's true because chapters have their own statewide conservation issues and campaigns, and they would like more national support for them. And on the other hand, the national Club would like more local chapter support for its national campaigns. So, that's always been a built-in tension that overlaps the different responsibilities and goals of each entity.

03-00:58:41
Eardley-Pryor: Well, let me ask you, just on that point since we're on the topic, what role does staff play in that tension? For example, in North Carolina, Molly Diggins is hired as the first staff member for the North Carolina chapter of the Sierra Club. Who is she working on behalf of, the national or the chapter?

03-00:59:02
Cox: Well, up until now—though some fear it may change—state chapter directors report to the chapter executive committees. That's a volunteer structure. So, the local groups in each state send a delegate to the statewide or chapter-wide executive committee that oversees statewide policy, fundraising operations, and the supervision of staff. So, a state director such as Molly Diggins in North Carolina would be hired by and overseen by the state's executive committee.

03-00:59:43
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. So, staff in the field is actually more aligned with the volunteer leadership of their chapter. Whereas staff members maybe in San Francisco or now in Oakland that are national staff members, they're the ones that are focused on these national priorities. Is that what I'm hearing you say?

03-01:00:00
Cox: That's correct as far as you go, but there's one more wrinkle in it. There's also what's called national field staff. So, the national can put a staff member in North Carolina to help organize in that state on a national campaign. That's a national field staff that reports to a regional staff manager.

03-01:00:26
Eardley-Pryor: I see. So that might be somebody like—for instance, would John McCown be considered a national field staff, ordinarily?

03-01:00:32
Cox: He would be. He would be, and more explicitly within the environmental justice program. He was an EJ [environmental justice] regional staff member.

03-01:00:40
Eardley-Pryor: All right. It is a mix of different structural changes and ones that change over time. That's what's so great about hearing your memories and knowledge of this, and also hearing about your explicit role in helping reorient things so the Club could evolve and deal with its new challenges. One last thing I'll ask about with regard to Project Renewal is that I found really fascinating the appendix at the end of it that said, "We can make all these changes to our governance restructuring, but what needs to be included in this is we would

suggest new norms of behavior." And some of those norms of behavior that you encouraged, if not a rethinking of, but, or maybe even a recommitment to include activism, democracy, entrepreneurship, targeted work, new communications, and then the last one, finality of decisions. So, can you share a little bit about why you thought the task force thought it was important to make mention of these sort of cultural changes beyond the governance structural changes?

03-01:01:48

Cox: Well, structures are composed of people, and for them to work in the most healthy and most efficient way, a culture has to develop or sustain norms of behavior that are aligned with the objectives of that structure. I'll just take one example, the finality of decisions. There had developed a habit in the Sierra Club on the part of many activist leaders that if a decision was made that wasn't their decision, they would go around the entity that made the decision and start a lobbying campaign at another level to try to reverse it. Because Sierra Club activists know how to design campaigns, and they would use them inside the Sierra Club as well. And so, we were spending a lot of staff time having to address all of these requests from volunteers who could not accept a decision from the responsible or the lead entity. Now, that's not everybody, but some activists had developed that habit. So, in developing the new structure, we wanted to have clarity about where decision making lay at each level.

03-01:03:09

Eardley-Pryor: That's really great. I don't have a ton of other questions with regard to Project Renewal except to ask broadly, what was implemented, what wasn't, what worked, and what needed to be tinkered with? Anything that we haven't discussed thus far?

03-01:03:26

Cox: Well, we did implement most of this except for biennial meetings. We did consolidate the regional entities, the ecoregions and the RCCs [Regional Conservation Committees]. In effect, we pretty much eliminated the RCCs at that time and attempted to merge them into a single regional structure, and there was a lot of tension around that. Many of these RCCs had their own history—

03-01:03:55

Eardley-Pryor: Why so much tension?

03-01:03:57

Cox: Well, because the feeling that they were losing part of their Sierra Club identity that had been working with that regional committee, investing. There was affective investment, just psychologically, in that position. So, I think we struggled with that level of Project Renewal as much as any other level. Oh, and one final thing in conclusion that points ahead. Part of our financial challenge was solved in the next year because of the Gingrich takeover of the

US Congress with the Republicans, and the Contract with America and the threat to environmental law. Suddenly, our membership started growing again in the face of this emergency, the threat to roll back twenty, twenty-five years of environmental progress. And more people started contributing and supporting the Sierra Club. So, we were growing out of our deficit problem just as we were facing our new political exigence.

03-01:05:07
Eardley-Pryor: It reminds me of the phrase that "war is the health of the state." And perhaps "War on the environment is the health of the Sierra Club." [laughter] That's great.

03-01:05:17
Cox: That's a good phrase. We adopted it in our strategy, the "war on the environment."

03-01:05:20
Eardley-Pryor: That's right. Well, before we get back to that, because there are great stories involved in that very powerful moment in American history, in the re-rise of conservatism and the role the Sierra Club played to protect those environmental rights that were created. Do you mind if we take a break here and just recalculate?

03-01:05:38
Cox: Okay, let's do that.

03-01:05:39
Eardley-Pryor: Thanks.

[break in audio]

03-01:05:44
Eardley-Pryor: All right, great, Robbie. So I want to pick up on a story that we—that you introduced yesterday and hear a little bit more about how it evolved and concluded. And that's your work with JPAP, the Jesus People Against Pollution, and particularly of working with Charlotte Keys, and what happened with your engagement with them. I can't remember where we left things off. It was in your first year [on the Sierra Club board of directors], you joined with Nick Aumen and John McCown and others and meet with Charlotte [Keys] and her JPAP people. Where did things go from there?

03-01:06:19
Cox: As a result of that initial meeting, we did develop a partnership, and Charlotte Keys often spoke about the importance of the partnership, and that's how she defined the relationship to the Sierra Club. But—

03-01:06:33
Eardley-Pryor: Well, let me ask actually on the point, why, of all the different concerned citizens groups, and the rise of EJ [environmental justice] work across the country, and its attention in the wake of the First [National] People of Color

[Environmental Leadership] Summit in DC in '91, why was it that you and the national Sierra Club got so involved with this one group in Columbia, Mississippi, with JPAP [Jesus People Against Pollution] in particular? Why them?

03-01:06:54

Cox: Well, I think it was a combination of Nick Aumen and the [Gulf Coast] Regional Conservation Committee in the southeast who were attuned to these issues of environmental racism in the South, and the recent hiring of John McCown as one of our [Sierra Club's] first EJ [environmental justice] field organizers. And I believe it was John who came in touch with Charlotte Keys, the young woman who was the leader of JPAP [Jesus People Against Pollution]. And knowing that a fellow Southerner had just been elected president of the Sierra Club. Within, I would say, two to three weeks after I had been elected president [1994], I got a phone call from Nick Aumen asking me if I would return to Mississippi to meet with the local community and represent the Sierra Club, because now they had the attention of the national president and the board of directors, potentially. And they're smart operators, they knew that they might get a little more media attention and resources. And I was happy to return because I had been so impressed and moved by my initial meeting the year before.

03-01:08:04

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Thank you for that. So, what happened at that next meeting then?

03-01:08:08

Cox: Well, I flew into Jackson, [Mississippi]. Nick Aumen picked me up, and we drove about two hours south to the small town of Columbia. And on this visit, I ended up touring some of the outlying farms around Columbia of small, biracial farming communities who had these toxic leaking waste barrels. What happened is that after the Reichhold Chemical[s] plant had exploded years earlier, it was abandoned and a fence was put around it, and they had to dispose of all of these barrels of toxic chemicals. Some were simply left above ground, strewn around on the property inside the fences. Others were sold for a dollar to barrel farmers as weed killer.

03-01:09:06

Eardley-Pryor: Wow!

03-01:09:06

Cox: Yes. I met this one African American farmer who told me the story of his cattle who were being born deformed, and he said, "I was using that barrel over there. They told me it was good weed killers, and so I sprayed a lot of the property around the pastures to control weeds. But when these calves started being born, I didn't use that stuff anymore. They just told me it was weed killer." And I went over with a photographer from the Jackson news media and looked at the label on some of these barrels. And the labels were warning of danger and there were particular chemical names on them, and we had

pictures taken of the labels. And that reporter went back and issued a front-page story the next day about that story as well as some of the other events that occurred on my visit that time. And that came to the attention of the CEO of Reichhold Chemical[s] who had his headquarters in the Research Triangle Park in North Carolina—

03-01:10:21
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, he was in North Carolina?

03-01:10:23
Cox: Not far from where I lived. So, three days later after I had returned to Chapel Hill, I got a phone call directly from a Mr. Phillip Ashkettle who identified himself as the CEO and said that he had been reading about me in Columbia, Mississippi, and he invited me to talk with him. He wanted to share the perspective of a new generation of chemical CEOs and to see if there were accommodations that could be made.

03-01:10:58
Eardley-Pryor: What were your thoughts in receiving this call? Did you think he was sincere, or—?

03-01:11:01
Cox: Well, my initial thought was, I'm going to get the PR [public relations] treatment from a chemical CEO, but I thought it was important as an opening perhaps. I'll go, I'll listen, I'll see what can come of this. I did meet with Mr. Ashkettle in his office in Research Triangle Park, and I told him more of the story. He wanted to hear that from someone who had been there. He had sent one of his people there earlier to meet with the committee of the JPAP [Jesus People Against Pollution] group, and it did not go well, initially. But after he listened to me for a while, he then said, "What kind of an agreement can we make with you and the Sierra Club to settle this?" And I said, "Mr. Ashkettle, you need to be asking the question of the leader down there, Charlotte Keys. I'm not going to speak for them, but I can show you how to get in touch with them. And I think it would be invaluable for you to visit the community, listen to their stories, and then perhaps ask them what you can do."

03-01:12:10
Eardley-Pryor: What kind of foundation racial dynamics do you think are playing out here? I'm assuming Phillip Ashkettle is a white man.

03-01:12:17
Cox: He was a fairly young white man. In fact, he impressed upon me that he's a different generation of CEOs of chemical companies. And he acknowledged in the meeting that the chemical companies had done a bad job in leaving pollution in areas where they operated, and that he was committed to operating his company in a very different way. He had just been appointed CEO of that chemical company, and he was not the CEO at the time of the explosion and the abandonment and such. So, I thought given that, that there

was an opening, and it was important for him to actually experience the community.

03-01:13:00

Eardley-Pryor: Can you actually share your memories of experiencing that community, too? I've heard other people's stories of visiting areas in Cancer Alley in Louisiana and Mississippi, and the physical assault of being in the presence of some of these refineries and these chemical manufacturers. What are your memories of actually being on the ground there?

03-01:13:21

Cox: Well, the chemical plant itself had closed down, but I can tell you when I visited the farm with the leaking toxic chemical barrels, the fumes were evident, they were overwhelming at times. I was concerned about my own safety at the time, and yet, I wanted that reporter to get a photograph, to hear the story from that farmer, and then we got out of there. But it was hearing the stories of the residents who live near that plant, literally on the other side of the chain-link fence. I have a photograph somewhere in my archives, a photograph of the backyard of one of the small homes. Looking out the back window, the chain-link fence is about two feet beyond their house, and on the other side of it lay toxic waste barrels. So, they impressed upon me that the suffering they had experienced over years when no one would listen to them, all a range of diseases and symptoms from rashes and headaches and cancers and respiratory diseases. And I wanted [Phillip] Ashkettle to experience that firsthand, to make it real. And I give him enormous credit. Not only did he go down the first time with one aide and spent time in the community listening to them, he returned again a second time by himself and dealt directly with Charlotte Keys and JPAP [Jesus People Against Pollution]. And they ended up reaching an agreement where Reichhold Chemical[s], after several visits and negotiation, agreed to finance a true health study to determine, to identify the nature of the suffering from different diseases and were willing to help with medical bills. And the really big element is he agreed to help finance the relocation of many of those homes that were on the front line near the plant.

03-01:15:23

Eardley-Pryor: It's a surprising and significant result.

03-01:15:28

Cox: I was very impressed with his support.

03-01:15:31

Eardley-Pryor: What was the process there, going from him meeting you, as another white man in his office in North Carolina and saying "What kind of deal can we arrange together, you and I in this room in North Carolina" to this point where he's gone on to visit and meet with JPAP [Jesus People Against Pollution] members to reach that final settlement? What transpired?

03-01:15:56

Cox: I really pulled back from the relationship while a lot of that was happening. Once Phillip [Ashkettle] and I had talked, and when we talked by phone a few times, he took it on himself to then initiate the contact and make the arrangements and went down, and they had their conversations. Charlotte Keys would keep me informed, however, of the progress of that.

03-01:16:23

As a result of this happening, it became apparent that Charlotte [Keys] and her story of JPAP [Jesus People Against Pollution] had national significance that it could help illustrate the problem of environmental racism from chemical pollution. So, we arranged for Charlotte to come to Washington, DC, and the national Sierra Club and the Washington staff financed the trip. We had Charlotte at the [Sierra Club] headquarters in Washington and had a press conference of the Washington, DC press corps so that Charlotte could tell her story to them, the nation's press corps. She told her story, and what I recall most is that one of the cynical, old-time reporters questioned Charlotte and said, "How do you know? What's the evidence that your illness is the result of that chemical plant? Can you prove that?" And Charlotte just kept her composure, and she said simply, "Study me, the evidence is in my body."

03-01:17:35

Eardley-Pryor: That's such a good story.

03-01:17:36

Cox: And it silenced that reporter, and they got good press out of that. We were also able to arrange a visit at the White House for Charlotte to be able to meet with the [Vice President Al] Gore administration and some of its officials.

03-01:17:50

Eardley-Pryor: That's significant leverage to be able to bring.

03-01:17:55

Cox: I must say, I think that was one of the several influences coming out of the EJ [environmental justice] movement that led President Bill Clinton ultimately to issue his executive order on environmental justice [Executive Order 12898] that directed all of the federal agencies to consider environmental justice in their program planning and in the development of their regulations.

03-01:18:17

Eardley-Pryor: That's a big political moment, a big win, institutionally, for environmental justice at a national level.

03-01:18:24

Cox: It actually was.

03-01:18:26

Eardley-Pryor: That story you told about Charlotte Keys answering the question "where's the proof" is something that seems to echo through a lot of experiences of environmental justice pioneers and environmental justice activists, particularly

as scientific experts come in and say, "We need evidence of environmental contamination, and we're going to look at these metrics." I've read some of your work where you bring up something called "the indecorous voice." Can you share what you mean by that, "the indecorous voice," and how Charlotte [Keyes] represented that in this context?

03-01:19:03

Cox: Sure. It's one of the essays that I published. [Cox, R. J. (1999). Reclaiming the "indecorous" voice: Public participation by low-income communities in environmental decision-making. In C. B. Short & D. Hardy-Short (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Fifth Biennial Conference on Communication and the Environment* (pp. 21–31). Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University School of Communication.] The concept of decorum is an ancient Latin concept of the proper way of speaking in different forums. And yet, the inverse was happening in these EJ [environmental justice] communities as they tried to interact with health committees and state regulatory bodies and congressional hearings. They were often challenged for not speaking appropriately, that is to say, with expertise and knowing the technical language, and therefore, they were not fitting or appropriate for that context. They had become the indecorous voice. Well, a lot of the challenge coming out of the EJ [environmental justice] movement was to shake and rattle the official forums to gain a hearing, and it sometimes took a lot of aggressive action. It took the support of other groups. It took a movement coming together to demand a hearing. And I think it was the leadership and composure and the savvy sense of helping build a movement that people like Charlotte Keys brought to the table.

03-01:20:22

Eardley-Pryor: Will you share a little bit about what's happening within the Sierra Club itself at this time, too? This is about '94 when these events happened, meeting in with the White House, bringing Charlotte [Keys] for this DC visit, and then I believe the settlement that Reichhold Chemical[s] and Phillip Ashkettle make with Charlotte and JPAP [Jesus People Against Pollution] happens towards the beginning in 1995. That's about five years after the SWOP [Southwest Organizing Project] letter that Richard Moore had written to the Big Ten [national environmental organizations] has made its way around the country and the Sierra Club internalizing it. Where is the Club at in the mid-nineties, and where does it go, in terms of environment justice? Particularly, I'm thinking on our previous conversation about these financial crises and this restructuring. Where does environmental justice play out within the Club in this broader context?

03-01:21:09

Cox: Well, I think the most concrete way it played out was the development of a robust environmental justice organizing program in the Club. As we recovered from our financial crisis under the Gingrich Congress—a rise in membership, more foundation support, more donations coming in, direct mail producing more new members—we had the budget resources now to begin adding to our

national field staff. John McCown was a field staff person under the aegis of the program on environmental justice. So, the Club did begin hiring other EJ [environmental justice] field organizers in Detroit, in Los Angeles, in Tennessee, and other areas around the country, in New Mexico, and John was one of them.

03-01:22:01

There was a point where the program, as it was just getting started, was having to fight for one of these budget, in one of the budget battles early on before we become fully reestablished. And there was a special meeting of the Sierra Club. I believe it was somewhere in, maybe, New Orleans where Nick Aumen and one of the field managers brought in other activists working on EJ [environmental justice] issues. And with my support and some others on the board, we made an appeal directly to the board of directors to fully embrace the funding—full funding and expansion of the EJ [environmental justice] organizing program, and we succeeded in that. I think of those early years, the Sierra Club actually became one of the [environmental justice] leaders of the so-called big, national, principally white organizations. So, I was proud of the action at time.

03-01:23:04

Eardley-Pryor: Help me understand the context of today [now in 2020], this internal reckoning the Club is having with regard to its regional profile, its hiring practices, its leadership, and its own reckoning with its own founding members, whether it be [Joseph] LeConte, who we've discussed, or John Muir coming under fire as being—the accusations of being racist. Help me understand what's happening in the Club in 2020, and where it moved from the mid-nineties. Why, if there was this push for the board of directors who was able to say, "Yes, we should be doing EJ [environmental justice] work, we should be funding it," that we're now having this moment in 2020?

03-01:23:44

Cox: Well, I think the moment in 2020 is a result. Increasingly, the more study was done of the history of some of the Club's early leaders, the more the issue has been raised in the broader society. Given this Club's earlier commitment, given what it has said it supports, it was only inevitable that, in this moment, as so many important lines of influence are coming together, that it would begin more of a self-examination in addition to working outward in EJ [environmental justice] communities. More than that, I think this is a long conversation that we should schedule separately. There are so many dimensions to it, but it is a significant moment in the evolution of the Sierra Club.

03-01:24:34

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, to bring us back in terms of time and context, another topic that I'd love to hear you share your experiences and memories of is, within the Club in this mid-nineties period, the battle for what came to be called the End to Commercial Logging [ECL] and what the Sierra Club's stance was going to

be vis-à-vis logging in the national forests. Can you share with me what's going on in the Club? What is the ECL, or the End Commercial Logging effort within the Club? What happens, who were the main players? Can you share some of that, please?

03-01:25:04

Cox: Sure. I think the context is to recall that public lands are owned by the federal government and consists of the national forests, the Bureau of Land Management [BLM], and other units. On those federal public lands, it requires a certain designation to prohibit commercial development, logging, road building, and so forth. The principal designation is wilderness based on the 1964 Wilderness Act. That's the campaign I had worked on in North Carolina. But in other areas of the national forest, they are mandated under federal law requiring what's called "multiple use" of the national forests and BLM lands. And "multiple uses" include recreation, logging, mining, grazing, and so forth. Many people were surprised that these more extractive industries exist on public lands.

03-01:26:03

Well, inevitably, within an organization of passionate activists who care about the Earth, that there would grow a movement within the Club to have the Club adopt a more rigorous stance on the uses of our public lands, since they were the lands of the American people, taxpayer money, that they belong to the public, to all Americans. And so, a movement grew in the Club. It included such activists as: Jim Bensman from Illinois; David Brower, of course, lent his support to this; Chad Hanson who, at the time, I think was in Oregon in law school; Charlie Ogle, and a number of other forest activists principally who did not believe it was appropriate for private industry to be logging the nation's forests that belong to all Americans. And they developed the concept of the End to All Commercial Logging on all public lands, and it was a radical proposal at the time. No environmental organization really was supporting that, and it was resisted initially inside the Sierra Club.

03-01:27:18

Eardley-Pryor: I can see, especially in the northwest where members—membership, Club membership includes people that work in the timber industry. I mean, people that want to recreate in these areas but also make their living off of these areas. So, how was that reconciled at the national level?

03-01:27:34

Cox: Yeah, it was quite contentious in those areas, and of course, endangered species became the ground zero for some of these battles. Bumper stickers on cars, which was something to the effect of "Feed your family, cook a spotted owl." [laughter]

03-01:27:53

Eardley-Pryor: I remember some that would say, "Are you environmentalist, or do you work for a living?"

03-01:27:56
Cox: Exactly, that was another one. Well, as a result of this movement inside the Sierra Club, two things happened. First of all, there was growing tension with the board of directors and Carl Pope and the national leadership. And a lot of the activists, Jim Bensman and Chad Hanson and others, were threatening to run petition candidates on the board of directors' ballot. They were issuing public op-eds or letters to the editor to try to embarrass the Sierra Club for its weak stance on national forests and such. And a lot of this was coming to a head when I was president of the Sierra Club in 1994 and 1995. I spent a lot of time trying to work directly with many of the lead activists in that area. I flew up to Oregon to meet with Chad Hanson. It was a very tense initial meeting. Chad, at that time, was a far more angry young man than he is today, and I spent a lot of time trying to understand where he was coming from, control my anger, [laughs] and to try to keep a conversation going. He and I did talk, and we talked for hours. I had similar conversations by phone and then in person in San Francisco with Jim Bensman, who was more of the legal expert at the time in terms of lawsuits. He was suing the [US] Forest Service constantly—often winning because he knew the regulations better than they did at times. Ultimately, this came to a head with a negotiated compromise that they would cease a lot of their public antipathy and opposition to the Club if the Club would place on the ballot, for the members to vote on, a referendum that would advise the board of directors whether to adopt a policy recognition of the End to All Commercial Logging.

03-01:30:00
Eardley-Pryor: Let me state back what I'm hearing, and you tell me if I'm hearing you correctly, which is that these directors—like Chad Hanson [*note: Chad Hanson was not a Sierra Club director at that time; he later became a director and remained so at the time of this interview*] and even David Brower, you mentioned, on the board of directors—are pushing this issue but not getting necessarily the results they want from the whole board and doing these workarounds through op-eds—

03-01:30:19
Cox: Well they weren't—

03-01:30:19
Eardley-Pryor: —oh, they weren't? They were threatening to run a slate?

03-01:30:24
Cox: Right.

03-01:30:25
Eardley-Pryor: I see. And eventually—

03-01:30:27
Cox: And David Brower—

03-01:30:27
Eardley-Pryor: —what happens?

03-01:30:29
Cox: Oh, I'm sorry. David Brower had left the Sierra Club years earlier and had formed Earth Island Institute and Friends of the Earth. But he was thinking of running a slate, and they wanted Brower to head a slate of petition candidates because of his name and credibility.

03-01:30:45
Eardley-Pryor: Is this ECL issue, this End Commercial Logging issue, what brought Brower back into his role as a [Sierra Club] director?

03-01:30:51
Cox: It was. Eventually, he was elected on his own. He agreed not to run as the head of a slate. He was elected to the board of directors around that time. But what we did, as part of this negotiated settlement, was that I was willing to entertain a motion on the board of directors to place an ECL [End Commercial Logging] policy recommendation on the ballot for, I don't know, 1995, '96? I don't recall the year.

03-01:31:28
Eardley-Pryor: To let the membership to decide?

03-01:31:30
Cox: To let the members decide what policy direction the Club should take on logging on public lands. It would be an advisory referendum. It wouldn't set policy, but it would advise the board of what the membership felt. That was a heated debate on the board of directors, and in fact, it was an evenly divided vote. The president, chairing the meeting, usually does not vote but only votes in the case of a tie. Well, I had my first tie as the presiding chair of the board. And I looked at, I think it was Phil Berry, and said, "I'll support the resolution. Let's put it on the ballot. Let the members decide."

03-01:32:19
Eardley-Pryor: Why did you make that choice?

03-01:32:20
Cox: Well, I thought it was the only way to settle this debate within the Club that was consuming a lot of our energy and attention at the same time we were trying to fight the Gingrich Congress on the war on the environment. And I thought, if they were willing to make some compromises, and it was a passionately held issue by many activists in the Club, that they had the right to at least ask what the membership felt. Well, the membership approved it, and the board subsequently did officially adopt the policy of the End of Commercial Logging on public lands. And subsequently, the debate became over some of the nuances of the policy. Would activists still be able to negotiate with local Forest Service management plans about how much would be protected from logging? And could they even agree to a management plan that allowed some logging? And that would be litigated within the Club for years afterward, but there's been a general settlement these days. It's not as contentious.

03-01:33:32
Eardley-Pryor: Does [the Club still have] End Commercial Logging, a zero logging end-goal?

03-01:33:41
Cox: I'm having trouble hearing your audio right now.

03-01:33:43
Eardley-Pryor: I'm sorry. I was asking, does the Club still have this policy of a zero logging end-goal?

03-01:33:50
Cox: Yes. Yes, it does.

03-01:33:53
Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

03-01:33:54
Cox: As far as I know. I've been off the board a few years.

03-01:33:58
Eardley-Pryor: And as a way to tilt towards this conversation that you've mentioned—for our conversation about the [Newt] Gingrich takeover of Congress and what's happening at the federal government level, some of that context—I'm wondering if you can share with me what's happening within the Clinton-Gore administration. I understand that there was a [federal] budget that was put before President Bill Clinton that he vetoed, in a series of vetoes early in his presidency. One of the issues [for that veto was logging], and it was a rider, a salvage logging rider that was part [of the budget], and initially he vetoed this. I know eventually, the bill came back to him with pretty similar language that he did pass, or signed. And then there's also the issue that's known as "takings." So, I'm wondering, what's going on within the federal government around logging issues in the context of the Sierra Club trying to decide whether it was going to try to end commercial logging?

03-01:34:58
Cox: Well, those issues are coming up in the context of the November 1994 election in which the Republicans seized control of both the [US] House and the Senate. And going forward for the next two years, issues from takings, which we should talk about, opening up national forests to more logging, and rollback of other environmental regulations on clean water, and so forth, all of that is now bubbling and coming up. Even before November of 1994, we're getting hints of this. Takings legislations are being introduced in state legislatures, and so maybe I should define what that is.

03-01:35:48
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. What do you mean by takings? What is that?

03-01:35:52
Cox: Well, under the US Constitution, I think it's the Fifth Amendment, I'm not sure, the United States government cannot physically take your property for

public purposes without fair compensation for the value of the property. Part of the conservative or right-wing part of the conservative movement felt that even if the government didn't physically take your property, if it enacted regulations such as wetlands preservation that affected your property in a certain way, then that was a "takings" under the Constitution, and they deserved compensation. Well, the courts had never recognized that kind of extended or indirect effect on property. So, this became an effort on part of the conservative movement and the Gingrich people who took over the Congress after the November [1994] election. So, going into the new Congress in January of 1995, this is going to be one of the major assaults on existing environmental law and practice.

03-01:37:02
Eardley-Pryor: Well, that's good context. So, that's part of the conservative umbrella —

03-01:37:07
Cox: That's correct.

03-01:37:08
Eardley-Pryor: —that holds all the issues including, I imagine, they wrapped this up in the failed health care effort in '93 that Hillary Clinton helped spearhead on behalf of the [President Bill] Clinton administration. It failed, and I can see conservatives framing all of this as big government takeover.

03-01:37:25
Cox: Oh, of course. Yes, it was. And we can come back to the salvage rider, if you wish, in the context of that whole war on the environment, as that was just one piece of it, of the assault on twenty-some years of environmental protection.

03-01:37:40
Eardley-Pryor: That makes sense. Well, I have a note here that in advance of the November takeover of Congress for the first time in forty years, where the Republicans have control of both houses, that in October of 1994, you have a meeting with Vice President Al Gore. That's just fascinating. Tell me, if you can, what that was about and what the experience was.

03-01:38:02
Cox: Well, it was almost happenstance. Gore was speaking at the annual Democratic dinner in Des Moines, Iowa, and I was also, as [Sierra Club] president, visiting the chapter in Iowa at the time. So, there was an opportunity for me to meet with the vice president. And it gave me a very brief opportunity to, at least, raise the concern we had about this movement for takings as well as some of the other threats against environmental regulation. This was one month before the November election, and it was to become more dire later. I would be seeing Mr. Gore again a few months later.

03-01:38:42
Eardley-Pryor: Yes, and in ensuing years, then working on his behalf and campaigning on his behalf for the 2000 elections.

03-01:38:50
Cox: I was, yes.

03-01:38:51
Eardley-Pryor: Was that [October 1994 meeting] the first time that you met Vice President Al Gore?

03-01:38:54
Cox: It was the first time I met him.

03-01:38:56
Eardley-Pryor: What was that interaction like, just at a personal level?

03-01:38:58
Cox: Well, personally, he is a very personable, easy person to interact with, unlike the reputation I fear he later got in the [presidential] campaign in 2000. He is humorous, obviously a smart, really smart guy, and he was very attentive in listening. I had a good working relationship when I had the chance to meet with him, which was infrequent. But there, with the Gingrich Congress, I would have some intense opportunities to at least speak with him further.

03-01:39:36
Eardley-Pryor: Sure. And now that we are introducing Al Gore as another character in this narrative that you're sharing, I think of course about climate change as an issue that is so prevalent today. I'm wondering, because Gore had written *Earth in the Balance* already a few years before your first meeting him, before even getting the vice-presidential nod [first published in June 1992], and I'm wondering where is climate change on the radar of you and of the Club in this period, in the nineties during your presidency?

03-01:40:08
Cox: In those mid-nineties during my time as president, it was not on our radar. I know that the first congressional hearings occurred in 1988 with Dr. James Hansen of the Goddard Space Institute [Goddard Institute for Space Studies] who warned of this. But at that time, I think the national consciousness, and in many environmental organizations, it was, in the general population, a theoretical possibility, distant, global. And right now, on the ground, we were facing these emergent threats on the political front. It would emerge later with the Sierra Club, and I credit the subsequent [Sierra Club] president Lisa Renstrom with really bringing it to the Sierra Club's attention during her presidency [2005–2007].

03-01:40:57
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Just on a personal level, when do you remember climate change coming on to your radar, personally? Was this something that came up with regard to your work as a professor at UNC, or was it through the Sierra Club? Do you remember how it bubbled up for you, the issue of climate change?

03-01:41:13

Cox: Well, I think it bubbled up as members of the board began to speak of it, and I know there was one exchange at the board level several years later when Dave Foreman was on the board [1995–1997] that the debate was over, well, "How can we convince more people of the cause of global warming?" And I remember Dave speaking, "Well, let's just skip over that part. Let's address what the solutions are because cities and regions will be facing dire threats, rising sea level along the coast, increasing wildfires. And the Sierra Club should be addressing that set of concerns. You don't have to debate people about what caused it. Let's be with them on the front lines." But that occurs a couple of years later.

03-01:42:05

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Let's take a pause here before we dive into the story about the Gingrich takeover, the Contract with America, and the war on the environment.

03-01:42:13

Cox: Okay.

[break in audio]

03-01:42:19

Eardley-Pryor: All right, Robbie. So, in 1994 in November, the Republican ascendancy occurs. Newt Gingrich helped lead a takeover of the US House, and then, of course, the US Senate also had a Republican majority—the first time in forty years where conservatives have control of both houses of Congress. What are your memories of learning about this major event, and what did you do with it?

03-01:42:42

Cox: Well, it was a dramatic wake-up call. I had flown out to San Francisco on election day for meetings in advance of some other issues we were dealing with. We knew that the Democrats were in trouble. As I landed at San Francisco airport and was walking down the corridor, I glanced at a television screen. By this point, it was late into the evening, and the results of the election were known and were being broadcast for the first time of the complete takeover and a major reversal of political power in Washington, the House and Senate. And I was thinking, "Oh, my God, this presents a major assault on all that we care about."

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So, I'm on my way into town, I get in touch with Carl [Pope], we meet the next morning—it's already late at night—in the library at the old Sierra Club headquarters on Polk Street. And Carl and I and his senior staff began to assess the fallout from the election. We immediately realized we've got to switch from an offensive strategy with the Clinton administration to a defensive strategy, because they've [the Republicans] indicated they're going to throw everything and the kitchen sink at us all. We made some initial

decisions about what a defensive strategy would be. We knew that number one, we had to sound the alarm because the American people didn't realize yet what was coming at them. The Contract with America, in its one-page summary, never mentioned the environment, but it did talk about things like government regulation and the economy and getting the government out of the way. But in the detailed policy proposals they had behind it, we knew they were coming after every environmental law that had defined the previous quarter century.

03-01:44:43

So, number one, we said we have to sound the alarm. Number two, we're not going to be able to defeat every individual initiative that comes before the Congress. We're going to have to develop a unified message that tells the story to not only the American people but to the news media and begin to get a counternarrative out into the public square. And finally, we've got to educate our own members inside the Sierra Club and prepare them for the coming battle, because it was the resource of the Club to have a grassroots network that's powerful if mobilized. So, that was some of the initial thinking.

03-01:45:25

Eardley-Pryor: Now, these are some real strategic thoughts that are happening the day after this event happens, I mean, to make these three big decisions. Where were you drawing from? Where was this strategic plan that ends up becoming what the Club does over the next few years? What was informing these decisions to create the strategy? Where were you drawing from?

03-01:45:54

Cox: Oh, this is very clearly coming from Carl [Pope], who is a master strategist, who pivoted very quickly to a defensive posture. He understands the DC political power-center extremely well. He had worked in DC with Zero Population Growth earlier. He had contacts with key Democratic leaders in the Congress. He understood how this would play out almost immediately. And I give Carl enormous credit in outlining the basic core strategic principles: sound the alarm, develop a core message that gives us a chance to change the narrative, mobilize the grassroots, and then choose our battle where we had the greatest leverage. And there are multiple ways to then unfold that through tactical operations, and we'll get into some of that. But that was the foundation after the election, the next day, where the Sierra Club began to pivot.

03-01:46:56

Eardley-Pryor: Share with me your thoughts and contributions as a professor of rhetoric and a scholar of communication around this messaging component to it. What were the thoughts, and what happened? What was the message, and how was it crafted?

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Cox: Well, in terms of media coverage, we knew that it would not be possible day-after-day to inform beat reporters and editorial writers who had no background in, let's say, the essence of the sewage systems and clean water regulations. And then, two days later, they would have to become an expert on the rollback of air pollution from coal-burning power plants. So, I knew that we had to have an arch—an overarching story, a narrative that would tie together the import of what all of these separate attacks meant. And one of the assignments I got, or suggestions from Carl [Pope], was to get up to DC and begin to work with some of our media people and with one of our consultants, a pollster, Celinda Lake [Lake Research Partners], who still has her polling operation, and to think through message development. Now, we ended up doing that, but that would come several weeks or a month or several months later to really fine-tune the message.

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We were still getting our feet on the ground in November. But one of the things that we did in November is that the Clinton administration and Gore called the heads of all the major environmental organizations to an urgent meeting at the White House on November 17, just two weeks after the election results, because they knew, of course, what was coming at them. So, Carl [Pope] asked me to go in his place. The other environment organizations were sending their CEOs, their executive directors. Carl and I had ended up agreeing that we would have to divide up the territory, in a sense, because there would be so many opportunities, so many needs to continually get out into the public square and send our message. He would handle the west. I would handle the east. And so, I would attend the meeting that Gore set up. It was on November 17 [1994].

03-01:49:25

Eardley-Pryor: That's an extraordinary amount of trust and confidence that Carl [Pope] is sharing with you, to say "Go and represent the Sierra Club as president of the Club, on my behalf with all the other CEOs of these major environmental organizations, with the White House."

03-01:49:45

Cox: It was a leap of faith on his part, in one hand, but we had worked together since I had become president back in May [1993]. He had seen the way I was thinking and representing the Club, and working on Project Renewal and with the financial messaging I had to carry out to the grassroots, and my background in communication and so forth. I think he trusted me, at least to the point of asking me to attend that meeting, and it would become more so as the days went on, I'm honored to say.

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Eardley-Pryor: What happened at that meeting then, with the White House and with Vice President Gore in the wake of the Republican takeover?

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Cox: First of all, I was denied entry into the Old Executive Office Building [Eisenhower Executive Office Building] at first; they couldn't find my name. [laughs] Gore's people had to send down an aide to wave me through, and I was able to join the meeting. Well, what happened is that Gore had assembled a lot of the key Clinton administration cabinet members, [like] Tim Wirth, who was the undersecretary in the State Department for Environment Affairs; Hazel O'Leary, [Department of] Energy; Bruce Babbitt from [Department of the] Interior; Carol Browner, EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]; and [Kathleen] Katie McGinty, who was head of the environmental policy office advising the White House [Council on Environmental Quality, CEQ]. They wanted to hear what the reaction was from us, the environmental leaders of the major groups, and to see whether or not we were in alignment with them. That subgroup of the Clinton cabinet, below the president, were strong environmentalists. I think they were trying to understand how we might be able to work together for the coming assault.

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I do recall that one or more of the other CEOs—I won't name them—said initially, "What we need to do is make sure we still have access. We've got to be able to work with the new power on Capitol Hill, the House and Senate. So, we have to be able to have access to their offices to be able to talk with them, and to advise them, and to lobby about some of these policies they're developing." And I remember [Al] Gore turning and looking at me, because I was there for the Sierra Club who had a different strategic design in place because we had a large grassroots membership in all of these constituent districts out there. Some of the other environmental organizations did not have grassroots members who were active participants in the organization. They tended to be inside-the-beltway, lobby organizations. I did say to Gore at the time that, "The Sierra Club stands ready to mobilize its nationwide grassroots base of thousands of members, that if you stand solidly behind the environmental principles that we've struggled for these years, the Sierra Club will stand with you, and we'll rally in support of your efforts, and we will go out, and we will be targeting and pressuring swing votes in the Congress. We will mount a robust defensive campaign." And that theme became picked up by others, though others still insisted that their expertise inside the beltway was needed. So, I think we all went away from the meeting with assignments of what we would develop and flesh out more as our proposals for how to work together. And the Clinton administration people themselves went back and began to develop their own planning and efforts to protect each of their areas of responsibility.

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We agreed to a follow-up meeting that happened on December 22 [1994], just about a month later. And at that meeting, we had a series of reports back from the different cabinet secretaries and Gore himself on the range of issues, and how they would fight for them, and that they would help send a signal. Because we had all asked Gore that the president sends a clear signal to the

American people that the environmental groups could basically organize around and point to in defense of the Clinton administration's environmental policies, which were in defense of the environmental laws on air, water, and so forth. So, there was a lot of agreement as we ended that period. And at that point, we went back to begin developing our own organizations' fuller strategies and campaigns.

03-01:54:50

Eardley-Pryor: But, it sounds to me, the way I'm hearing you tell the story, is that each of these major organizations were just relying upon its own strength—and the Club's strength, of course, being this grassroots, nationwide activist network that they could tap into and leverage.

03-01:55:03

Cox: I must say because of the way it worked out, because of the relationships we developed on a personal level through these meetings at the White House, that I and Carl [Pope] and the Sierra Club were able to work in collaborative, big, media events that would unfold in the coming months, appearing with people like Gene Karpinski with one of the national organizations that he led [then executive director of the United States Public Interest Research Group], and to have assemblage of all of the big environmental NGOs at a big rally in Lafayette Park outside the White House on another big protest we had. So, we developed working relationships where we could come together to generate media coverage of what was at stake, in addition to our talents on, expertise in lobbying and grassroots mobilization.

03-01:56:00

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. So, it sounds like there's a real nice collaboration among the Big Greens [large national environmental organizations]. Going forward, what was the ongoing relationship like with the Clinton-Gore administration? You had said that the Big Greens asked for them to make a lead charge that you could rally around. Did that happen?

03-01:56:19

Cox: Well, it did happen, and the president ended up adopting the environment as one of his big three talking points in terms of the defense of his administration. The environment, education, and maybe health care was the third, I don't recall. So, that was enough to go forward. And then, of course, we had continuing open lines with Gore, and Carl [Pope] had direct lines with Nancy Pelosi, who was his representative in Congress from San Francisco. So, we—

03-01:56:51

Eardley-Pryor: Good to know people who know people.

03-01:56:53

Cox: Yeah. We had good communication with the Democratic leadership in both the Congress and in the White House.

03-01:56:59
Eardley-Pryor: Within the Sierra Club, I've heard you reference the way to push back against the Contract with America and the Gingrich takeover was framing their activities as a war on the environment. Where did that messaging and even that phrase come from? What's the story behind that?

03-01:57:19
Cox: Well, as I hinted earlier, we wanted to develop a core message that would help support a counternarrative. One of the things that I did was to work with our media personnel in the DC office and with the consultant help of Celinda Lake, who gave us a lot of polling data that we could work with. We ended up fine-tuning a message, which we defined as a single sentence that encapsulated the essence of what the Gingrich rollback of all of these different environmental laws amounted to. And so we developed the message of "Every American has the right to a clean, safe environment, don't let them take it away." And what we would do almost daily was that with each bill introduced in Congress by the Republicans to target some environmental law, we would go out to the media, *New York Times* editorial writers, Los Angeles editorial writers and say, "There they go again. Every American has the right to a safe and healthy environment or clean and safe environment. They're trying to take it away. Here's what they did today." And ultimately, that message got picked up and repeated and rolled into lead editorials and news coverage of us. They would quote that message, and that began to be a really public resonant counter-message out there.

03-01:58:56
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. I'm struck by the attention that the Club makes around the issue of rights, that there are now environmental rights to be protected, and to hang their messaging around the notion of rights.

03-01:59:10
Cox: Yes, absolutely.

03-01:59:14
Eardley-Pryor: How did the Club then move forward with this idea of rights? What were the things that it did to help mobilize those ideas?

03-01:59:21
Cox: Well, we did two things. In April of '95, in addition to a lot of the media effort and the education of our membership and getting geared up, Earth Day was happening—

03-01:59:36
Eardley-Pryor: This was a big one, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Earth Day.

03-01:59:38
Cox: It's the twenty-fifth anniversary, so that was a huge media opportunity. And so major events were held on the mall in Washington, DC. Massive numbers of hundreds of thousands of people that were there, all the major environmental group leaders were there, including prominent speakers such as Robert F.

Kennedy Jr. and others. And we had bands that were just rising and Shawn Colvin and just some of the other bands, I can't remember right now, and major media coverage. And when I spoke at the time, I was the delegated Sierra Club spokesperson to be at the stage for that event.

03-02:00:22
Eardley-Pryor: And you're talking where? Because I imagine there were events across the country. Where are you talking about, that event?

03-02:00:27
Cox: Well, I'm on the mall at the major event, the national event.

03-02:00:30
Eardley-Pryor: In [Washington] DC?

03-02:00:30
Cox: In DC. So we're on the mall, the mall is completely jammed with people, hundreds of thousands people, there are speaker systems every so many yards down the width of the mall in both directions, big screens and speakers. Each of us had, what, maybe five minutes to speak, maybe three, and so we had to distill the essence of our message. Well, we had spent time developing a message that we could then elaborate with quick references and calls for mobilization of those that were there to respond to the urgency moment. I did what I could in that moment in that speech.

03-02:01:19
Eardley-Pryor: Well, give yourself some credit here because I've seen the C-SPAN video of your speech, and you are an emphatic speaker. You are a dynamic public spokesperson, and I almost wanted to stand up and cheer watching you give your talk. And I heard people in the background, the thousands, the tens of thousands that you were speaking to, a hundred thousand, getting up and the camera would swing over, and you see people screaming and putting their fist in the air. It was a pretty neat moment, and you helped lead the charge on that. You are a humble, a very humble West Virginia man. I want to say, give yourself some credit because that's a pretty neat moment that you helped create on a mall there.

03-02:01:54
Cox: You do that only with the support system behind you and the media advisors that are there with you. Ronni Lieberman was one of the DC media people who were handholding me through the backstage and getting me up there, and we were talking about messaging. So, it took a number of us to pull off an event like that.

03-02:02:16
Eardley-Pryor: It was great, the delivery in particular. Your delivery was just, again, empathic, just wonderful and impassioned and got other people impassioned.

03-02:02:25

Cox: Well, thank you. The second thing that happened as the spring began to unfold was that in May [1995], the Sierra Club called together its major leaders at the national level—staff and volunteer leaders, board of directors, Carl [Pope] and I—to do an assessment at a retreat. Where were we, what were our challenges, how were we doing, what more did we need to do? And Carl led with an assessment of our weaknesses. He pointed out we were still a minority voice in this national phenomenon that was happening with the takeover of the Congress and the momentum behind Gingrich to change these laws. We were facing a new Congress of newly elected Republicans from swing districts that had been Democratic before, but in order to have taken over the Congress, Republicans had to flip them. But party discipline was very strong in the Congress and Gingrich was not wanting to let any of his newly elected freshmen peel away from the party line vote.

03-02:03:41

We were struggling for resources. We were still coming out of that financial crisis, but we turned to what it is that we could do, where we needed to put our strengths. And I know one of the things that Carl [Pope] said again was that we had to deliver more effectively our broad message—"Every American has a right to a clean and safe environment, don't let them take it away"—and find more forums, and that we had to get this message out to local communities and within congressional districts. And I think one of the really strategic gems that Carl innovated was he took a look at the map of the swing districts of newly elected Republican, first-term members of the House of Representatives, and he argued they were vulnerable. Yes, there's party discipline, but they have a constituency that could swing either way. Those were moderate or swing districts. So, we had to find a way to develop our message in those districts and to have representation and presence there. So, for me, that meant a lot of travel schedule to visit those districts. Carl was doing it; others were doing it. And finally, we said the third point, "We've got to really develop our membership in order to carry the same message so it resonates and to be able to target their members of Congress to have this multiple front that is beginning to make Speaker Gingrich nervous because his swing, vulnerable new members are being targeted."

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Eardley-Pryor: So you could go after Gingrich's ability to win votes by targeting the new swing district Republicans?

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Cox: That's right. And I'll give you an example. We cut a number of radio ads to be played in these local districts. And the radio ads were based on a popular game show at the time that would ask a member of the audience a question and they'd have only so many seconds to answer and then a gong would ring and the answer—

03-02:05:57
Eardley-Pryor: Are you talking about *The Gong Show*?

03-02:05:58
Cox: Yeah, that's what it was.

03-02:06:00
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, God, I loved that show.

03-02:06:02
Cox: Well, I remember traveling to Maine, to the district of Representative James Longley who was a newly elected Republican in a swing district. And so, we bought radio time in his district to play the radio ad again and again. And then we arranged radio appointments, interviews for me. And I would then be able to respond to the online radio reporter after they would play the ad, which was the newsworthy event that day. And I would then riff off of that to talk about Jim Longley, and why is it that James Longley voted against the Clean Water Act? Uh, uh, gong. And then why is it that James Longley voted against this? Hesitation, gong goes off. And then I would deliver our core message that every American has a right to a safe, clean environment, why is he targeting the Clean Water Act? And then I would travel around the state of Maine and the field staff would—or the chapter staff will set up radio and TV interviews for me to carry the message. Carl [Pope] was doing it, other senior leaders were doing the same thing. As Carl pointed out at one point, we had to beat the drum loudly and keep beating it to resonate throughout the country.

03-02:07:24
Eardley-Pryor: That's a great story about that radio ad in Maine. Just fun and creative, but also just, indeed as you frame it, incredibly strategic.

03-02:07:36
Cox: Yeah. Well, we knew we had to get the attention of the media.

03-02:07:43
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, that's excellent. What are some of the other memories you have about that meeting where Carl's framing, "Here's what we need to do in May of '95 in the wake of the takeover." What else is happening that you found was successful?

03-02:08:05
Cox: Well, we got word that the Republicans were rewriting protection of the forest and the regulations around logging in the national forests. And they included in some of their language of the bills what was called a "salvage logging" rider, or an amendment that was added. Salvage logging traditionally has meant allowing some of the slash or damaged trees or the leftover timber in the forest to be taken out by private interests. Initially, it was simply for subsistence logging for small family farms and others that could use fuel wood from the forest. But the way the language was written, that the salvage rider had such a broad language, it became a loophole for just the continuing of logging healthy trees in the forest.

03-02:09:07
Eardley-Pryor: So not just the dead and dying trees, but green trees?

03-02:09:09
Cox: Not just the dead and dying, but healthy trees. So, it was a phalanx going back into the forest again that we had protected on earlier multiple use forest management plans and so forth. So, it was the genius, I think, of Debbie Sease, who was conservation director in Washington, DC, to plan a media event outside the White House in Lafayette Park. And her idea was to have a chainsaw event because the public needed to hear the sound of chainsaws in our national forests again to appreciate what was coming.

03-02:09:47
Eardley-Pryor: This is a logging issue, after all.

03-02:09:47
Cox: And that, particularly, the White House needed to hear the sound of chainsaws in order to realize that we were coming back after them, the Clinton administration, our allies whom we felt were drifting away from a robust defense of the environmental law. So, I was delegated on the East Coast to be the spokesperson for the event. We rounded up all of the CEOs of environmental groups that were based in DC, and all of their staff members to have a big crowd. And then Debbie and the Sierra Club staff went around to every Hardwood Store they could find in DC and surrounding communities and rented every chainsaw they could find and handed a chainsaw to every CEO and me as president of the Sierra Club. And so, we stood in a semicircle, and I was standing with my back to the White House, at the podium, speaking to the array of chainsaw-holding CEOs in front of me.

03-02:10:52
Eardley-Pryor: That is one hell of a visual.

03-02:10:54
Cox: [laughs] So, I was delivering the message: the condemnation of the salvage rider, the Clinton administration that was teetering on accepting this bill and signing it. And I said, "The sound you will soon hear in our national forests is the sound of chainsaws." And that was the signal that all of us pulled the chain and our chainsaws roared to life, all at once. The media loved it. And so did the Secret Service with rifles on the top of the White House. So, I saw the look on Debbie's face standing in front of me, looking over my shoulder back at the White House kind of. And I turned around and looked, and the Secret Service had stood up behind the barricades on the roof of the White House holding their rifles or machine guns and looking at this assault that was coming into the White House, where was it coming from—

03-02:11:51
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, "These guys are crazy!"—thinking there's going to be a bunch of chainsaw-wielding environmentalists coming after the White House.

03-02:11:59
Cox: [laughs] Yeah. well, we got some results. The next day, Leon Panetta, who was Clinton's chief of the staff, called Carl Pope and they—

03-02:12:08
Eardley-Pryor: And a Californian at that, [Panetta is] a California boy.

03-02:12:10
Cox: Yeah, he was. He was, still is. He said to Carl, "Carl, you need to call off the dogs. We will not sign this bill, call them off. We can't have this kind of division with environmentalists when we're trying to defend the environment as one of the big three message points we're putting out there." So, we got through that even though we didn't sustain that later.

03-02:12:38
Eardley-Pryor: That's great, that's a great story. So, it worked, the chainsaw salute.

03-02:12:42
Cox: Yeah. And that's an example of a tactic that implements a broader strategy of trying to sound the alarm, delivering a consistent core message that gets media attention.

03-02:12:54
Eardley-Pryor: That's wonderful, that's great. Well, let's take a pause for today. We've covered a ton of ground, and we can continue the rest of the stories of what else you're doing to fight the war against the environment on behalf of the environment. Thank you very much for your time today, Robbie.

03-02:13:09
Cox: Okay. We will pause.

Interview 4: September 21, 2020

04-00:00:00
Eardley-Pryor: Today is Monday, September 21 in the year 2020. I'm Roger Eardley-Pryor for UC [University of California] Berkeley's Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library. Today is interview session number four with Robert Cox. Robbie, it's great see you again.

04-00:00:16
Cox: It's good to see you, Roger.

04-00:00:17
Eardley-Pryor: All right. We are in our respective homes—in North Carolina for you, and in Santa Rosa, California, for me—conducting this interview over Zoom in light of the ongoing pandemic and other escalating crises of rising fascism and climate change that are happening around us. So, it's nice to take some time to chat with you about your history in combating some of these challenges. Today, I'd like to pick up where we left off in what was going on in the midst of the [Newt] Gingrich takeover, the Republican takeover of Congress in the mid-1990s, and your role still as president of the Sierra Club during this time. In particular, I'm interested in an event that you noted for me on November 1, 1995, that you and others in the Sierra Club delivered an environmental bill of rights to Congress. Can you share with me a little bit of what that was and what the strategy was around creating an environmental bill of rights?

04-00:01:13
Cox: Sure. We had earlier, after the Gingrich takeover, thought extensively about what kind of strategy defensively was necessary when they were throwing everything at us—rollback of this law, attempts to gut a regulation—almost daily. And initially, we decided upon a core message that would be repeated with media at every turn when the Gingrich people attempted something, and that message was that "Every American has the right to a safe and healthy environment, don't let them take it away." And then we would link that to the particular outrage of that day. Well, by this point into the full year, 1995, of that Congress, we knew we needed to do a better job in organizing our grassroots—the many groups and chapters throughout the nation, that real army of activists that could help us deliver this message and target their members of Congress in their home districts. So, we needed the tool to give them that they could organize around that would carry our message through and amplify it. So, we created the idea of a bill of rights. It had five key planks and also mirrored the Contract with America that had been a handy organizing tool for the Republicans in winning that election in '94.

04-00:02:45
Eardley-Pryor: Well, that's sharp. So, mirroring their language, but framing it in terms of environmental rights?

04-00:02:49

Cox: Exactly. So the five planks, briefly, were to prevent pollution; preserve America's national heritage; and the giveaway public assets; conserve America's natural resources; and get the big money out of politics. Under those five planks, we had well-developed briefings of what legislation was endangered. And we encouraged local activists in each group in each chapter to go into public spaces, carry the petition, get signatures because the idea was ultimately to deliver over a million signatures both to state houses and ultimately on the steps of the US Capitol. So, it gave them something to engage communities with one on one, getting signatures, and that worked beautifully. By November, we had achieved the goal. It was I think a total of 1.2 million signatures in huge mailbags gathered on the steps of the US Capitol with the heads of all of the environmental groups behind those big mailbags. And I was able to speak for the Sierra Club, and we delivered our message in front of a lot of media coverage because we had been building that news story interest from the ground up throughout America, and it culminated then in a perfect, image-driven event for media.

04-00:04:17

Eardley-Pryor: I was going to say, it paints a perfect picture, for a snapshot, and to incite discussion in the media age growing, with twenty-four-hour Cable News Networks in the nineties. I want to ask, also, about—with regard to this bill of [environmental] rights and this rally at the capitol and mobilizing the grassroots on this—what was the reaction among the grassroots within the chapters and within the groups, of national coming in and saying, "Here's the concern, we need to be talking about Congress in the national level versus what might've been their own bailiwick of things in their own backyard?

04-00:04:54

Cox: What was going on in those chapters was outrage over the Gingrich Congress. We were totally united on this one. There was no friction. There are, maybe, other issues in other times, but not during this period. It was all-hands on deck.

04-00:05:10

Eardley-Pryor: That's good, a heightened moment, and everyone focused on the initiatives there. I mean, this is a great event. What other kind of events were you participating in, either to promote this message or to promote the interests of the Club?

04-00:05:23

Cox: Well, throughout that year, 1995, I was on the road extensively. I think my lovely partner Julia [T. Wood] said, that year, I was away from home more than I was at home. I would be speaking wherever I would have an invitation or could find media interest in the Sierra Club's message. So, from Maine to Boston to Dallas, Texas, to Utah even, all over the country, radio, TV addresses, rallies to mobilize and give support to the local chapters and

activists in their communities, and then use that also to gain media attention for their efforts as well as the national message we were delivering.

04-00:06:08
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. In the context of this, this was still while UNC [University of North Carolina] had given you—or the Club had bought out your teaching time. So, this [Sierra Club presidency] was essentially what you were doing full time?

04-00:06:20
Cox: I was doing this full time, yeah.

04-00:06:24
Eardley-Pryor: I have a note here that during this time period of travel and trying to promote the interests of this environmental bill of rights and challenge the Republican takeover, that you also had a meeting with the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] administrator Carol Browner. What's the context of that meeting?

04-00:06:40
Cox: Well, I worked with Carl Pope, our executive director, to meet with Browner. Since the Gingrich Congress was attacking clean water regulations and, for example, clean air, a lot of the environmental laws that EPA was overseeing, we were very concerned that the EPA stand firmly in the face of this and do what they could to continue to enforce these regulations. So, we had a good discussion with Carol Browner. And when she was hesitating in terms of the timing involved in one of the cases that we wanted, clean enforcement now, she said at one point, "Robbie, sue us," [and, paraphrasing her] "that helps us. When we're being brought into court by the other side, we can argue that 'We're under pressure and they're citing the law. I am under this obligation to report out or to begin enforcement by X date, and we're being sued, we must comply with the judge's order.'"

04-00:07:47
Eardley-Pryor: That's a great story. So, yeah, advocating. And where did you see the EPA as coming down? How pleased were you with how they were responding, both to your advocacy from within the Club and just generally against the Republican onslaught for deregulation?

04-00:08:03
Cox: Oh, well, Carol Browner as head administrator for EPA was with us from the beginning. She was in those early meetings I had with Vice President Al Gore back in November and December of '94, and she had pledged strong support of these environment laws and regulations coming out of them. But we had to give her support out in the countryside, as we did with the administration itself.

04-00:08:30
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, and by this time, it sounds like you're doing so much work in just, over that past year, that you've become a semi-regular in the DC circuit.

04-00:08:37
Cox: Yeah.

04-00:08:39
Eardley-Pryor: I also have a note here that shortly after this time period, in the fall of '95, another initiative that arose within the Club during your presidency was something called Project ACT [Activist culture, Communication & coordination, Training]. I have heard this spoken as something in relation to Project Renewal, the restructuring of the Club's governance, which we've talked about before. But what was Project ACT in particular? How was it different from this prior governmental reconstruction within the Club?

04-00:09:10
Cox: Well, you're correct in that the earlier Project Renewal was about governance and streamlining, simplifying, making it more efficient, and financially sustainable. One of the still-to-be-implemented aspects was giving greater support to the activist grassroots in the Sierra Club. We'd been working on some efforts to do that, but with the Gingrich Congress, this became even more urgent because they [the Sierra Club's grassroots] were asking for support, for resources. And at the same time, there was a conversation bubbling up among four or five of us at the national level about the need to build a more organizing culture. Now, that phrase "organizing culture," really came from Dave Foreman, who had joined the board of directors by this point.

04-00:10:04
Eardley-Pryor: And can you share who he was?

04-00:10:07
Cox: Well, Dave Foreman is known in American history as one of the cofounders of Earth First!, the radical environmental group in the West that would attempt to block logging, [conduct] tree spiking, civil disobedience in defense of Mother Earth.

04-00:10:21
Eardley-Pryor: Kind of a *Monkey Wrench Gang* approach to environmental activism.

04-00:10:23
Cox: A *Monkey Wrench*, out of that, the moniker for what they were doing in Edward Abbey's famous book. Foreman had recently had difficulty with federal law officials on what we thought was a trumped-up charge. And so, after that was settled, I think Dave was looking for involvement in a credible, highly mainstream environmental organization to contribute his time.

04-00:10:57
Eardley-Pryor: Am I hearing you say that he was distancing himself from the Earth First! movement that he helped create?

04-00:11:04
Cox: I don't know that he was distancing himself personally from it. You have to talk with Dave about that. But Dave is such a passionate and committed

person to the environment, particularly to public lands and biodiversity. He would go on, at that point, to be less involved with Earth First! and began to develop—what—his own organization was called, which was the Wildlands Project. And his vision was, big ecosystems required preservation in order to protect the particular small parts and species within them. Now, Dave was on the board of directors now, and he and I began to—

04-00:11:48

Eardley-Pryor: [The board of directors] of the Sierra Club?

04-00:11:49

Cox: Of the Sierra Club. And he brought with him this vision that this Club, with all of its potential with its hundreds of thousands of members in local areas all over America, that we could do more in developing an organizing culture. And by that, he meant not just having program meetings at local groups, showing a film or having a speaker, but developing those local meetings to training of people to be able to go out in their community, to recruit others to come in to work on Sierra Club campaigns and issues, to be outward looking in communities. He and I had a conversation and invited others, particularly at a board retreat in Montana at the Big Sky Resort. Bob Bingaman, who's the Sierra Club field director, and still is; Alita Paine, who was a staff member in San Francisco working with volunteers; and Joni Bosh, vice president for conservation. Those individuals also really supported this idea of an organizing culture.

04-00:13:09

So, at one point during the board retreat, we took off up into the mountains and just started a conversation about how we could implement this vision within the Sierra Club structure. And we came to an agreement that there should be a set of proposals developed that I could take to the board of directors that would speak to the needs that our activists had, and the resources we could provide, and the driving rationale behind this, which was to build greater capacity in our war on environment in fighting against the rollback of environmental law during the Gingrich Congress. So, actually the term—the word ACT, A-C-T, is acronym for three components of this set of proposals: Activism, which I've just mentioned, is to think of our members as activists who are organizing within their own cultures to develop greater capacity at that level. T for Training—they needed greater understanding of how to design campaigns. They needed to understand how you develop networks within your community. Where are the power sources? Develop a grid that allows you to see your relationships in a network of others within the community. And then, finally, Communication.

04-00:14:33

One of the things we had to put forth in Project Renewal was this activist network that would try to link people that had interest in multiple issues throughout the Sierra Club but do so across state boundaries, and link up people who shared an interest in, let's say, forest issues or water issues. Well,

we were still developing that system because of the rollout of the communication infrastructure it would require. So, we made a renewed commitment to that—building greater communication capacity, particularly between the national Club and chapters, so that we could coordinate. And I'll give you a good example: getting the environmental bill of rights out into the hands of the chapters, giving them support, coordinating logistics of when I would be traveling in order to have rallies in those areas, being able to communicate better within their state to mobilize people around a particular fight—over the rollback of clean water regulations this week—getting the word out quickly.

04-00:15:43
Eardley-Pryor: It sounds to me like you're building off the framework for Project Renewal, which was around the systems thinking of networks and trying to link those networks. But then, having that not just be something that happens within the way the Club's bigger mechanics are working, but to make sure that the grassroots is also networked in a similar way.

04-00:16:02
Cox: That's well put, yes.

04-00:16:03
Eardley-Pryor: But it also is going to require a lot of, as you mentioned, systems infrastructure—building those networks, having places to hang the webbing on, which I assume meant online construction.

04-00:16:17
Cox: Well, it is, and of course, this was right at the cusp of new technologies coming out. By the end of the nineties, of course, we're into a much greater communication systems, and then we've only gone on from there to where we are now, which is just amazing in terms of the online organizing we can do.

04-00:16:37
Eardley-Pryor: Absolutely. So, I have two questions, one is more looking back and the other is more looking forward. The first one is looking back and thinking, how much is Project ACT building on previous efforts that the Club had in trying to train and build up its grassroots? And I'm thinking in particular, in the eighties, this push that was called GREP, the Grassroots Effectiveness Program, that the board of directors really—I know a number of them were really pushing. How much is Project ACT a break from that or a continuation of that in a different way?

04-00:17:09
Eardley-Pryor: I'm not sure there was a conscious connection by this point in 1995 to GREP. That was an earlier effort. It was never fully developed, rolled out, and then sustained, and evolved. So, in a sense, we were starting over again with new personnel driving the process at national and interest at the grassroots level. And the exigence of the Gingrich Congress really gave it a lot of impetus to be accepted and rolled out very fast. One of the institutional involvements that

came out of this was the Sierra Club Training Academy. We wanted to institutionalize our capacity to train volunteers in how to design campaigns, and how to connect with Sierra Club resources, both in their chapter and nationally. And the Training Academy really turned out so many workshops and materials and really helped to build that activist network.

04-00:18:16
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. I'm thinking, too, about Adam Werbach following in your footsteps as the next president of the Club beginning in the spring of '96. I'm thinking about—how much was that need for training also a part of the bigger effort to include younger people suddenly in this Sierra Club during this pregnant time?

04-00:18:36
Cox: Oh, it absolutely was. Adam had really developed his own approach to training and working with high school students even as he came to the board in 1993 to get official connections with the Sierra Club. But I want to end this conversation to give a real shout-out to Bob Bingaman who was the guru for training inside the Sierra Club and has a real belief in empowering grassroots through training in the design of campaigns. Bob brought a lot of his own background and experience with a training academy in Chicago where he had gotten a lot of this information and shared it within the Sierra Club. We adopted and improved and built upon it and then instituted it through the [Sierra Club] Training Academy.

04-00:19:27
Eardley-Pryor: Is this in connection to the Saul Alinsky training methods that come out of Chicago?

04-00:19:31
Cox: Well, Saul Alinsky is part of it, and we had all read his *Rules for Radicals.* I think this [training the Bob Bingaman attended] was called the Northwest Training Academy [Midwest Academy]. I'm not sure, I'll have to check that.

04-00:19:42
Eardley-Pryor: Cool. Well, one last question is thinking about, in looking forward from this moment in '95 and '96 as you're building this Project ACT plan out, it is at this early moment in terms of the technological infrastructure to make this effective. It certainly comes to fore over the next few years. I'm wondering, in your estimation, how successful was Project ACT in helping mobilize people to do this training, especially around the slow development of technology over the next five years until people are really familiar with it?

04-00:20:18
Cox: First of all, it was really successful. I mean, we really had people linked into this all over the country. But let's not forget that all of the chapters already had their own newsletters that were publishing news about the war environment monthly or quarterly at least. And then, they were building their own communication LISTSERVs that could get the word out through email. So,

they were already building infrastructure, and we were setting up training workshops in San Francisco for what we called webmasters, or those that were not in the first generation of developing a web-based kind of competency in their chapters. So, a lot was going on already in addition to the training academy and the national efforts to build out this activist network.

04-00:21:17
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. I just love hearing about how much on the cutting-edge the Sierra Club has been on a number of fronts in terms of general organizing, particularly environmental organizing. And the technological angle is something the Club would always seem to be at the tip of that way of riding that wave, at the very front. So, that's pretty neat.

04-00:21:33
Cox: Yeah.

04-00:21:34
Eardley-Pryor: Well, great. I also have a note here that in June of '95 and—or June through the late summer of '95, there's some sort of event that happens with regard to The Sierra Club Foundation that you are pulled in, as Sierra Club president, to help negotiate. What was going on at the Foundation that required your assistance?

04-00:21:58
Cox: Yes. See, The Sierra Club Foundation was involved in a lawsuit with a sheep-herding cooperative, Ganados del Valle in northern New Mexico, and they were at loggerheads in terms of getting to a settlement. The Foundation had to secure the cooperation of the Sierra Club because the Foundation was holding Sierra Club money in terms of members' donations through the 501(c)(3) arm, which was the Foundation. And the Sierra Club would apply for grants from the Foundation on an annual basis to bring that money over to the Sierra Club to fund its educational activities, public education, behind our campaigns and so forth. So, I was asked, along with Carl Pope, but I would be the principal lead negotiator in the room because I represented the board of directors and could commit the board of the Sierra Club to any agreement with the Foundation for them to be able to settle.

04-00:23:07
So, in September [1995], Carl and I flew out to Albuquerque, New Mexico, rented a car, and drove up to Santa Fe and met with an attorney, who was a mediator, and with representatives from Ganados del Valle. Carl remained in the hotel, and I was talking—able to talk with him by phone during breaks. But it was I, the mediator, and I believe two representatives from Ganados del Valle at the table. I spent a lot of time listening to their story at the beginning, which was important, and they wanted the Sierra Club to hear and appreciate that story. They were the successor to an earlier cooperative that had been in the initial agreement with the Foundation to develop a sustainable mode for using public lands in grazing sheep. Ganados del Valle was the successor

organization, and there were some questions in the Foundation's mind of whether they should be the proper recipient of any settlement money coming out of an earlier dispute over land.

04-00:24:20

So we had to settle that, and then we had to finally agree upon a reasonable amount of money that the Sierra Club could afford for the Foundation to be able to pay out and that would also satisfy the proposals that Ganados was making in terms of what they wanted to do with settlement money, in terms of building out their sustainable sheep-and-wool-making operation there. We did reach a settlement, it's a confidential settlement, and I won't go any further than that. But in the broader context of New Mexico and the southwest, the Sierra Club itself was already developing an EJ [environmental justice] organizing presence, working with not only Hispanic groups in the southwest but with Indigenous tribes such as the Zuni Pueblo tribe in Arizona, New Mexico, and that area. So, we were very sensitive to the importance of being able to settle this with this organization, with Ganados. And quite frankly, I think the governor and the attorney general of New Mexico were very interested in having the Sierra Club get this behind us.

04-00:25:32

Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean by that?

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Cox: Well, they were seeking public office; we wanted to support them. They were Hispanic officeholders, and they wanted the Sierra Club to retain its credibility if we were giving them support, and they very much wanted our support in terms of electoral politics. And so, we were able to do that as the Sierra Club, obviously.

04-00:25:52

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. I can see why this would be an important moment to make sure because it rises up to such a high political level, too. Back down towards the grassroots level of implications, with the ongoing EJ [environmental justice] organizing the Club is doing, what was the result of the settlement in terms of how it spread out within the EJ efforts that the Club had in the southwest?

04-00:26:17

Cox: There were two versions spreading out. In academic literature often, the Ganados dispute was used as an example of racism because of the initial disagreement with the Foundation. I think the Sierra Club came out of it looking a little better in terms of its willingness to support Ganados del Valle with a pretty significant settlement amount. And beyond that, we were beginning, as I said, a presence with an on-the-ground environmental justice organizer in the region. I don't recall the year he started, but a premiere organizer was Andy Bessler who was based in—I think he was in Santa Fe, [Flagstaff] but he was ending up working with a broad coalition of groups in the area on any number of issues impacting justice.

04-00:27:16
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. I'm just overwhelmed at how much you are doing in this year as president of the Sierra Club and try to think how any of it would've been possible without having this be a full-time commitment. It absorbed so much of your time, and of course, it was such a crisis moment as well that you needed to rise to that occasion.

04-00:27:41
Cox: Well, I was early-middle age and felt I had all of the energy in the world, and I was intrigued. It's an incredible opportunity for somebody, a kid growing up in rural West Virginia to find himself in this position where you are involved at a national level on things that matter, and that they were connected to your first love and passion, which was the earth and wandering in those forests above the small village of Bellepoint. I was overjoyed to be able to do this. And it was physically and mentally exhausting at many times. I have to add once again, having the support of my lovely partner Julia [T. Wood], as well as my chairman back at home in the department of communication, that sustained me as well. So, I felt very fortunate and privileged to be able to serve this role, and I was not going to waste any of the time.

04-00:28:50
Eardley-Pryor: I have a note. Of course, we just made mention that as you stepped down from president, the youngest president in Sierra Club history stepped forward, who you had helped cultivate up and welcomed into that national spotlight, and that's Adam Werbach. Share with me what that experience was like within the board of directors of taking—in the wake of your incredibly dynamic presidency—taking almost what seems to me like a bit of a risk in then handing the reins over as president to this very young, up-and-coming leader. So, what was going on within the board of directors on making the decision to shift towards Adam's presidency?

04-00:29:29
Cox: Well, this was not a decision that was being developed by the board as a whole. In fact, there were others on the board that were considering a run for president as my term neared its end. And I recall one evening, before a board meeting the following morning, that I walked over to the hotel room where Adam was staying near our old headquarters on Polk Street to just determine where Adam's interest lay and whom he was supporting as new president. And he informed me that he was going to make a run for president himself. He was still, I think, in his first term on the board—it would have been his first term—and surprised me. I thought he was still a bit too young, didn't have the same experience some of the other directors had. But I couldn't deny that he was a smart, young man who had already proven that he could get things moving, make things happen. And he brought such excitement and energy from the youth grassroots already. Adam had also been mentored by Dave Brower in the early years, and Adam really sought Dave out for counsel and such. I worked with Adam closely inside the Sierra Club. And so, we were both, I

think, supporters of what he wished to do, or willing to give him an opportunity to make his case to the board.

04-00:31:16

The board was somewhat split when Adam announced his candidacy, and there was a lot of discussion, both the pros and cons—obviously, his youth. And a strength would be a strong image for the Sierra Club as the youngest president in the history of the Sierra Club. He was barely out of college. And he's very charismatic, a wonderful speaker, a person one-on-one who's just magnetic. Some of the older directors were hesitant—this was clearly not within the tradition of the Sierra Club—but there were enough of us finally to get a majority vote, and others were willing to go along to make this unanimous, to speak to the world.

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There was one interesting condition. They asked me, since I was close to Adam and we had worked together, not to step away entirely but agree to serve as the vice president of the board in order to be able to work closely with Adam. I don't think Adam needed that, but I think some of the directors that were wavering felt reassured that we would be still working together in a sense.

04-00:32:41

Eardley-Pryor: What did that mean for you? What kind of responsibilities did that mean in the wake of this very time-consuming presidency that you had?

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Cox: Well, the vice president of the board of directors was also the vice president for conservation. It was really defined in that manner. I realized that I did not have the same depth of experience in overseeing the conservation program and all of its nuances and logistics. And I made clear to the members of the Conservation Governance Committee that I would really rely on them for a lot of their advice and helping with a lot of the day-to-day operations. I would travel, and I ended up representing the Sierra Club in different media events around the country when we would release certain reports, for example a report on smart cities and design of cities, or other environmental reports, because I could still garner media attention as a result of being the immediate past president and speaking officially as the vice president for conservation. I recall one of the Conservation Governance Committee meetings we had was on a float trip down the Rio Grande river from—in—not the Rio Grande, but what's the river that runs down from—through Colorado into the Green River in Utah? [Gunnison River]

04-00:34:10

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, the Platte?

04-00:34:13

Cox: I have to check that, and I'm embarrassed to say that's slipping my mind right now. Dave Foreman had organized a lot of his former Earth First! buddies to

provision us along the way. It was a multiday float trip down the river through the Gunnison [Gorge] and onward into Utah. And lying back on those floats, those rafts, Foreman lighting up a big cigar, and we were talking about the conservation issues facing the Club in—that would have been '96, '97, that period, '98. It was after the wars with Gingrich that just felt like a—just to be able to enjoy Sierra Club again in terms of what we were passionate about—to be back in nature and thinking through issues of conservation.

04-00:35:09

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, it's so important to take the time just to enjoy some successes as well as and enjoy the time together in what you've accomplished. And on that note, I have here that in May '97, the Club bestows on you the William [E.] Colby Award in Excellence—for Excellence in Leadership. What did that award mean to you at this time?

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Cox: It meant a great deal that I would be honored in that way. I know a number of people had to organize, to lobby for that award to be given. A young organizer in Michigan, Jan O'Connell, and some of her colleagues had really pushed for recognition. It meant a lot because I think it recognized what I had invested over those previous three to four years in my work on the board, in particular, the two years as president. That was a nice moment, and Julia [T. Wood] was able to be out at the awards banquet that year. I wanted her very much to be part of that culture out there in San Francisco and to meet people that I was working with almost daily.

04-00:36:29

Eardley-Pryor: That's beautiful you could celebrate that moment together. This brings up a question as well, is how are you able to maintain your work on these issues, especially as these continued assaults are happening? How do you remain positive in these times? And is this kind of feedback part of the way that helps boost you up, in seeing others recognize your efforts?

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Cox: Well, not so much the latter. I didn't need that sort of recognition to be doing the work and particularly during that period. I think this was more analogous to a retirement award because I had finished that intense work. But during that period when I was traveling and doing the work as president, I would regularly be flying back home for several days, and often, Julia and I would go to a place we had on Topsail Island on the North Carolina coast to spend time just walking the beach in those ocean breezes and relaxing a bit. I would still be on with phone conference calls with the board or Carl [Pope], but still, it was a home base that was nurturing and particularly with Julia's support.

04-00:37:48

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. I remember Julia telling me, also, the importance of not just having those times together at home but for you to really get back into nature as well and do some backpacking and traveling. I also want to ask about that

in the context of what you're doing in the wake of the—as a time for renewal for yourself, [to ask you] a little bit about some of the international travel that you're able to do in this time period, as well. I believe you told me that there was a trip you made to Alaska in the summer of 1995? What was that experience?

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Cox: Well, Alaska, to the National Wildlife Refuge. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was itself being targeted by the Gingrich Congress to open it to oil drilling. The refuge had been off-limits to oil exploration and drilling because of the Gwich'in Indigenous people and their dependence upon the annual migration of the caribou that came out of Canada into the coastal range of the refuge and their tribal hunting grounds regularly, and the incredible ecosystem that that refuge represented. So, the Sierra Club was running what they called activist outings in different places globally and in the United States. They had one planned for the Arctic Refuge in 1995 that I thought would be not only a way to get back into nature and have a fabulous multiweek adventure in the Brooks Range and traveling through the coastal range, but that I was able to use it to help bring attention to the Arctic by the president going to the Arctic Refuge itself and meeting with people in Fairbanks and then with Gwich'in peoples in their village. But it was refreshing and reenergizing, and I—yes, it certainly was.

04-00:39:50

Eardley-Pryor: I love how with you, Robbie, there's always—it's never just one thing. It's "I'm going on this trip, it's going to help me feel renewed, but it's also going to bring some attention to this political issue that we're dealing with." You're working on multiple fronts in just about everything you do.

04-00:40:03

Cox: Yeah.

04-00:40:04

Eardley-Pryor: I also have a note that there was a conference in the summer of 1996 that was around religious and environmental issues held in the eastern Mediterranean. What was this conference, and what was your experience there?

04-00:40:18

Cox: Well, Carl [Pope] asked me to attend. This was just as I had—no, I was still, I was still president at the time, I think. At any rate, it was organized by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Istanbul—he is the head of the Orthodox branch of Christianity in Europe—Bartholomew II. His vision was to bring together on the millennial anniversary of the revelation of St. John the Divine on the island of Patmos in the Greek islands. For Christians, the New Testament has that concluding book, the Book of Revelation to John. But Bartholomew, the patriarch, believed that there was a strong environmental message in that revelation and wanted to use the millennial anniversary to bring together the key government leaders and officials of the world, the key environmental

leaders of environmental groups throughout the world, and the key religious leaders throughout the world. Catholicism, Judaism, Buddhism, the Dalai Lama's representative, ministers from France, [Timothy] Tim [E.] Wirth from the United States, Associate Secretary for Environment at State Department. And so we met aboard a ship sailing out of Athens through the Greek islands to Istanbul, with conferences and symposia each day on the ship trying to interpret not only that core message of respect for the Earth, but to bring back to bear upon pollution in the Mediterranean, the threats to the environment that peoples were experiencing, and the importance of a shared message, a unified message throughout the world from government, religion, and NGOs [nongovernmental organization] in protection of the Earth. It's so fascinating.

04-00:42:28

Eardley-Pryor: That sounds just amazing, sailing through the Greek isles having this kind of discussion. My memory of Revelation is, the thematic is essentially the end of the Earth and the return of salvation, in the Christian framework. Was this end-of-the-Earth theme something that resonated at this conference? Is that something that was on the table for concern?

04-00:42:51

Cox: Well, in the Book of the Revelation [Revelation 7:3; 9:4], during this moment where judgment is being passed, an angel delivers the message to the people of the Earth. And one of the verses says, in my loose translation, "Those of you that respected the Earth and the trees of the Earth, over to this side. And those of you that despoiled the Earth, over to that side, and you will be condemned forever." I mean, it was a very powerful message. So that was the passage we really drew inspiration from.

04-00:43:28

Eardley-Pryor: Gosh, what an incredible experience there, sailing together with all these people having these kinds of discussions. You had mentioned earlier, too, that you had returned in the late nineties to your love of hiking through Nepal, and that you were able to go to the Kingdom of Lo [Upper Mustang] in 1997. Can you share a little bit about that experience? I think I have a note here, that you shared, that it was a monthlong trek?

04-00:43:56

Cox: Indeed. Well, the Kingdom of—often called by westerners the Kingdom of Mustang—is on the Tibetan Plateau on the border between Nepal and Tibet, occupied then, of course, and now by the Chinese. [Tibet, but Lo was not occupied by the Chinese.] It was ethnically Tibetan. It had been isolated, essentially, from the rest of Nepal for centuries and only nominally controlled in the 1990s. There were no roads into that region at all, only trails, horseback transportation, and had been closed to outsiders for centuries. The government of Nepal finally decided to open it on a limited basis for those that wanted to organize treks into the region. In order to get there, we had to fly from Kathmandu to Pokhara, and from there, in a small helicopter up to Jomsom, which is right on the southern flank of the Himalayas, where we would then

have to hike through the Himalayas through a deep gorge, the Kali Gandaki Gorge, the deepest gorge on Earth, up onto the Tibetan Plateau. And then, another week of hiking through these fairly rugged mountainous trails to get into the main settlement or town that was the regional capital [Lo Manthang] of the Kingdom of Lo. We had to walk all the way back out again, of course.

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But it was striking to see an area and a people prior to electrification, roadbuilding, and all of the commercial development that follows in. Kathmandu, today, is a heavily crowded and polluted city, unfortunately, as the result of a lot of in-migration into the city after years of civil war a decade ago. On the other hand, it was a very poor area because it was not connected, networked with the larger outlets and markets of India, Nepal, and so forth. And so, as always, you feel torn between some kind of romanticized view of an area—and yet, some of the dignity and the core value is still maintained in that case of Tibetan Buddhist lineage.

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But then we had a lot of discussion about micro-hydro technology and ways in which the Sierra Club—I was representing the Sierra Club. This was not a Sierra Club hike, but I was working with my friend Jagat Man Lama to organize this trek. But ways in which NGOs like the Sierra Club and others could support small-scale, micro-hydro-generating on streams and rivers to generate electricity that would not require damming and the mega projects going on in India at the time, to bring some aspect of more sustainable development into the region.

04-00:47:12

Eardley-Pryor: I was just thinking in my head that, as you're doing this trek, this is just a few years after the United Nations has its Brazil Earth Summit in 1992, a few years after of the popularization of the term sustainable development in the late eighties and really spreading in the nineties. So, here you are on these treks talking about ways to implement sustainable development just as that term is really becoming a buzzword in academic circles. There you are on the ground in Nepal. It's great. In thinking about your love and passion for traveling through Nepal and even into Tibet, and your professed experience as a Buddhist, I'm wondering how you brought that sensibility to this ecumenical conference with the eastern Orthodox Christians, in this sailing trip that you did talking about [the Biblical book of] Revelation. What was it that you brought as a Buddhist environmentalist to the table in those meetings?

04-00:48:11

Cox: Well, I'm not sure that it was so much my personal faith that I was bringing but the Sierra Club's interest in developing relationships back in the US with different faith organizations, churches, evangelical Christians. I had, at one point, attended an evangelical Christian conference and met with some of its leaders in order to speak about our shared interest for environmental protection. It also enabled me to be able to develop relations with others

attending the conference that I could bring back for Sierra Club, ability to continue those relationships, build coalitions, and such. I was, however, just personally struck by Robert Thurman, who was a Tibetan Buddhist scholar in the northwest in New York City, and who was giving his interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism and its teachings about sentient beings in the earth, which is a term and a teaching that I was increasingly beginning to study as I was developing my own practice in Buddhism.

04-00:49:30

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. That's beautiful. In the context of these international experiences—your expansion of your mind and understanding of what our role is as creatures, and part of your renewal on these treks back into nature—I have a note of a trip you took to Tanzania to climb Mount Kilimanjaro in the wintertime between '97 and '98. What was that experience like, being and hiking in Africa?

04-00:50:00

Cox: It was fascinating, it was challenging, it was also tragic in two senses. We were witnessing the gradual melting of the snows of Kilimanjaro made famous in literature. I was invited to attend a climb that was organized by a professor at Farmville [Longwood University] which is the town in Virginia where my parents lived, and it was right after my trip to Mustang, to the Kingdom of Lo. At first, I was not going to do it because it was just another extensive commitment to take on apart from my work with the Sierra Club. But I had finished my term as president, and so I was giving myself a little more room to do this.

04-00:50:47

But on the climb itself, we had the second tragedy, and that is that we lost a fairly young, quite accomplished physician, medical physician, who had worked in the Iraq war as a MASH [Mobile Army Surgical Hospital] surgeon and then was a chief surgeon in his hospital back in Farmville. As we neared the summit of Kilimanjaro, he was becoming weaker, but all of us were sensitive to altitude sickness. We would always practice good caution, and we would stop overnight again or send someone back to lower altitude. But he didn't seem to be suffering any altitude sickness. He was exhausted—many of us were by the time we got to the final camp, just below [the summit]. A blizzard was coming in, it would dump about three feet of snow on our route up to the rim of the summit during the night. And our plan was to start our climb at about midnight in order to be able to make it to the summit and then back before sundown when it becomes dangerous to remain on the summit, as it does in the Himalayas. And the surgeon said that he was still feeling tired, and he wanted to—he would forgo the summit attempt. He wanted to stay in camp and rest. And we thought that was actually good, that he should not go any higher. But given that he had no symptoms of altitude, he was just tired, he didn't think he had the strength to do this arduous attempt to the summit.

04-00:52:25
Eardley-Pryor: Especially through three feet of snow.

04-00:52:27
Cox: Yeah, yeah. And so, he remained. So, when the group came back, he seemed even weaker, and so we decided to begin walking down immediately. And for a while, he was okay, and he was walking on his own. But after about a day of descending, he became even weaker and began to require help in terms of leaning on somebody to walk. And finally, it dawned on us, this guy was suffering altitude sickness. I was not the leader of this climb, but I knew enough from my Himalayan experience some of these symptoms, and so I asked him, "What's going on?" And he said, "I wanted to make that summit attempt all along for a long time, so I've been self-medicating to suppress the symptoms of altitude sickness, so that you wouldn't turn me back." And I said, "We're getting you down even faster." And so, we radioed ahead and tried to get some kind of a four-wheel drive vehicle, all-terrain, to meet us about halfway on the descent if they could make it up that far. We got him down, got him in that evacuation vehicle. And they then took him to Arusha, a nearby town from the base camp of Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. There were German physicians there that were treating—they had experience in treating altitude because they were nearby the base camp for Kilimanjaro.

04-00:54:20
By the time that I got down, he seemed to have recovered. He was back at the small hotel and resting. And we had a long conversation about whether he should continue on to the trip, and he said, no, he was going to quit the trip at that point and rest a bit and then fly back home. And we thought that was appropriate at the time. We also, I think, relaxed our guard a little bit because we had gotten him all the way down to the base camp, to lower altitude, much, much lower altitude. Everyone else was recovering any symptoms that they had then. So, we went away for several days and assumed that he was already flying back home. Then we got word that he had died. And I made a point of going to the hospital in Arusha and talking with the surgeons. I said, "Can you tell me what happened?" Because I and another professor had to accompany this man's body back to the United States and the US Embassy was making arrangements for an immediate flight to bring his coffin and the two of us back.

04-00:55:42
Eardley-Pryor: What did the surgeons tell you then?

04-00:55:44
Cox: They said that he, when he came in, he was essentially a walking dead man and that his organs were collapsing. This is when he came back, after he'd rested a while. We had left thinking he was going home, and he got worse before he could fly back home. And the local people took him to the hospital, again, and he collapsed on the table in their surgical room. He was suffering massive cerebral and pulmonary edema, I think both, and affecting all of his

organs. So, I had to accompany his body back to [Washington] DC to meet his widow and then later explained to his colleagues at the hospital. I was able to look at his medical kit. Earlier, I had him describe to me the medicines he was taking as we were descending. I shared those medicines with his colleagues, and they said, "Yes, you're absolutely right, those were in effect suppressing any symptoms of headaches or other altitude sickness, nausea, wanting to lie down and just sleep instead of going on." He was fine all the way up the entire ascent, until he rested before the summit and we started back down, and then the symptoms started breaking through.

04-00:57:16
Eardley-Pryor: Wow. What was the name of this surgeon who passed away?

04-00:57:20
Cox: You know, I do not recall his name at this moment.

04-00:57:27
Eardley-Pryor: How did you internalize this experience? What did you take away from this? It sounds like a harrowing moment.

04-00:57:35
Cox: It was a tragic event. I felt terrible for him and for his widow. I also felt angry that he had misled the group by denying information. We were all trained to look for symptoms of altitude sickness, and I can't deny that I felt angry for this. It was a teaching experience for all of us in terms of our own travel and hiking at altitude, especially. And I felt fortunate all these years being at altitude and not having these symptoms, but that has been seared into my mind to be cautious.

04-00:58:21
Eardley-Pryor: That does make me wonder, too—I mean, these are a monthlong trek in Nepal, a climb in Mount Kilimanjaro, especially in the light of somebody who passed away on the same adventure. How were you, yourself, training? What were you doing in order to make yourself capable of accomplishing these hikes?

04-00:58:37
Cox: Oh, I've always been a regular aerobic runner. And in these days, I am just an aerobic aggressive walker, four miles a day on some hilly terrains and forests. So, I've always realized the importance of aerobic health and have been doing—and when I was Sierra Club president, I had different routes around San Francisco I would run each morning. And that was one of the other things that helped, on the road especially, just to stay energized or nurtured.

04-00:59:14
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, I have here, of course, the note that you also served as president of the Sierra Club again, in 2000 to 2001. Is anything that happens between this period here, where you're sharing some of your experiences hiking and international travel in the wake of this intense presidency you had

in the mid-nineties? Is there anything you want to share about before we get into that 2000 presidency?

04-00:59:42

And I'm thinking in particular, Robbie, what's going on with your teaching? I mean, you had mentioned that in '94, you had a book contract around environmental justice that you knew you wouldn't be able to do because of your activism as [Sierra Club] president. Once you end that time, in this period as president, you come back to teaching again and to scholarship. What is it that's going on in your academic life during this time before you become president again?

04-01:00:06

Cox: Right. Well, I think the most important thing that came out of this experience was my decision to begin to merge my experience with the environmental movement and the importance of communication as the real currency that helps to organize and compete in the public square. So, I developed initially a small honors seminar for advanced students in environmental advocacy that would study a lot of the environmental movement, its advocacy campaigns and lessons of communication that came out of that. I would go on to institutionalize that course in the curriculum as Environmental Communication and begin to develop more of my own research and writing around environmental issues. I had begun to grow an interest in the impact of free trade agreements on environmental regulation in countries that were being put in jeopardy by the so-called neoliberal free trade agreements. So, I did continue my research. But more and more, it was being influenced by my experiences with the Sierra Club and the broader movement.

04-01:01:23

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Do you mind if we take a little break here before we dive into that 2000 presidency?

04-01:01:28

Cox: I think that's good.

04-01:01:29

Eardley-Pryor: Great, thanks.

[break in audio]

04-01:01:33

Eardley-Pryor: So, Robbie, after cycling off the [Sierra Club] board for the required one year, you run again for the board of directors. You're elected nationally by the nationwide membership of the Sierra Club, and immediately you also become president, once again, of the Sierra Club in 2000. What's the story around that and your thoughts on becoming president again?

04-01:01:57
Cox: Sure. Well, the year 2000, of course, was a presidential election, and it was shaping up as [Albert] Gore versus [George W.] Bush, that infamous election in which the Florida hanging chads decision gave the presidency to Bush instead of Gore, [Bill] Clinton's vice president.

04-01:02:18
Eardley-Pryor: Despite the popular vote, again, going to a Democratic candidate.

04-01:02:20
Cox: Despite the popular vote. Well, I think because I had developed so much experience public speaking during my two terms as president and as vice president for conservation, and the travel and my ability to devote the time out on the hustings, that I could end up being very useful to the Sierra Club as the sitting president speaking for the Club in support of a Gore candidacy in advancing our agenda during an election year. And there was not another serious contender for the presidency at that point given those expectations for what the position would require. So, I agreed to serve for one year. I would not seek a second term, which was more traditional for presidents of the Sierra Club.

04-01:03:16
Eardley-Pryor: And that was knowing that you'd be so dedicated to the 2000 election as the president?

04-01:03:22
Cox: That was the principal rationale for my support in becoming president again.

04-01:03:27
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, and it makes sense, too, to think of all the work that you did—in the wake of the [Newt Gingrich Congress's] Contract with America, and your leadership with other national leaders on the war against the environment, that you had captured so much media attention, even speaking on the mall during the twenty-fifth anniversary of Earth Day—to then, in 2000, have the same person back again as the head of the Sierra Club. I mean, even as a media strategy that makes strong sense.

04-01:03:52
Cox: Yeah, sure.

04-01:03:52
Eardley-Pryor: Let alone your leadership, that it was so essential. So, tell me what was the experience like then, of advocating on—what role did you play as president of the Club with regard to the 2000 election?

04-01:04:07
Cox: Well, initially we had to get the endorsement officially of the Sierra Club and that required a two-thirds vote of the board of directors, the fifteen-member board of directors. So, we needed ten votes in order to make a federal election endorsement.

04-01:04:24
Eardley-Pryor: And the context for the election this time, of course, is Al Gore is the Democratic nominee, but Ralph Nader as the Green Party candidate had a very strong backing across the country among left-leaning progressives.

04-01:04:37
Cox: Absolutely, and in fact, that became the dominating tension inside the board of directors. We had moved from my being elected [Sierra Club] president in May [2000] into June and then July, with a board retreat that would occur in Utah up at Alta, at one of the ski lodges. And we knew coming into that July retreat, we were expecting to make a presidential endorsement, but we had experienced dissension within our ranks up to that point. Director [Michael K.] Dorsey, for example, had published an op-ed in media critiquing Gore for his failure to do enough as an environmental leader, he went public with that. David Brower, who was still on the board at this point, was publicly praising Ralph Nader. [David Brower resigned from the board of directors on May 18, 2000, and did not attend the July retreat, but he did praise Nader publicly.] We had several other directors that were leaning toward Nader or not wishing to make an endorsement at all given that it was a choice between Gore and Nader. I was concerned about this board meeting at the retreat because if the Sierra Club fell short inside the board of being able to marshal enough votes to endorse Gore, I felt it would not do well for the Sierra Club's image—Gore, [who wrote] *Earth in the Balance*, principal advocate for the environment in the Clinton administration, and the Sierra Club wouldn't support him in the presidency? So, I felt it was vital that the Sierra Club make this endorsement.

04-01:06:24
And at the retreat, I devoted a great deal of time to talking with other directors including one who was wavering but wanted some acknowledgment of Nader. And I encouraged him to work with our staff to develop a useful resolution that would acknowledge Ralph Nader's contributions that would end up supporting election reform for third-party candidates, trying to give enough for some of Nader's concerns but short of an endorsement of president, clearing the way for that person and one or two others to then be able to support Gore.

04-01:07:08
Eardley-Pryor: And you needed to make these kind of concessions in order to reach this two-thirds [vote] within the board of directors?

04-01:07:13
Cox: Yes, I did. By the night before the vote, I had counted nine directors, and I needed ten. So, at 1 a.m. in the morning, I walked over to Michael Dorsey's room at the ski lodge. He had left his door open. I knew Michael was a late-night guy, and he was working on his laptop, so I asked if I could come in and talk with him. And Michael and I talked for over an hour, into about two or three in the morning, about his concerns. And he ultimately came along to be

able to support Gore. And I give Michael a lot of credit for making a really hard decision at that point.

04-01:08:05
Eardley-Pryor: What were the points that you helped raise that helped him change his mind, especially in the wake of [Michael] coming public with an op-ed earlier in support of Nader?

04-01:08:14
Cox: Well, I think the argument that I had made both to Michael [Dorsey] and to the rest of the board was the argument that Jesse Jackson had made in supporting [Bill] Clinton initially, when Clinton first ran [in 1992]. And Clinton was suspect on the part of many African American as this Arkansas Democrat, and people didn't know him that well. And Jesse Jackson ended up making the argument that Clinton is not a perfect vehicle, but he is the vessel at this moment through which we can work far better than through his opponent to advance our agenda. And I added my own personal story of the experience with Eugene McCarthy and our refusal as the New Left to support Hubert Humphrey against Richard Nixon, and that kind of purist attitude that caused us to be blind to the pragmatic outcome of losing power when it took years and years to regain the momentum toward a more progressive future. In the end, we ended up with twelve directors voting to support an endorsement, two opposed, they were strong Nader supporters, and one of who just abstained. But we got the endorsement. Carl [Pope] immediately called Gore at his home in Tennessee and said, "We've got the endorsement." And Gore very much wanted a public event to receive the Sierra Club's endorsement. So, we agreed that I would fly out the next morning to Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Gore was going to divert his campaign plane from, I think, in Ohio to Grand Rapids.

04-01:10:12
Eardley-Pryor: Wait, just so I'm getting the story on this right. In order to have this public event where the Sierra Club comes forward and says, "We do endorse, officially, Al Gore with the support of our membership," Gore diverted his campaign trail to come and to meet you?

04-01:10:28
Cox: Yes, yes.

04-01:10:29
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. And contextually as well, what else is happening in the Gore campaign? What are the other environmental organizations doing with regard to Nader versus Gore? Where was the Club at in regard to that?

04-01:10:40
Cox: Well, keep in mind that most of the other national environmental organizations were not a 501(c)(4) organization. They could not make an electoral endorsement in a federal race. The League of Conservation Voters, however, was supporting Gore. They were constituted principally as an

election-oriented environmental organization. But in order to make that public announcement, we had to have the vote of the board behind us, so we got that. So, I meet up with Gore in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on the shores of the Grand River flowing by a beautiful park in Grand Rapids. We had a chance to talk a little bit beforehand, to chat and get comfortable, then I would go to the podium with my manuscript speech. And, yeah, I use it only just to look at it occasionally but to give my robust endorsement, and the media was all over this. And when I finished, I picked up my manuscript and turned to Gore and shook his hand after proclaiming, "And now, it's my honor to introduce the next environmental president of the United States." I turned to Gore, shook his hand, and Gore leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Robbie, if you'll put my speech back on the podium before you leave."

04-01:12:10
Eardley-Pryor: You had grabbed it off the podium?

04-01:12:12
Cox: I did. [laughter] I did.

04-01:12:12
Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

04-01:12:14
Cox: And, of course, he gave just a passionate, enthralling speech in support of the environment. And CNN ran that clip all day that day, and it got wide publicity. So, the Sierra Club's endorsement mattered in his campaign, ultimately not quite enough, but for the moment, we were still fighting the good fight.

04-01:12:43
Eardley-Pryor: Where do you think the bulk of the membership for the Club was at with regard to Gore versus Nader?

04-01:12:52
Cox: Well, we did a survey of our chapters. Two-thirds of all of our chapters responded to our question, whom do you support, would you support an endorsement of this candidate or that? And thirty-nine of the chapters responded with the support for Gore. One chapter urged support for Nader, and that was Alabama. [laughs] We had strong support from grassroots Sierra Club members.

04-01:13:28
Eardley-Pryor: That's really cool. After earning this endorsement and then delivering it to great media attention, what then was your role as president to help encourage and get that endorsement spread out further?

04-01:13:42
Cox: Well, I, shortly thereafter, went on the road with the singer Melissa Etheridge to host some concert events that would target Nader voters. So, here was the

strategy. We were surrogates for Gore, speaking for him out in key swing states, so that the campaign didn't have to devote their resources there.

04-01:14:08

Eardley-Pryor: Was this something you developed in concert with the Gore campaign, or was this something that the Club organized?

04-01:14:14

Cox: No, we were coordinating with the Gore campaign, and they were telling us, "We need Robbie out there speaking for Gore in traditionally Democratic states but where Nader is threatening to peel support away from Gore in the general election, giving states like Oregon, Washington state, Minnesota to Nader. So, the idea was to draw upon Melissa Etheridge's appeal to progressive young voters and advertise concerts, and then I, along with Elizabeth Birch of the Human Rights Campaign, who was its executive director, and the head of NARAL [Alice Germond, the executive vice president of the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League], the abortion rights organization, and later, Gloria Steinem would join us. So, we started in Seattle, a sold-out concert. Melissa is doing her wonderful guitar and singing, and then pausing and making her own personal plea, and then saying, "And the president of the Sierra Club is with us." And so each of us, Alice, I, and Elizabeth had like five minutes each, interspersed with Melissa's singing, to make our pitch. And I would speak to the importance of the appointments of the Supreme Court in terms of the rights that were vital to that audience in front of us, abortion rights particularly. And then we continued on to Portland with another concert in the massive student athletic stadium at night.

04-01:16:06

And I remember walking out on the stage to speak, and the spotlights were on the stage, and I couldn't see the audience at all. It was like a two- or three-tiered kind of stadium for basketball for Portland State University. It was an unusual speaking situation. I remember standing just backstage before I went on, and Melissa [Etheridge] was also getting ready to go out to sing—one of our other speakers was out at the moment—and I could see her pacing back and forth obviously very nervous. And then, at one point, her assistant who tunes her guitar steps up to the entrance to the stage and holds out the strap of the guitar up and the guitar down in position. And Melissa suddenly turned from her pacing, walked straight toward the stage with one arm going to the strap, the other arm grabbing the guitar, and she's out on the stage ready to sing. Traveling with her was an experience. Going through airport security was also an experience.

04-01:17:15

Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean?

04-01:17:16
Cox: Well, I mean she self-describes as a rocker. She was wearing leather with metal and so forth, and she was setting off all the alarms at the security gates. And one of the young women who was a security guard was apologizing and saying, "Melissa, I love you, I love you, but I've got to pat you down." [laughs]

04-01:17:38
Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

04-01:17:39
Cox: Well, she did the first two events in Seattle and Portland, then she left the tour. And then Gloria Steinem met us in Minneapolis, and we picked up a couple of other swing states where Nader's appeal was threatening to take votes from Gore.

04-01:17:57
Eardley-Pryor: What was the experience of working with Gloria Steinem? I mean, she's such a legend of the women's rights movement.

04-01:18:03
Cox: She's very impressive. She was very self-contained. I remember that she said that she would never support Nader because she considered him such a sexist, that when she met Nader on some kind of important issue event and they were both testifying, the only comment Nader made to her was something about her shoes. [laughs] And she said, "That was it with Ralph. It's kind of insulting."

04-01:18:38
Eardley-Pryor: What a wild experience. You mentioned traveling and just chatting with these folks. Being on a tour like that, what was that experience like, just socially?

04-01:18:49
Cox: Well, it was interesting. In Portland, Al Gore's—one of his daughters joined us, went on stage. And back at the hotel—this is like midnight, and I'm about ready to crash, and I've been on the road for a while. Melissa is hyped up from the performance or the concert, and so she's getting up with Gore's daughter and a couple of other friends who met there, they're going out to club for the rest of the night. And the next day, we're trying to make a run to the airport, and the problem was getting somebody to go wake up Melissa.

04-01:19:31
Eardley-Pryor: [laughs] That's traveling with a rock star. Those are good stories. Well, that's great. So also, I have a note here that in addition to this advocacy you're doing out on tours in these important—not necessarily swing states, but to secure the Democratic vote on behalf of Gore in these important states, that you're also building alliances with labor leaders on behalf of the Sierra Club. What's the story with that? And maybe you can share a little bit of the broader strategic story of why the Club is making these efforts, and how that happened?

04-01:20:07

Cox: Yeah, we had been developing these relationships with the United Steelworkers, the SEIU [Service Employees International Union]—the basically domestic workers in hotels, and so forth—and others. At one point, we were trying to draft some kind of compromise where we could bring labor and green groups together on a climate bill. John Sweeney, who was the head of the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations] at the time, invited labor leaders and me and a couple of other environmental leaders to meet in Washington [DC] to see if we could work out a draft agreement. Now, this had happened a little earlier before the Gore campaign started. And we thought we had reached an agreement where we were developing what we called "principles of a just transition" that acknowledged that in certain energy sectors like coal mining, we would have to spend particular attention to ensuring justice for those workers. For example, giving them immediate seniority in new energy sectors to transfer them into related employment or educational benefits for either them or their children, retraining if necessary. And we had a draft agreement until it came to the attention of Richard Trumka, who was the secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO at the time. He's now currently the president of AFL-CIO. Trumka had come up through the ranks with the United Mine Workers [of America] working in Virginia and West Virginia and was opposed to any such agreement on a climate bill that would phase out fossil fuels. And he is famously known for saying to Sweeney and to our BlueGreen [Alliance] group, "I'm not going to be the labor leader that turns the light out on coal workers."

04-01:22:14

Eardley-Pryor: Why was it important for the Sierra Club to get engaged with BlueGreen groups in the late nineties and especially around the 2000 campaign?

04-01:22:23

Cox: Well, I mean, think about the political constituents involved in labor and workers and environmentalists joining together to explode the old myth of jobs versus the environment. And there were so many new academic studies that were emerging that were demonstrating that states with strong environmental regulations were among those economically that were prospering and where employment was good. We had data, but it was particularly a challenge with climate because of fossil fuel industries that would be impacted by any true clean energy economy. But politically and strategically, it made sense to try to forge coalitions with labor unions and the environment on areas where we could work together and cooperate and agree to disagree in other areas. For example, and we'll get to it in a moment perhaps, but labor wanted our help in fighting these free trade agreements because they were torpedoing regulations that protected workers and labor rights in many nations that signed free trade agreements. That allowed corporations then to override local environmental law.

04-01:23:45
Eardley-Pryor: So, they saw that as an avenue that, "If we can get the environmentalists to come together because they're concerned about these environmental regulations internationally, as are our workers, let's both get together and have better political clout collectively."

04-01:23:57
Cox: Correct. So, all of this was happening as we were building toward the Gore campaign. And as the result, almost immediately, I was going on a ten-day tour through the country and talking both with labor and with swing votes in the Congress on free trade agreements, and then ending in Los Angeles at the Democratic National Convention just weeks later, in probably August, at that point, when the Democrats had their nominating convention.

04-01:24:29
Eardley-Pryor: Where was that convention held for 2000?

04-01:24:32
Cox: Los Angeles. Right. So, I was invited to be on a panel at that point with George Becker, president of the Steelworkers, and with Jesse Jackson Jr., who was running for Congress or just in Congress, and then with James Carville, the political guru for Bill Clinton.

04-01:24:55
Eardley-Pryor: That's a very dynamic panel.

04-01:24:57
Cox: It was sponsored by People for the American Way, a liberal advocacy group that worked with the elections. I remember afterward that Mick Jagger's former girlfriend, Bianca, came up to me and wanted my phone number, that she had some issues she wanted advice on, dealing with the environment.

04-01:25:19
Eardley-Pryor: So, you can say that Bianca Jagger asked for your phone number.

04-01:25:22
Cox: I can actually say more than that. When I went back to UNC, I was hosting one of my graduate seminars in my office, and my phone rang. And I excused myself to the seven or eight students who were with me, and I said, "Let me just answer it, see who it is," because I was still president of the Sierra Club, so I couldn't not answer the phone. I answered the phone and it's Bianca Jagger. She's in a hotel in Miami, in a room, and she says, "Hi, Robbie, I have this question about—" She had some issue in Florida she was really involved with, she was an advocate for, and she was a strong environmentalist. And I said, "One moment," and I turned in my seminar, and I said, "You have to excuse me for a moment, Bianca Jagger is on the phone and—" [laughs] So I went back, and we talked a little bit, but she never called me again. I don't know why.

04-01:26:21
Eardley-Pryor: That's so good. I'm sure your students were thinking you have now elevated to rock star status.

04-01:26:25
Cox: Well, my teaching evaluations went up that semester. [laughter]

04-01:26:30
Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

04-01:26:31
Cox: Yeah, there are a few moments here and there that are just fun and a lot of joy in doing this work. And then it gets serious again.

04-01:26:39
Eardley-Pryor: Well, share if you would, what your experience was being at the Democratic National Convention. Had you ever attended a convention before?

04-01:26:46
Cox: I had not. This was the first convention I attended. I had to have my credentials, wearing that tag at all times to be admitted to the floor and so forth.

04-01:26:58
Eardley-Pryor: What was the experience like, in thinking about how political machinery operates?

04-01:27:02
Cox: Well, I was constantly being introduced to meeting other leaders there, Hollywood people, labor people, other environmental leaders. And so, it was good to continue to nurture relationships so that working together, subsequently, is easier because you've developed a personal bond, or they know that you're somebody you can trust or respect. So, just doing that networking was important. Also, just the nominating process and the requirement to have the total delegate votes necessary for a nomination. Fascinating experience.

04-01:27:41
Eardley-Pryor: Was there still any hangover with regard to Gore versus Nader at this time? I mean, this is among the people that are there to sponsor a Democratic Convention. I imagine it's pretty much to promote their candidate. But was there still any kind of discourse happening within the Democrats about alliances or allegiances with the Green Party?

04-01:28:03
Cox: There were attempts to negotiate, for Gore's campaign to negotiate with Nader's people. And at one point, Nader had actually pledged to Gore that he would not campaign in any state that would affect Gore's ability to win that state. If it was a state that would ordinarily have gone for Gore, Nader was not going to spoil the playing field. He would only campaign in states that Gore

was going to lose. And then he broke his word and campaigned in Florida in the days leading up to the election. Nader was unforgiving of the Sierra Club's endorsement of Gore, and in his book about the campaign called *Crashing the Party*, Nader explicitly denounces not only the Sierra Club but me, by name, for endorsing Gore and not supporting him, and he went through his spiel about not being—Gore not being the true environmentalist and such.

04-01:29:18
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, Nader seems like he remained unapologetic.

04-01:29:21
Cox: Yeah, he remained unapologetic.

04-01:29:25
Eardley-Pryor: I'm thinking about November of 2000, and then the ensuing weeks in the wake of this hung election, this debated election. What was your experience, having spent so much of the previous year on the campaign trail and pushing on behalf of Al Gore? What was your experience of witnessing Election Day and then the debates that happened afterwards to decide Florida?

04-01:29:49
Cox: It's hard to describe the depth of disappointment and particularly the way in which it happened. Winning the popular vote, and then the maneuverings that occurred around the vote count in Florida, and the intervention of the Supreme Court and such. It took a while to get over this. But I must say that Al Gore set an example of graciousness with his concession speech, finally, when it became clear there was no way to continue to appeal. He urged the people to come together and to respect the constitutional, peaceful transfer of power and to give the new president his due and opportunity to serve in the office.

04-01:30:40
Eardley-Pryor: What were the thoughts within the Club, especially among the board, and the executive committee, and Carl [Pope]'s side, of how to then respond in the wake of Gore's loss?

04-01:30:51
Cox: Well, I think we, after taking a deep breath, knew that we had to develop our defensive strategic capacities again after the fights during the Gingrich Congress, and continue building an activist training, developing our media and particularly all of the new communication infrastructure and such, and gearing up for further fights coming out of the White House, this time when we no longer had the [US] presidency. So, you pick yourself up and you continue to try to advance your mission.

04-01:31:35
Eardley-Pryor: In what ways did the efforts you had in the mid-nineties—to restructure the Club with Project Renewal, and then especially Project ACT to revitalize grassroots networking—what role do you think those played in positioning the

Club in the wake of Gore's loss and the rise of George W. Bush to confront that new challenge?

04-01:31:56
Cox: Well, we had now developed the channels of communication and were far better equipped to get the word out instantly to frame priority campaigns, and the importance of timing to be involved on an issue when a decision was being made. We continued to respond in the exigence of each week in terms of administrative actions and work in the Congress, supporting the Senate particularly, oftentimes depending upon the filibuster to block efforts to open the Arctic Wildlife Refuge again, something that perennially Republicans keep trying to do.

04-01:32:51
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, especially again—once again, now, in 2020.

04-01:32:54
Cox: But we were also continuing to develop our own environmental justice relationships and were beginning to engage in what we called "toxic tours."

04-01:33:09
Eardley-Pryor: Now share, if you would, what that means—and, in particular, I'm thinking in light of how, at this time, you're mentoring a young woman named Phaedra Pezzullo as a PhD student, as a PhD candidate at UNC. So, what does toxic tours mean, and what were you engaged in?

04-01:33:26
Cox: Sure. Well, the term really arose as impacted communities, often people of color or low-income communities that were often the sites for highly polluting intensive industries, such as oil refineries or petrochemical plants or hazardous waste incinerators and disposals. My graduate student Phaedra Pezzullo had been studying Warren County [North Carolina] and PCB [polychlorinated biphenyl] hazardous wastes fill, often called the birth of the environmental justice movement. She would go on to develop a book that studied the wider phenomenon of what she labeled toxic tours. I think the phrase had emerged here and there but below the surface; it wasn't receiving a lot of media attention. Her book [Phaedra Carmen Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice*, University Alabama Press; First edition (May 10, 2009)] ended up winning an academic award for being an innovative study of environmental activism. So, a toxic tour is an effort to bring outside groups, who have resources or power along with media attention, into communities that are relatively powerless or have less access to resources and media in order to shine a spotlight there, or to develop a relationship that's mutually beneficial.

04-01:34:56
Eardley-Pryor: The way you described it really makes me think about the experience you had, for example, with Joe Grimsley in bringing people in power to the wilderness or to the outdoors, the way that Brower would encourage people to run the

rivers in order to protect them and to stop dams. But here, it is on an environmental justice front to do a toxic tour.

04-01:35:16

Cox: Well, and you acknowledged the right lineage because we were all brought up on David Brower's stories of the Grand Canyon dam and then the proposals to dam the Grand Canyon. And his maxim always was, "To protect these places, you need to bring people to them," so that they see what's at stake and they develop their own appreciation and love of that natural area. And so, a toxic tour takes that into these communities. So, I had an opportunity to ask Phaedra [Pezzullo] to join the Sierra Club in one of its toxic tours that it was planning [the board of directors visited a *colonias* outside Matamoros, Mexico, in the NAFTA maquiladora zone, in February 2001]. So, I can talk about that if you wish.

04-01:36:00

Eardley-Pryor: Yes, please. What was it? Where did you go?

04-01:36:03

Cox: Well, this was planned for Matamoros, Mexico, which is a community across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, Texas, in the southeastern part of the Texas-Mexico boundary. The Rio Grande had really been so diverted by agricultural interests all along its thousands of miles route that by the time it got to the divide between Matamoros and Brownsville, just separated by bridge, it becomes just a small stream that was left before it emptied into the Gulf of Mexico. But Matamoros was distinctive in the sense that it was part of the *maquiladora* zone. *Maquiladoras* are these free trade industries where regulations are lax or nonexistent, and so US corporations under NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] were relocating across the border into northern Mexico in these *maquiladoras* zones because of less regulation. Now, as a result of that, they were offering employment opportunities in Mexico, low wages but certainly higher than many received in their villages. And so, a lot of job-seeking Mexicans would be coming to these *maquiladoras* but setting up *colonias*, or illegal encampments along the river, because they couldn't afford housing. Matamoros had not provided infrastructure such as clean water or sewage disposal.

04-01:37:42

And so, these *colonias* were prime examples of essentially environmental racism, where they were surviving by pulling water out of a polluted Rio Grande River where sewage was also going in. And children picking through big mounds of garbage that were smoking from the decay in the center, and looking for tin cans or something they could sell to some local collector of these items who would then repurpose them and sell to tourists as art objects or something, or recycle them and sell to refineries for money. It was a despairing situation.

04-01:38:29

A [Sierra Club] board member with us, who would later become president, Lisa Renstrom, had grown up as a young child in Mexico with her father, who owned a hotel in Mexico, and she was fluent in Spanish. And so, I was walking along with Lisa through the *colonias*, and she began speaking Spanish to some of the residents there. And they were surprised that this Anglo group who was touring through their dirt streets with dogs playing and children in the dirt playing, and they just opened up to her and described their stories and the parents' worries about their children playing in the—swimming in the rivers that are polluted and the difficulty getting clean water, and the kind of wages they were getting were not enough for them to move in any better place. So, we were able to bring back those experiences and continue in our international relations in speaking with Mexican officials and in our work in terms of free trade agreements, lobbying fiercely to begin strengthening the agreements in these free trade agreements for protection of environmental and worker and health regulations, instead of just the total exploitation of "cheap labor."

04-01:39:57

Eardley-Pryor: It sounds to me like, the way you're framing how these *colonias* are developing, particularly in this particular location—it really seems like something that would have exploded in the wake of the 1992 passage of NAFTA. And here are, now, finally the consequences that you can see.

04-01:40:13

Cox: Precisely.

04-01:40:14

Eardley-Pryor: And you had also mentioned that in this time period, as well through the late nineties, you're getting an increasing interest in the neoliberal framing of free trade in your academic work. And here you are bringing it back into your Sierra Club work as well.

04-01:40:30

Cox: I was, and part of that was also because the Sierra Club had invested in staff resources in Washington, DC, with a trade representative that would be working on the [Capitol] Hill in DC and with our allies who were advocates for fair trade, instead of free trade. Because we were finding that progressive groups had common cause to work together to reform these neoliberal trade agreements that were really just starting to come into their own. The United States was currently negotiating a Free Trade [Area] of the Americas that would eliminate tariffs throughout both the northern and southern hemispheres and through Central America as well. And we found common cause with Laurie Wallace and some of the other big advocates on fair trade and began to plan events together and mobilized our forces at major rallies and to show up at free trade conferences to be heard.

04-01:41:42
Eardley-Pryor: Can you share an example of some sort of event that you might do in collaboration around free trade issues?

04-01:41:48
Cox: Sure, the Summit of the Americas that brought together negotiators from the different countries to attempt to draft a Free Trade [Area] of the Americas agreement, the FTAA. All of the environmental and progressive trade groups came together to target that meeting. It was held in Québec City in the French-speaking province of Québec, Canada. And there were massive demonstrations planned surrounding the buildings where the trade negotiators were. I remember being stopped at the airport when I flew into Montréal and pulled aside by the security. They had asked me what my purpose in visiting Canada was, and I said, "I represent the Sierra Club of the United States. I'm attending the free trade agreement." And they apparently had the Sierra Club on a special list. They went through all of my papers, my briefcases, computer, and then finally waved me on. Others were reporting similar attempts.

04-01:43:00
Eardley-Pryor: Was this just an intimidation tactic?

04-01:43:03
Cox: Intimidation tactic. The area around the negotiators in Québec was heavily militarized. And there were also internal divisions within the opponents. On the one hand, Sierra Club and other free trade groups were peaceful in engaging in lawful assemblies of large marches and peaceful demonstrations. But there had also, by that point—after Seattle [street protests at the World Trade Organization's Ministerial Conference in Seattle in 1999], where the free trade discussions really became known as the Battle of Seattle.

04-01:43:44
Eardley-Pryor: That's what I was going to ask you about. When did Seattle happen, and what kind of echoes were there with regard to that and Montréal for you?

04-01:43:50
Cox: Well, as a result of that [Seattle] experience, more radical groups were starting to form that were also showing up in the mist of the larger demonstrations. Some were called "black bloc" protesters—anarchists and others that would go out and seek to target either the police or to destroy property. And we knew that going in, and so some of the march planners were meeting each of the different blocs. There were some black bloc anarchists. Some were willing to engage in civil disobedience such as sit-ins, refusal to leave when ordered. And then some, like the Sierra Club, we were under the regulation that we would engage in no unlawful activity in pursuit of our goals. That had been a longstanding rule of the Sierra Club. And so, we thought we had an agreement among the three divisions where the black bloc anarchist agreed to be at a certain zone within the city and not overlap the other two zones. And the other two—

04-01:44:57
Eardley-Pryor: Now, were these discussions that the leaders of these different factions would come together and say, "All right, you guys take these blocks, you guys take those blocks"?

04-01:45:05
Cox: That's pretty much it. We attempted this at least. We thought we had an agreement, and yet when the moment came at the apex of the march when we were assembled at a strategic spot, suddenly black bloc anarchists charged into the midst of the peaceful demonstrators and were—had become provocateurs. And at that point, the police responded with tear gas and pushing back on the crowd, and I got tear-gassed and—

04-01:45:39
Eardley-Pryor: Were you in this crowd? What happened?

04-01:45:42
Cox: Well, my eyes started suffering for one thing. I learned the effects of tear gas. And so, we were all trying to pull back to try to get separation again from the black bloc anarchist, pulled back into a peaceful zone, and the civil people—in civil disobedience, peaceful civil disobedience—they were upset because the anarchists were basically intruding on them, and they were being associated with the more violent of ones.

04-01:46:12
Eardley-Pryor: And being gassed because of it.

04-01:46:13
Cox: And being gassed at the same time. Everybody was gassed basically. That was an experience.

04-01:46:20
Eardley-Pryor: What do you think comes out of those kinds of moments? I mean, it clearly would've gotten attention, it would've got media attention. Do you think there is a role for that kind of civil disobedience?

04-01:46:35
Cox: Well, I think it is in this sense—well, not the black bloc role. I think that diverts from the message. But bringing attention through the media to the arguments against neoliberal free trade gets those arguments in circulation in the public square, so they're talked about in newspapers, in academic papers, in conferences, on the Hill in lobbying. The Free Trade of the Americas negotiations ultimately ended in failure. It could never get agreement with all of the disparate countries in the two hemispheres. But that would not be until about five years later.

04-01:47:17
Eardley-Pryor: So, in some ways, you can think that the Sierra Club's efforts in what it wanted to accomplish were successful in the fact that the free trade agreement collapsed.

04-01:47:25

Cox: It did collapse, but it collapsed frankly from a lot of other trade-related issues. Hugo Chavez [former president] of Venezuela, for example, opposed it, and a couple of other Latin American countries were suspicious of this as a neocolonial effort of the United States. They were protective of their sovereignty and feared that the US would have too much hegemony. So, I don't want to give the Sierra Club overdue credit. We helped raise the issue on important matters that became part of the conversation, but the struggle would go on for some years before the final collapse of the FTAA.

04-01:48:06

Eardley-Pryor: With regard to these experiences here in free trade, you mentioned a toxic tour trip down to Mexico. Here you are talking about the entire NAFTA area in Québec, Canada. I have a note you also traveled to Mexico to meet with the [then-Mexican] president-elect Vicente Fox? What's the story behind this visit? Did you go on behalf of the Sierra Club, in your role with the Club?

04-01:48:32

Cox: I did. I was still president of the Club at this time. The Sierra Club was working with Amnesty International on a joint international campaign that was called Defending The Defenders. That is to say that throughout the world, environmental defenders were being harassed or killed in some cases by their governments. And—

04-01:48:56

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, I remember Chico Mendes, for example.

04-01:48:58

Cox: Yeah, what's your example?

04-01:48:59

Eardley-Pryor: Chico Mendes, I believe.

04-01:49:01

Cox: Chico Mendes, yes, absolutely. And so, the Sierra Club had the capacity to bring a lot of media attention and mobilize support in the United States, and so we developed a joint campaign. Vicente Fox had just been elected president of Mexico. He was still president-elect. He had not yet taken office. So, he made a trip to Washington, DC, for the express purpose of meeting with American nongovernment organizations, NGOs, that were working in Mexico. And he wanted to develop better relationships between Mexico and US NGOs because Mexico benefited from a lot of that work—health, literacy, advice on safety issues, the environment. And so, he wanted to develop good relationships and sought a meeting with the heads of major US NGOs.

04-01:50:00

So, I was invited by the Mexican ambassador to the US, since I was president of the Sierra Club. And our agenda in that meeting was—as part of the campaign with Amnesty [International] was to defend one of the defenders of the forest in Mexico. His name was Rodolfo Montiel [Flores], who was

basically a local farmer in a rural village, but large corporate interests were coming into the region's forests and logging them for export for manufacturers to make ski poles and other consumer goods. But the local villagers depended upon those forests for sustainable forestry, for fuel and cooking supply and repurposing some of the wood for small products. And there was dispute over the ownership of those forests. The Mexican government asserted its control over them, the villagers argued they were locally owned, and Rodolfo and his colleagues developed local preservation groups to defend the forest against these logging operations. And the government of Mexico had them arrested, and we heard reports of being tortured to try to break the resistance in these regions, in order to clear the way under NAFTA for some of these US corporations to log those areas. So, our agenda along with Amnesty [International] was to bring the case of Rodolfo and colleagues to the attention of Vicente Fox and to plead with him to reopen their case and to appreciate that they had been framed, that they were being harassed in prison, and to grant them release. And apparently, we had success in that case. When he became president, he did order their release.

04-01:52:07
Eardley-Pryor: What was that experience like of being in that meeting?

04-01:52:11
Cox: Well, it was unusual. I never had much opportunity. I had talked with [Bill] Clinton and with [Al] Gore, but never a foreign president. Some foreign leaders here and there on the trip in the Mediterranean with the Ecumenical Patriarch, but the president of the country next to the United States, that was—I was appropriately awed by the experience, but he was very gracious. He listened to our plea; his aides took notes. We developed inter-staff relationships so that the Sierra Club could follow up with his staff in order to get the information, the proper names and identities and the legal briefs in their behalf.

04-01:52:59
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. I know that the Sierra Club has created a Canadian branch, so there's a Canadian chapter of the Sierra Club, but not so in Mexico. I'm wondering with the Sierra Club coming down and advocating on behalf of these environmentalists in Mexico, if that was ever part of the dialogue within the board of directors about creating a Mexican chapter for the Sierra Club, beyond the Canadian and American boundaries?

04-01:53:25
Cox: Sure. Well, that question had arisen much earlier in Sierra Club's history, I think most likely at the time when Sierrans in Canada wished to develop their own chapter. That didn't present the same kind of problems because they were essentially a similar culture, English-speaking, at least the parts of the country that were organizing chapters initially, like British Columbia. But the question then naturally arose as our [Sierra Club] International Committee worked with NGOs around the world and some of them inquired if they could form Sierra

Club chapters. We finally decided, and I think received good advice from our colleagues in other countries that, no, this was not the Sierra Club's business to do this. This would be viewed as a neocolonial effort or imperialist effort. That the Sierra Club's role was to support the Indigenous work and NGOs within those nations. And we made a very distinct, long-lasting decision decades earlier not to do that, but to be supportive as we were in the case with Vicente Fox.

04-01:54:40

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. And it's fascinating, too, to think that the Club for so many years was so focused on preservation efforts within the United States that there are accusations historically that supporters of the Club were not taking the concerns of those who used the forests sustainably for their own benefits, who had been there for such a long time. And instead, the federal government would come in and seize these lands to preserve them in different ways. And yet now, here you are representing the Sierra Club in Mexico on behalf of those who do use this subsistence forestry, in opposition to the state coming in.

04-01:55:19

Cox: Well, and we were also learning. We were learning lessons from World Wildlife [Fund] working in India and other countries where they were learning that the US model for national parks where people were excluded was not an appropriate model internationally, where people had grown up in villages within and as part of those living ecosystems. And I think the Sierra Club was learning more about that in terms of developing relationships with local communities around national forests and supporting efforts, for example, in repurposing native forest wood for other purposes, such as musical instruments or crafts or furniture, as opposed to industrial logging.

04-01:56:09

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. At the end of this very intense time again as president of the Club—that one-year term [2000–2001], this intense time to help to promote the Gore campaign, and then in the wake of that up through the spring of 2001—after that point, after you stepped down from this intense year of presidency, what roles did you take on within the Club to remain active within it, as you were still on the board of directors?

04-01:56:39

Cox: Well, one initiative that occurred to the Club—particularly to our key climate staff person, Dan Weiss in Washington, DC—that we would attempt to target Ford Motor Company for its role in producing gas-guzzling cars. Basically because, by this point, hybrids were beginning to come on to the scene. Dan had always made the argument that the single biggest step the United States could take to curb global warming was to increase the gas mileage—miles per gallon of America's auto fleet. And in order to do that, we had to target both the administration and Congress that set the CAFE standards [Corporate Average Fuel Economy], the corporate auto fuel average, and to the

carmakers themselves to encourage them that there was a market opening for more hybrid vehicles as well as more efficient gas-engine cars. So, a particular tactic used to further that overall strategy was to attempt to gain media attention for the Sierra Club's campaign by announcing that its former president was being petitioned to run for the board of directors of Ford Motor Company and to be a voice on Ford's own board of directors in urging it to take this more sustainable pathway.

04-01:58:15

Eardley-Pryor: What were your thoughts on trying to become a member of the Ford Motor Company board of directors?

04-01:58:20

Cox: Well, in talking with Julia [T. Wood], one of the thoughts that occurred was that they certainly paid their directors a lot of money, unlike the Sierra Club, which pays nothing but covers your travel expenses. Well, I had to go through a lengthy process of petitioning to be listed on the ballot for the board of directors, and that would take some months, and we knew that. We also knew honestly that, in the end, they were not going to let the former president of the Sierra Club anywhere near the board of directors. But we also knew we had a window of three to five months where we could work with the media. The media loved the story. This was a nice, juicy hook they can hang a story on—a Sierra Club former president running for Ford's board of directors. So, Maria Bartiromo [CNBC] interviewed me on her TV program, financial newspapers covered me. And so, we were just getting our message out there as much as we could, sitting back, enjoying, and having a lot of fun with this initiative until finally, I received a very polite letter from the secretary of the board announcing that I would not be listed on the current ballot for the board.

04-01:59:39

Eardley-Pryor: That's, still, a great story with great political strategy involved in that, too. And then, sure enough, under the [Barack] Obama administration, they are able to push for those CAFE standards, the higher fuel efficiency, as a part of its broader climate efforts, despite now the [Donald] Trump administration rolling it back.

04-01:59:56

Cox: Well, the Trump administration has not succeeded yet in rolling that back. Not only are there lawsuits surrounding this—ill-supported in terms of the science behind the regulation, that it faces severe court battles, but California and other states have entered into an agreement with several of the big carmakers to respect the original [Obama-era CAFE] standards, or a progressive version as opposed to the Trump standards that would really dummy down those standards. So, we're in the midst of this gigantic battle at this point with the Trump administration.

04-02:00:38
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, and my anticipation is that that battle there under the California standards will rise to the Supreme Court, which makes it even more prescient of what will happen, in the wake of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's passing this last weekend, to the Supreme Court. That's great context.

04-02:00:54
Cox: Yeah, point well taken.

04-02:00:56
Eardley-Pryor: Well, Robbie, let's take a little break here before we dive back into your next round—your third term as president or other events that happened between this moment of you making the effort to get on Ford Motor Company's and then your third term—for what's happening in the early 2000s. Let's just take a little break here, if you don't mind.

04-02:01:16
Cox: Yeah, we will do that.

[break in audio]

04-02:01:21
Eardley-Pryor: Great, Robbie. So, I would love to hear some of the stories—before you regained the presidency of the Sierra Club in the later part of the 2000s—of the early part of the 2000s. I understand that you and the Sierra Club itself were targeted by a group that was opposed to domestic immigration in the United States. And these anti-immigration folks often were mobilized by a desire to control population—population control and immigration seem to be a focal point for them. So, in order for us to have this conversation of what happened in the 2000s, the Sierra Club does have this deep connection to overpopulation concerns that stretch back to Paul [R.] Ehrlich's book, *The Population Bomb* that was published by the Club in '68, and then onward as the Club's negotiating its relationship on population over time. Can you share a little bit about your understanding of the Club's stances on population and immigration as context to what happened in the early 2000s?

04-02:02:18
Cox: Sure. Well, you're correct in that the Sierra Club has long had an interest in world population growth and its relationship to the environment. By the early nineties, we had been working particularly in light of the Cairo conference [United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, in September 1994] that developed some of the best principles for addressing population growth, on global population stabilization, following the guidelines of women's empowerment, access to health care, literacy, the family planning resources—those variables usually associated with gradual stabilization of a nation's population. We had done good work in that area, but by the 1990s, forces in the United States—coming out particularly from a Sierra Club member who had a strong desire to control US domestic immigration as one tool to stabilize population, John [H.] Tanton, a

very wealthy man, a dentist, I believe. He was funding a number of anti-immigration population-control groups in the United States. It became clear that they were trying to get the Sierra Club to acknowledge that immigration into our country was something the Sierra Club should address since it claimed to be interested in population control. At that point, the Sierra Club realized that it was being dragged into what could become a very ugly kind of political and controversial set of issues. So, the board adopted a policy of neutrality on domestic immigration, but rather would continue to work on the root causes of population growth both globally and in the United States.

04-02:04:20

Eardley-Pryor: That battle that the board had in order to come forward with a neutral stance on immigration but maintain its efforts around population stabilization or control knowing very clear-well that empowering women is the way to make that most successful—when did that Sierra Club board battle happen, about making this neutral stance?

04-02:04:44

Cox: I believe that was in—somewhere in the mid-nineties. I'll have to check the date on that. [By the mid-1990s, the Sierra Club had begun to question an earlier immigration restrictionist position; in 1996, the board adopted a neutral position on US immigration policy.]

04-02:04:49

Eardley-Pryor: So, before your time on the board then?

04-02:04:51

Cox: It was before, yes, it was before my time. There had been an attempt to place a referendum on the ballot to get the Club to take back that neutrality stance, but that was defeated 60 to 40 percent. So, the groups that were interested in bringing the Sierra Club into this set of issues were not going to give up, even after losing that referendum attempt. It would become known to us by 2003 that they were intending to target the board of directors itself in an effort to gain a majority on the board, and therefore declare the Sierra Club opposed to most forms of domestic immigration.

04-02:05:36

Eardley-Pryor: With these groups—you mentioned John Tanton and whoever else that he's affiliated with, these anti-immigration groups that were pro-population-control groups, however we want to frame them—if they've been doing this sort of work over time and continued to poke at the Club over time, what was the—so, in 2003, that it suddenly came to your attention. How do you remember realizing that there was now this sudden threat at this point in 2003?

04-02:06:02

Cox: Well, Morris Dees [Jr.], the head of the Southern Poverty Law Center, sent a letter to Carl Pope, our executive director, that revealed a memo that John Tanton had written to his fellow anti-immigration advocates and these other groups that explicitly laid out their agenda, which was to go after the Sierra

Club because it was a respected, mainstream, national organization, and that if they could take control of the Sierra Club, their message could have broader appeal in American politics. Morris Dees alerted Carl to this threat, and we realized that one of the directors on our board, Paul Watson, was speaking to certain groups out in the countryside openly talking about this strategy, that he fully intended to help take over the Sierra Club for this purpose. Now, Paul Watson, of course, is famous for his role as the head of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society and his boats that rammed whaling ships in the South Seas and around Antarctica. He's a very charismatic individual.

04-02:07:19

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, talk about "monkey wrenching" at international sailing, right?

04-02:07:24

Cox: Absolutely. Well, and to give you further background, by this point, several others had become directors of the Sierra Club, and initially unknown to us as having an interest in opposing immigration into the Club. They did not run on that campaign platform, their ballot in the Sierra Club's election spoke of other issues. But suddenly, if this anti-immigration group could just elect five new directors through the petition process, which enables you to get on the ballot in the Sierra Club, they would join with another of four to five people on the board that were sympathetic or open advocates, and therefore would suddenly constitute a majority of our fifteen-member board. Once it became known to us—the Tanton memo, of Paul Watson's statements, and the petitioners that were beginning to be circulated by people that we knew were anti-immigration advocates—we realized, well, some of us realized at the time, this Club had an existential crisis on its hand.

04-02:08:4

Eardley-Pryor: And when you say "we"—you had mentioned Carl received this memo from Sothern Poverty Law Center, and you, of course, somehow became aware of that. When you say "we," do you mean you and Carl? Who else are you thinking about when you say "we?"

04-02:08:55

Cox: Right. Well, I and some of the other directors that were aware of it began talking. I reached out to several people that I trusted and knew—[Lawrence] Larry Downing was one of them. Greg Casini, who was the chapter chair from Colorado. And it was at the board meeting, I believe, in Nova Scotia or perhaps the upper peninsula of Michigan—I forget which meeting—I remember saying to some of the other directors, "We need to design a campaign to sound the alarm and ensure that this slate that would become a five-member slate would not be elected in the 1994 April election of the Sierra Club.

04-02:09:49

Eardley-Pryor: But 2004, right? April 2004, not '94?

04-02:09:55
Cox: Right, I'm sorry, April of 2004.

04-02:09:58
Eardley-Pryor: So, you're at this board of directors meeting. It sounds like you're building your own constituency within the board to say, "There is a threat here, and we need to act on it." What was your reception to sharing that idea?

04-02:10:13
Cox: Well, it started as a quiet conversation. It was not brought up at the board level officially, and Carl [Pope] made very clear that he, as executive director, could not be involved in any attempt to be involved in the election, that staff had to remain out of Sierra Club elections. I clearly made it known to those that I've talked with that I had a very strong interest in this, given my background with environmental justice issues and concern, and having been a former president, and feeling very protective of the Sierra Club and its credibility. I began quietly reaching out to, as I said, those that I had trusted with the goal of pulling together a small group that could begin to plan a campaign. We knew how to do campaigns in the Sierra Club, but we had to start now if we had a chance to develop the resources, to sound the alarm, to be prepared, to be able to affect a national election but without any real money to do this, and to have candidates that we knew could get elected.

04-02:11:31
Eardley-Pryor: The actors that are involved in this, you mentioned coming together within the Club. Who were some of the people that you had concerns about that were existing on the board, or organizations on the outside that you saw as targeting the Sierra Club takeover?

04-02:11:47
Cox: Sure. Well, the other directors that were allies of this anti-immigration movement included the following: Ben Zuckerman who was an astronomy professor at UCLA; Doug La Follette, who was a relation to the famous [Robert M.] La Follette of Wisconsin; Paul Watson, whom I've just mentioned; and I believe Marcia Hanscom, who was an activist with the Los Angeles chapter of the Sierra Club. So, they were ready to welcome five new directors they could band with to change—not only change the Sierra Club's policy on immigration, but controlling the board of directors of the Sierra Club meant that they controlled the Sierra Club's assets and its employees. And it was very clear to me in talking with Sierra Club staff, when they began to realize that this was a hostile takeover being planned, many of them said that they would resign, that they would not work for a Sierra Club controlled by a board of directors that was widely viewed as—would be a racist board.

04-02:13:05
Eardley-Pryor: What was the argument that those favoring the control of immigration, these anti-immigration activists, what was their idea for why this needed to happen in the environmental framework?

04-02:13:19
Cox: Well, they were looking for connections to the general policy of immigration border control. Immigration, certainly, it was one of the strong arguments. Employment was another argument, the fear that American jobs would be lost to cheaper labor by immigrants coming. And the Sierra Club was one of the most respected mainstream environmental groups that had an open election process for its board of directors who set policy, and so we were imminently penetrable. And [John] Tanton realized this when he developed this strategy with his memo laying out their plans.

04-02:14:05
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. That's good context. And, as you've said, they're the threat that the existing staff members—the Club itself would fracture, not just in terms of membership but its staff would also, or could also, flee.

04-02:14:18
Cox: Exactly.

04-02:14:18
Eardley-Pryor: This really was a threat to the Club itself.

04-02:14:21
Cox: Truly an existential threat in that it threatened the identity and the ability for the Sierra Club, as we know it, to survive.

04-02:14:30
Eardley-Pryor: With the people you found as advocates to this existential threat, people that were also concerned about this takeover, what did you all decide to do as a strategy in response?

04-02:14:42
Cox: Well, let me share some of the names that I pulled together that constituted our little steering committee. We became a very committed, tight group that worked together to develop a campaign plan: Jonathan Ela, who was a board director—or maybe not at that time, but a strong activist from Wisconsin; Patrick Murphy, out of Sierra Student Coalition; Larry Downing, past president of Sierra Club; Greg Casini, whom I've mentioned; Nathan Wyeth, W-Y-E-T-H, a young, really bright, young director coming up—I'm not sure if Nathan had been elected to the board yet or not; David Karpf, K-A-R-P-F, Dave Karpf, also a Sierra Student Coalition previous director, training director; Bob Perkowitz, who was the husband of Lisa Renstrom [who served as Sierra Club president from 2005–2007], Bob was an entrepreneur and had a strong antipathy towards this group of people in terms of anti-immigration; Chuck McGrady, also a former president of the Sierra Club, and Republican I might add; Guy Saperstein, a famous civil rights attorney out of [University of California] Berkeley [Law School], I believe he is somewhere in the Bay Area, he was also the former trustee of The Sierra Club Foundation; John McComb, a volunteer, a former Sierra Club staff person but no longer; Judy

Anderson, a longtime desert activist from Los Angeles; Rafael Reyes, on the board of directors. And that was the core group.

04-02:16:43

It started initially in conversations I had with Greg Casini, and then we slowly started identifying others that we thought would be willing to commit time and put of their own name and resources behind a small effort. So, what we did was to develop a campaign plan that ultimately had the goal of ensuring that voters knew what was at stake when they received their ballot in the mail. And they knew the importance of voting for candidates officially nominated by the Sierra Club, as opposed to those that gained access to the ballot through a petition process. So, we had to find a way to inform our members over a period of about three months, once the candidates were officially certified to be on the ballot at first of January, and ballots mailed out in February, counted in April. We had to plan to have this campaign locked and loaded by the end of the year, the start of January '04.

04-02:17:59

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. So, you knew you had a time frame that sometime by December of '03 to January of '04, everything had to be already activated?

04-02:18:07

Cox: Yeah. So, what we did is the following, as I try to recollect: we knew that we had to have a website that would be able to compete with other media and to be a central portal through which we could communicate the background—expose the background and the leanings of the candidates. We had to identify each of the petitioned candidates, because they were being certified in the main office, they were known publicly. We had to research them, who they were, and to be able to develop an argument for why they ought not be directors of the Sierra Club. Next, we had to develop our own contacts with American media—major newspapers, television, radio—and to do that, we had to line up spokespersons for our effort who were credible, highly known people, a Robert Redford or Bobby Kennedy Jr., people like that. And we had developed relationships with them—I had, personally, when I had been president. And finally, I think the most audacious strategy that we developed was to encourage three additional people who cared about this issue with us to run as petition candidates themselves and be qualified to be on the ballot in order to use their ballot statement as a sounding of the alarm and a warning to voters inside the ballot itself when it arrived.

04-02:19:55

Eardley-Pryor: Just so I'm clear as to what's happening, you are able to get three people to run as petition candidates to challenge the anti-immigration slate. And in their statement of why they're running, then, that could be a point to say—to point fingers at those who were the anti-immigration folks, and explain why this is so important to other voting members?

04-02:20:16
Cox: Precisely. They were not running to be elected themselves; though they had every right of membership under California nonprofit law to use the same petition process and their freedom under the First Amendment to use their statement to speak to their own motivations as free speech.

04-02:20:37
Eardley-Pryor: What was your petitioning process? I mean, what did it take for those anti-immigration forces to petition, and then for your three to go on board? How does one petition to run?

04-02:20:50
Cox: Well, you have to gain a certain number of signatures of Sierra Club members. It's a percentage of those that voted in the previous election, so it's a number that's generated each year. The five candidates developed that number of signatures, and I might mention who they were if I can recall.

04-02:21:14
Eardley-Pryor: Yes, please.

04-02:21:15
Cox: Karen Strickler, [Robert] Roy van de Hoek, and then three that were well-known, highly credible that worried us the most: former governor of Colorado [Richard] Dick Lamm, who was a big, good anti-immigration advocate; Frank Morris, who is African American and the former chair of the Black Caucus in Congress, but very conservative; and David Pimentel, who was an ecologist at Princeton? [Cornell University] I'll have to confirm that, but one of the northeast well-known Ivies [Ivy League universities]. So, we had five people who had impeccable credentials to the unknowing general member, and of course, none of them were planning to mention immigration—anti-immigration, as their motive on their ballots.

04-02:22:10
Eardley-Pryor: What I'm hearing from you is those that are doing this, it sounds like they are part of a broader effort and conscious of it. Do you think that's the case? Were they consciously trying to push through this anti-immigration platform, or were they being used?

04-02:22:25
Cox: Oh, they were recruited to run as the slate by Tanton and by Ben Zuckerman and some of the others. They assembled this group, worked to get them qualified on the ballot. And based on previous attempts to run, some of these individuals who mentioned immigration, they didn't get elected. They knew that in order to be elected in the Sierra Club, they couldn't talk about their real motive. So, we knew this in advance, and this is what scared us because if we did nothing there was a very, very good chance they would be elected. So, in recruiting our three, what we called, sacrifice candidates, we wanted them to be able to tell the story, to talk about those five people as part of an outside group attempting a hostile takeover, to point out why it was so important for

members to cast their vote not for them but for the nominated candidates the Sierra Club had put forth. And we recruited our own highly credible people, Phil Berry, former president of the Sierra Club and founder of the [Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund] law program, and two other individuals that agreed to run as sacrifice candidates. [Morris Seligman Dees Jr., chief trial counsel, Southern Poverty Law Center; and Barbara Herz, member of Sierra Club's Global Population and Environment Committee.] And then we got busy, at that point, developing our own network of volunteers throughout the nation who would spread the word, sound the alarm in their chapters, who would help us contact media. We ended up getting editorials in the *New York Times,* lead editorials twice, Los Angeles radio, TV programs all over the country, debates on radio programs I had with people like Zuckerman and others. So, we got the word out, we sounded the alarm, and we got the board of directors to agree to make a statement on the ballot recommending or alerting members to what was happening on the ballot.

04-02:24:35

Eardley-Pryor: How did you make that happen? If the board directors included people who were trying to promote this anti-immigration slate, how did you get the board of directors to make this statement?

04-02:24:44

Cox: Well, those people weren't yet in the majority, so I still had a working majority on the board that I could turn to, and they agreed. By that point, they were well-informed of this takeover attempt, but they were relying upon my group, which we ended up calling ourselves Groundswell Sierra. We needed a name to coalesce this, and it was Adam Werbach in a conversation that came up with the name, and it was brilliant. We convinced the board that it had to do what corporations across America do when they recommend a particular slate of candidates on the ballot. Nonprofit law recognizes that right of the board to speak. But the opposition anti-immigration people fiercely opposed this, thought it was the wrong thing to do.

04-02:25:43

During this process, by the way, the Sierra Club got sued by three of the SUSPS candidates. The opposition group was called SUSPS, Sierrans for US Population Stabilization. Three of their leading candidates on the ballot, Dick Lamm, David Pimentel, and Frank Morris, filed a lawsuit against the Sierra Club, against Carl Pope, and against the president of the board of directors at the time, who was Larry Fahn from California, [and five other board members], arguing the Sierra Club was using staff money and time in violation of California nonprofit law, and the Sierra Club board had no right to make a statement on the ballot, and so forth. The Sierra Club vigorously defended against the lawsuit. It informed that under California nonprofit law, the Sierra Club had the right to file a countersuit called a slap back, and that we would not tolerate such an attempt to close down the Sierra Club's voice. [The suit was abandoned after the Sierra Club gave notice that it was moving to dismiss the action under the California anti-Strategic Lawsuits Against

Public Participation, or anti-SLAPP, statute.] Now, let me make very clear, the Sierra Club corporation was not expending Sierra Club money. We were raising our private donations in Groundswell Sierra. The staff was not permitted to work with us. We, in fact, hired our own staff at pitiful wages given our budget of just a few thousand dollars—I think at most maybe $40,000 over the course of a full year, and hired two wonderful people. First of all, Talia L. Schank and then Clayton Daughenbaugh, two Sierra Club volunteers—Clayton, this year [2020] just received the William E. Colby award for his work on public lands. They helped us with the logistics, getting mailings out, setting up websites, and ultimately helping to be observers at the ballot process. The Sierra Club has a process of allowing all interested stakeholders and parties to be observers at a certain point in the outside independent firm that, with these computers, produces ballot results. So, where was I?

04-02:28:13

Eardley-Pryor: Well, you're at the point where you're rallying these people, you've hired these folks, and then, you had mentioned earlier, that most of this framework has to be established before December of 2003 in order for the positions to be made before the election happens in April of 2004.

04-02:28:31

Cox: Right. Well, we were ready, we were prepared. So, by—in January, I think it was, we went public, announced the website, emailed a lot of Sierra Club people and began our own media campaign to sound the alarm widely, began trying to raise money. Julia [T. Wood] contributed money, Chuck McGrady contributed funds, others on our steering committee kicked in some so that we could sustain ourselves and—

04-02:29:07

Eardley-Pryor: If you can take in these small contributions to mount this campaign, did you have to create Groundswell Sierra as some sort of separate nonprofit or LLC?

04-02:29:17

Cox: We did not. We were simply individuals banding together to wage a campaign. They were all private transactions, kept the Sierra Club a hand's distance away. And then, throughout the spring, did all of the foregoing efforts that I've just described. And by April, when the votes were counted, I was holding my breath. We did no public opinion polling. We had no idea if we were succeeding or not. I got a call from the Sierra Club officials who had the results of the election and was told, "Sit down. Are you sitting?"

04-02:30:01

Eardley-Pryor: Don't know which way that's going to go.

04-02:30:02

Cox: Yeah, and they said, "Not only did we win, but this is the largest turnout of Sierra Club members in an election in the history of the Sierra Club, and the Groundswell Sierra campaign of candidates won by a ratio of 10:1." It was

overwhelming, and I have my faith in the Sierra Club, and its values really came to the forefront. So, we had won an epic battle.

04-02:30:39
Eardley-Pryor: And helped to save the Club, it sounds like.

04-02:30:42
Cox: Well, for the moment. They kept trying, and they agreed to put a referendum—we agreed to put a referendum on the ballot the following year. It was defeated, yet another attempt.

04-02:30:54
Eardley-Pryor: What was the referendum with regard to? Was it with regard to immigration?

04-02:30:58
Cox: I think it was. I don't want to get my referenda confused with the earlier ones, but essentially it was a referendum to undo the neutrality.

04-02:31:12
Eardley-Pryor: That's a heck of a story.

04-02:31:14
Cox: And I think that is the conclusion of that campaign.

04-02:31:22
Eardley-Pryor: What happened in the wake? Is Groundswell Sierra still any kind of operational force within the Club? Did it have echoes in the wake of this 2004, springtime, board of directors election?

04-02:31:33
Cox: Well, it remained in existence for another year in order to safeguard the election, sound the alarm on a referendum, and so forth. From that point on, we disbanded. We had no other rationale to exist other than to protect the Club from a hostile takeover. Once that was over, we disbanded. I must say, however, we did protect the domain name Groundswell Sierra because—

04-02:32:01
Eardley-Pryor: For the website?

04-02:32:02
Cox: —well, we realized that the perfect attempt by the other side would be to capture our domain name and come out as Groundswell Sierra in support of overturning neutrality on immigration. And so, we had to safeguard that, and so every few years, one of the old Groundswell group will pay the fee for GoDaddy, and we preserve the domain name rights.

04-02:32:34
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. And I've even seen, in the past few years, that the SUSPS website still exists. They still maintain their web presence to try to get their message out, more than a decade later.

04-02:32:47
Cox: They do, and they're still peddling some of this old and false narrative and some of the publications. And statements the anti-immigration folks have contributed out there, some of those are just disgusting, racist statements going back to old eugenics and measuring skulls for size for intelligence. I must say one of our best allies during this fight was the Southern Poverty Law Center and Morris Dees. They did a major feature article on Groundswell Sierra before the election came out, and we laid out all of the briefs we had on these groups and these individuals, the rationale for doing this. And since Morris Dees is the founder and director of Southern Poverty Law Center, was one of our sacrifice candidates, he and his organization was willing to support this effort, and we became one of the main campaigns that Southern Poverty Law Center endorsed through its publication of our story.

04-02:33:52
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. And to build alliances across these networks is pretty good for progressive causes, too, beyond just the environment, to all of these things. That in the twentieth and twenty-first century, it really seems that the Club has taken on this new mantle of understanding, the intersectional interconnections in the broad, holistic aspects of battles for justice and for equitable living.

04-02:34:17
Cox: Well, absolutely, race, income, class, gender, and interests of nature are all interrelated and goes back to one of the early maxims that Muir stated, "When you try to pull out any one thread, you discover it's connected to everything else."

04-02:34:36
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Robbie, do you mind if we take a quick break here just for a second?

04-02:34:40
Cox: Okay.

[break in audio]

04-02:34:44
Eardley-Pryor: All right, well great, Robbie. Thank you very much for today's session. We'll pick up the story as to what happens in the mid-2000s up to the present with your ongoing work in the Club and what's happening in your life. So, thank you for today.

04-02:34:56
Cox: Yeah, thank you, Roger.

04-02:34:58
Eardley-Pryor: All right, and talk to you soon, bye-bye.

04-02:34:59
Cox: Bye.

Interview 5: September 23, 2020

05-00:00:03
Eardley-Pryor: Today is Wednesday, September 23, 2020. I'm Roger Eardley-Pryor from UC [University of California] Berkeley's Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library. Today is our fifth and, sadly, final interview session with Robert Cox. Robbie, it's great to see you today.

05-00:00:19
Cox: It's good to see you, Roger. It's been great working with you during this process.

05-00:00:22
Eardley-Pryor: I'll say the same. It's been a delight to revisit some of this history and to get your very insightful perspective on it. Today, I would like for us to pick up where we left off in interview session four, and that's to talk about Groundswell Sierra, which happened in the 2003 to 2004 period. And I wanted to enunciate a few of the critiques that happened, especially from petition candidates, about Groundswell's actions. I'd like to hear you share your perspective on those critiques, if you don't mind.

05-00:00:56
Cox: Okay.

05-00:00:56
Eardley-Pryor: The first critique that I saw, which I thought was hyperbolic if not fascinating at the same time, was by a woman named Karyn Strickler. She's the former director of the National Endangered Species Coalition, and she was a 2004 petition candidate for the Sierra Club board. She wrote an article in a left-leaning magazine called *CounterPunch* that accused the Sierra Club of having an old guard that engaged in McCarthy-like tactics of making false accusations and guilt-by-association critiques against, in particular, petition candidates like her. She said that there were only indirect links between the SUSPS group, the [Sierrans for US Population Stabilization] and some of these unsavory right-wing groups that were affiliated with racial purity and white supremacy. And so, I'd like to hear what you have to say about her critique that the Sierra Club's old guard, which I assume includes the thirteen former Sierra Club presidents who wrote this letter enunciating these concerns, what do you have to say to her accusations that the old guard was forming ranks around new people coming in?

05-00:02:11
Cox: Well, a number of things: I think the name Groundswell Sierra itself was aptly named because once it became known that this group was intending this hostile takeover of the Sierra Club, it awakened a sleeping giant among the membership. The result of that was the election results themselves—over a hundred thousand members voting, the largest turnout of our members of all ages across the nation and a rejection of their petition by a 10:1 ratio. As a matter of fact, most of the activists that I worked with in running Groundswell

were not the former presidents but young activists like Dave Karpf, Nathan Wyeth, Clayton Daughenbaugh, and others. I think it was the younger generation coming up through the Club that was most sensitive to issues of racism and diversity. This was not the old guard; this was a newly resurgent kind of energy coming into the Sierra Club.

05-00:03:19

I'll say one other thing. In terms of the charge of McCarthyism and an indirect relation to some of these racist groups, we laid out the research. Not only the Sierra Club, but activists all over the country sending in their research findings, independent journalists, organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center [SPLC]. You can go to its [SPLC] spring 2004 issue ["Robbie Cox, former Sierra Club president, discusses the ongoing attempt to turn the environmental organization into an anti-immigration group," *Intelligence Report: SPLC Magazine,* April 20, 2004.] where we lay out and document some of these interlocking directorships and the funding of these groups. We would not have gone public in such a vociferous way in which we did if we did not have the research behind us. I'm an old college professor, I knew that we had to make our case, and I think we did to our members.

05-00:04:07

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. I appreciate hearing your perspective on that, not to mention the fact that people—existing board members like Paul Watson— were making statements that, "Yes, we are trying to take over the Club." I mean, coming right out and saying it themselves.

05-00:04:20

Cox: Well, as a matter of fact, when Paul Watson made that statement at the board meeting in front of all of the council delegates from all of the chapters across America, they lined up at a microphone and directly challenged Paul Watson and forced him to admit that, well, that was what he was doing. And one after another of the chapters and their delegates denounced him in this effort. This was not a small group of old guard trying to crush dissent.

05-00:04:52

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. I appreciate us setting the record straight on that. I do have one other question. In the wake of that, the success of the Groundswell Sierra movement and this overwhelming voting that happened to castigate those efforts aside, what happened to the existing board members, like Paul Watson or [Doug] Le Follette and these others that were on the board, that were part of this effort to insert this anti-immigration platform? What happened to those leaders within the Club?

05-00:05:23

Cox: Well, the board members like Paul Watson and Le Follette, they filled out their term. They remained on the board, but they were not in the majority, and they cooperated on other issues. I think, when things settled down, we had a good working board relationship again. Paul Watson chose not to run for

reelection again after that. I think Le Follette did or attempted to run; I'm not sure that he was reelected. I think most in the Club by that point wanted to bring some of the divided volunteers back together. In fact, Groundswell went in with the other leaders of the opposition and formed a grand celebration of renewal of the Club. We had a dance, a band, and a kind of an attempt to come back together to get on with the real work of the Sierra Club.

05-00:06:23

Eardley-Pryor: That's wonderful. I was thinking about this, too: that the election happens in 2004, could have been seen as contentious by some, but includes an outpouring of support in some other ways. And then, in the very next year, in the fall of 2005, is the Sierra Summit that also serves to bring the Sierra Club members together in a scale and in a way that hadn't been done previously. So, I'd love to turn our attention to that event from September 8 to 11 in 2005, the fall of '05. The Sierra Summit is held in San Francisco. Can you share what that was, and why it was important?

05-00:07:01

Cox: Well, I think growing out of that earlier tension over immigration battles, there was such an impulse to get back to real conservation work in the Sierra Club. It was also a period in which the issues of climate change were coming ever more to the forefront. We were at that time, as well, going through a review of our priority conservation campaigns. The Sierra Club had a process of involving volunteer input in selecting the priority campaigns every certain number of years. So, all of this coming together led to the idea of bringing together as many leaders throughout America as we could for a summit. This would be the first time in the Sierra Club's history in which we did this. It turned out, over three thousand Club leaders assembled in San Francisco for a multiday conclave of meetings, of speeches, of exhibits, of celebration, and deliberation about what should be our top priorities.

05-00:08:10

Eardley-Pryor: I would imagine in a huge event like that, where the top priorities are supposed to be decided as a result of this—over just a few short days, that there's a ton of advanced organizing that needs to happen. I'm thinking in particular of the 1972 United Nations [Conference on the Human Environment], its first global environmental conference [the Stockholm Conference] that took years and years of planning to get nation-states to talk about what would they even talk about. It took years of planning to make the event happen in '72, I imagine something similar with the Sierra Summit, in '05, requiring a lot of background work. So, I'm just wondering if you're familiar with how that was organized, how that mechanically came to be, to make the event successful in September [2005]?

05-00:08:53

Cox: Yeah, there were a number of logistics and expenses involved. I believe it was Lisa Renstrom and her partner Rob Perkowitz that helped fund some of the expenses of planning. Staff were dedicated to lining up rental spaces, all of the

logistics to holding a large conference of that size, sponsorships were solicited, and it came together. It, I think, came off beautifully.

05-00:09:27

Eardley-Pryor: And I understand there were a lot of keynote speakers that came to present including [Robert] Bobby Kennedy Jr., Arianna Huffington, Bill Maher did some of his comedy there, current California Governor Gavin Newsom spoke at the time, and a number of other people. But the one I hear mentioned most frequently when folks remember the Sierra Summit is that Al [Albert] Gore [Jr.] came and spoke just about one month after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and much of the Gulf Coast. Can you share, because you have this background of working with Al Gore and advocating on his behalf in his electoral campaigns, what are your memories of Gore coming to speak at the Sierra Summit, and why was that important?

05-00:10:13

Cox: Sure. It turned out that Gore had been committed to speaking in New Orleans as the result of Katrina, but that event was canceled, and he was able to come out to San Francisco. I thought it was incredibly important that he be there because he really had become the prominent national voice for addressing climate change, raised the salience of that issue in such a visible way.

05-00:10:42

Eardley-Pryor: And just the next year, on that point, *An Inconvenient Truth* [Al Gore's documentary on climate change] hits the theaters in May of '06. So, he speaks in the Sierra Summit just a few months before this national media movie comes out that really puts the discussion in a lot of people's minds for the first time.

05-00:11:01

Cox: Yeah, that's correct, and we knew of that work, and the media coverage around this issue was increasing dramatically. It was all coming to a head. Some of us in the leadership knew that we were going to have to make a decision about the Sierra Club's involvement with climate change, whether it would be a priority or not. It was a major commitment if we were to do this, and that was one of the rationales for bringing together the broadest possible representation throughout the Sierra Club. If we were going to do this, it was important that our leaders understood why we were moving in this direction, to hear from leaders politically, research scientists, and others, and allow open, multiday deliberation, which did occur. And then we did a survey of the live members who were there and tabulated all of the results, and it came out that working with smart energy solutions or alternatives to fossil fuel in order to address global warming really ranked the top among our issues. So, we had our marching orders, in a sense, and began to plan then for three really top, overarching priorities of which climate change, smart energy was one of the top ones.

05-00:12:30

Eardley-Pryor: And I have a note here that, of the three conservation priorities the Club took on in the wake of the '05 Sierra Summit was America's Wild Legacy [Our Wild America]—the traditional issues of land and preservation and conservation—and Safe and Healthy Communities. Can you share what you think that means?

05-00:12:50

Cox: In addition to our traditional work with the public lands, wilderness and forests, the Club had become very involved in issues of toxics, clean air, and water as they impacted vulnerable communities, particularly in our grassroots environmental justice program heavily involved in many of these issues. And so, we brought those different but related issues together under the priority campaign of Safe and Healthy Communities. And then, of course, the Smart Energy Solutions gave us that permission to move on climate change.

05-00:13:28

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. In terms of planning and organizing towards these new priority goals, particularly around climate change and smart energy solutions, I also have a note that Harvard sociologist Marshall Ganz spoke at the Sierra Summit. But I understand he also was involved in a lot of Club work as well. What's your knowledge of his work within the Club, and any interactions you might have had with him?

05-00:13:52

Cox: Well, Ganz had been working with the Club years earlier. He is known not only for his research on organizing and social movements, but he had worked with Cesar Chavez during the earlier grape strike in California and had been a close ally of Chavez. And so, we wanted to bring Ganz into the Club to address the board in person, at an earlier board meeting as we were beginning to address issues of an organizing culture. And some of his Harvard associates were with him as well, sharing their research, helping us to understand and really appreciate what it takes for an organizing culture. So, yeah, he was going to be critical as we moved in this new area of climate change and what organizing would look like under that new strategic challenge.

05-00:14:55

Eardley-Pryor: How did organizing change with regard to climate change in the wake of the Sierra Summit? What were some of the ways that organizing—I'm thinking about the ways the governance had been restructured and then Project ACT [Activist culture, Communication & coordination, Training] to talk about how grassroots activism could create different kinds of cultural changes. What was different in this time that you might be implementing ideas from Ganz or others around climate activism?

05-00:15:18

Cox: Well, we were faced with the conundrum of, on the one hand, global warming required governmental leadership to address something of that scale. And yet if you recall in 2005, we were still under the administration of George W.

Bush who—and his close advisor, Vice President [Richard] Dick Cheney, a former head of a major oil energy corporation. And so, we knew that we would not get leadership at the national federal level, and yet given the exigence of addressing climate change, we realized we're going to have to work at the state level. But in fact, on energy policy, there was a lot that the states could do, in terms of renewable energy portfolios for example, and those are setting mandates for the production of energy that would have a certain percentage dedicated to clean energy sources. It was an attempt to regulate energy production from power plants, for example, that would move us in the direction of a more clean energy economy. To target that level and those decision outcomes really required building resources and the knowledge base on energy policy at the grassroots level. So, it would require a lot of background education and some guidance on how to intervene within utility commissions, for example, on energy issues and rate setting, and some of this was not part of the traditional wheelhouse of skills of the Sierra Club. But organizing at that local and state level now became the principal avenue in which we could begin to address global climate change when the Bush administration was absent.

05-00:17:15

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Yeah, and I'm sure we can go into a little more about how that trickle-down knowledge of "How do you get activists at the grassroot level to intervene in these different hierarchies" when we talk about your role in the Mission Strategy Advisory Committee that you served on for the Club as well, so that's great. I want to ask you, with regard to your mention of one of the priorities for the Club being safe and healthy communities, and how that included the environmental justice work—something that's a little bit achronological and I apologize for that, but I have a note that in February of 2005 that the Puerto Rico chapter of the Sierra Club was initiated, and you were in attendance for its coming-out party. Can you share a little of what that experience was, and why you think that was important for how the Club was evolving over time?

05-00:18:02

Cox: Certainly. There had been interest growing in San Juan and in Puerto Rico generally with the Sierra Club, and we had devoted some staff time to work in San Juan to work with those that were interested, that were Sierra Club members. Puerto Rico, as a US commonwealth, of course, they were US citizens as a result. They felt naturally that they would be part of the Sierra Club. This was different from our earlier decision not to organize chapters in other international areas or countries. A lot of the work they were doing in Puerto Rico involved families and enormous community involvement in their outings, and in their work in protecting some of the fragile ecosystems.

05-00:19:00

There was an issue called the Northeast [Ecological] Corridor [Nature Reserve], which was a beautiful, unspoiled beach, marine ecosystem in the northeastern part of the island. And the Sierra Club had been very helpful in

providing a grassroots organizer to work with the Puerto Rican environmental activists on that issue, ultimately prevailing, influencing the government. In fact, we noticed the membership was growing in Puerto Rico faster than in many of the chapters in the United States. And ultimately, the [Sierra Club] board responded to their request that they become an official chapter. And we organized a board meeting in San Juan to celebrate the official designation of Puerto Rico as the newest chapter of the Sierra Club, a kind of symbolic gesture toward our national support of Puerto Rico. Executive Director Carl Pope announced at that meeting in San Juan, he was changing his home membership. His home chapter from henceforth would no longer be the Bay Area but would be the Puerto Rican chapter. And he's still a member of the Puerto Rican chapter as his home chapter.

05-00:20:16

Eardley-Pryor: That is really a cool story. And not that it relates directly to the establishment of that chapter, but current Sierra Club President Ramon Cruz was born in Puerto Rico, although he did a lot of his activism in the New York area. But yeah, it's a neat, that's a really neat story. I didn't realize that the board actually had its board meeting there, too.

05-00:20:35

Cox: Yeah, we did. And Ramon was not only internationally working in environmental and climate areas in New York, but previous, he was the associate director of the Puerto Rican Department of Environment, I believe. And he is our current president of the Sierra Club, a very dynamic, amazing man.

05-00:20:58

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. And the establishment of that [Puerto Rica] chapter, I think, also speaks to the changes that are happening in in this twenty-first century environment, too—the growth of the Club in these new issue areas, but also the incorporation of new members, more diverse members, and really seeking those kind of memberships. I'm wondering if, with regard to the Bush administration being a Republican and, in a lot of ways, anti-environmental administration—as Bobby Kennedy Jr. would point out multiple times—what that did in terms of Club membership? In the past, I know—like for example, in the [Ronald] Reagan era that there was a real spike in Sierra Club membership as a result of these offenses against the environment. Similarly, in '94, '95 around the Gingrich Republican Revolution in Congress, a spike in Sierra Club membership for people that say, "Yes, we do need this." Was there something similar happening in the early 2000s with the Bush-Cheney administration?

05-00:21:56

Cox: Membership was increasing again, you're absolutely right. It was that same cycle of concern. With an administration that was not environmentally friendly, membership in the Sierra Club tends to grow as a safeguard, a counterforce against that disinterest.

05-00:22:15
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. At the tail end of the Bush-Cheney administration, in spring of 2007 to the spring of 2008, you again become president of the Sierra Club, your third term as president. Can you share a little bit about what went into that, and how you became president? What were you thinking about in terms of taking on a presidency for a third time?

05-00:22:39
Cox: I think that it was a—let me rephrase this. A number of the directors began to approach me and asked if I would serve as president at least for a year. The previous president, Lisa Renstrom, had served, I believe, two terms as president, and it was uncertain if she was going for a third term. And at that point, there was no other director stepping forward that had the same support among directors currently that I had. So, I agreed to serve again as president, and again, I made clear it would be for only one year, because I thought after that one year that there was a very capable leader arising that should be—that would step in after me.

05-00:23:33
Eardley-Pryor: And who did you have in mind at that time, even when you were taking on the presidency, for who would come after you?

05-00:23:39
Cox: Well, Allison Chin, who was a very bright, young woman, a research scientist, and increasingly devoting her time to the environmental movement. And I had known Allison years earlier. She came out of the Outdoor Activity Committee as a leader, but increasingly became involved in the Club's leadership structure. And it was clear that by the time I was president in '08, that she was the natural successor and would be a force for, particularly, for diversity inclusion and a greater push to really get this implemented inside the Sierra Club.

05-00:24:30
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Because I was wondering in the context of your term ending in the spring of '08, why you wouldn't stay on for a 2008 election year, as you did in 2000 during the Gore-Bush of election year, and to take on that role of advocacy like you did at that point. Especially in the 2008 election where it eventually became between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, so a breadth of diversity both in gender and in race. But, I see, I can understand better now that Allison was a person in your mind that was the right person to take on that.

05-00:25:07
Cox: I think that she was the more appropriate public voice in leadership at that point.

05-00:25:13
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. In 2008, I also understand that there was a new initiation for revisiting the Project Renewal, so a second Project Renewal effort and a round

of restructuring the Club's governance. And I'm just wondering, what was the impetus for that? Why would there need to be a revisiting of the governance structure and a reorientation for how things were working, and what did you do?

05-00:25:41

Cox: Well, Allison, by the way, chaired a task force to lead this second round of Project Renewal. The earlier model had worked for a while and had been over a decade and longer. I think it was because there were areas in which confusion was arising. It was also clear that the governance committees that have been delegated principal governance functions in their areas was not the best model. The board had grown impatient in delegating governance and wanted to take back that core function at the board level, but in turn, reconstitute many of these advisory committees as an upstream of advice coming to the board that would guide the governance decisions. But then we needed a model that would reflect the implementation of those policy decisions. It was on that side that there was some remaining confusion and the need to fully implement support, particularly for activists, grassroots. And, with new communication technologies continuing to evolve rapidly, to build out even better and smarter communication systems.

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So, if you can imagine a graph—and this was a graphic that was part of the report that came in—if you've got the board as a kind of oval in the middle of it, it has responsibility for governance. And on one side is what we call the upstream, the principal advisory routes through which new ideas, proposals for policy, for operations of different aspects of the Club would be fully vetted and developed, and when they were ripe for action, be brought to the board for deliberation. When decided as official policy, we then had a clearer structure on the other side of that oval that would be the implementation side. And we did a couple of innovative things at that point for all of our programs and campaigns to make clear that there was a partnership between the staff and volunteers. We instituted the concept of co-pairs. There would be a staff lead and a volunteer lead that would work together as what we called the co-pair. It may be redundant.

05-00:28:20

For example, let's say, the Beyond Coal campaign that was beginning around this time, or one or two years later. We would have a principal staff person and a really dedicated, knowledgeable volunteer lead that would oversee campaign operations, the budget, the resources, the strategies that's being laid out to target coal plants, for example. We had these co-pairs also in other program areas. We instituted something called "chapter and leader support" that would really forefront delivery of resources and implementation of board policies and support down through to the chapters, to give them a portal as well to work with. And then to really come to the whole idea of the activist network and update it and flesh it out, especially as we were moving into a campaign around climate change.

05-00:29:29
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. So, share with me again—you described this upstream aspect that would inform ideas, new ideas, that the board could then decide on. It sounds to me, almost, like you frame this as the board was reconstituting its own authority in some ways, but through this new restructuring. But this upstream part of that picture you painted, is that still the existing committees, these few committees that you created in the first Project Renewal that were consolidating previous committees-upon-committees?

05-00:30:04
Cox: No. We rethought those and really thought in terms of some different functions in some areas. We no longer had a Conservation Governance Committee trying to oversee all of these conservation committees, but rather to have, for conservation, a set of task forces that would recognize the different priority campaign areas, and each of them would have their principal leaders that were advising the board. But then, apart from the conservation task forces, we created something called the Mission Strategy Committee, and that implemented a concept that we had really considered out of a board retreat where we had a wonderful consultant come in to push us a little bit in our thinking about what constitutes strategy—to distinguish, as I may have said in an earlier interview with you, the difference between strategic planning, which is more operational, and strategic thinking, which has as its objective looking out over the horizon to identify emerging opportunities, threats or challenges, and the implications of those for decisions being made now in the Sierra Club.

05-00:31:32
Eardley-Pryor: I see, so just so I can make sure what I'm hearing is what I'm capturing in my mind. What you're saying is that this Mission Strategy Advisory Committee that's created in this second round of Project Renewal restructuring is really a way to help think through this dialectic or this comparison you have between strategic planning, which is really sort of the day-to-day "here's how we're going to do things," versus strategic thinking, which is the vision of what's coming—

05-00:32:00
Cox: Correct.

05-00:32:00
Eardley-Pryor: —and "what do we need to prepare for, in order to do our strategic planning well?"

05-00:32:06
Cox: Well, yes, and to be able to assess the capacity and the resources the Club had at that point in being able to meet or take advantage of those opportunities or be prepared for those threats. So, it was both—it was that dialectic of looking ahead and readying ourselves now.

05-00:32:27
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Do you want to talk a little bit about your experience on this Mission Strategy Advisory Committee? I know that that's something you were then a part of from 2008 to 2011.

05-00:32:36
Cox: Sure. Yeah, when I stepped down as president in '08, I was asked to serve as the chair of this new committee, and I actually worked with Greg Haegele, who was then the conservation director of the Sierra Club, who was a brilliant strategist, to develop the charge for the Mission Strategy group that reflected this idea of strategic thinking. And given that prior work, I was involved in helping to conceptualize what a Mission Strategy Committee would be. I very much wanted to get involved in that and away from a lot of the day-to-day operations of serving as president. And I knew that in order to really prepare for this strategy of working at the state level on climate change, that we had to do a better job of taking advantage of digital technologies. So, one of the first things I did was to constitute a technical summit in Washington, DC, to advise the new [Sierra Club executive] director Mike Brune and the Club leadership on how to take advantage of the new technologies, and how to use it in an organization like the Sierra Club. So, we brought in key digital leaders from labor, from other nonprofit groups, from the Obama campaign. In fact, the Obama campaign's digital field operator was a former staff member of the Sierra Club, and she helped—

05-00:34:22
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, wow.

05-00:34:22
Cox: —yeah, she helped to identify some of these other key leaders in digital technologies.

05-00:34:30
Eardley-Pryor: And so you brought these people in to help figure out—to help the Club think about how to implement more of the state-level energy-knowledge and activism in a digital frame?

05-00:34:42
Cox: Correct, correct. And to share their best practices. For example, we had a key digital leader from the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations] talk with us. And he described their operation and how they used digital technology, social media, some of the pitfalls and warnings against it, and the real core functions that could serve an organization. And what we did then, we had Mike Brune come in and sit through these sessions and be able to pose questions and listen to the advice we were getting from this highly qualified group sitting around a table in DC. As the outcome of that session—it was a multiday session—we ended up developing a new department in the national Sierra Club, the Department of Digital Strategies. And we hired a former Greenpeace director of digital

strategies in Europe to come in and help set up shop in a new Sierra Club operation.

05-00:35:49
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. It's so great. I just love hearing these stories of how the Club is constantly evolving and taking on these new technologies. Even since the sixties, it's something that the Club has, I think, done so well and helped keep it at the forefront of environmental leadership in the nation. It's great to hear all this actually implemented.

05-00:36:07
Cox: Well, I think that's why we're still here after starting in 1892, when some of the other conservation groups at that time no longer are here with us or in a much smaller version.

05-00:36:22
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. Well, that's great. Thank you for jumping into the Mission Strategy Advisory Committee, because it had come up, it just felt like it was an easy topic to talk about. To bring us back, is there anything that was involved in that second Project Renewal round of restructuring that you wanted to address from 2008?

05-00:36:43
Cox: No, I think we've covered the core aspects of that.

05-00:36:48
Eardley-Pryor: Well, let's then step back again to your term as president, this year [spring 2007 to spring 2008] that you were president. Did you also need to take a leave from UNC [University of North Carolina] this time, as you did in the prior two presidencies?

05-00:37:01
Cox: No, this time, and since I was dealing principally with graduate seminars, I was able to schedule my time pretty—in a flexible way. Perhaps meet a seminar, once a week I would fly out for several days, be back for couple days, and a very cooperative and supportive chair in my department.

05-00:37:24
Eardley-Pryor: How did the experience of having this bicoastal life, as you did before in your other presidential terms, how did your—just the experience of traveling across the country or doing your engagement at this national level—how did that change in the times between when you were first president in the nineties to this time in the late 2000s?

05-00:37:46
Cox: Well, I was beginning to get a direct flight from Raleigh-Durham [International] Airport to San Francisco, for one thing.

05-00:37:51
Eardley-Pryor: That'll improve the experience a lot.

05-00:37:54
Cox: That helped a great deal. I felt more comfortable and at ease in serving as president because I had done that previously during two different periods, and I was able to prioritize my work, my time a little better. I was able to continue to do some of my scholarship that had been put aside in my earlier years as president. And I was not as consumed daily as I was during the Gingrich Congress and on the road extensively. So, it worked out with a life balance far better than earlier.

05-00:38:34
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. And it sounds to me, the way you spoke about becoming president in 2007, that you knew that it was a shorter term as well, that there would be an end-point of engagement. Then it wasn't something that was going to continue to consume your world for years.

05-00:38:47
Cox: That's true.

05-00:38:49
Eardley-Pryor: I'd love if we could turn our attention to some internal controversies that came up in the Club during this time period as well. And the first one being the relationship of the Sierra Club to Chesapeake Energy, a natural gas company, and involving donations that happened through that. Can you share what the story is around the Sierra Club's relationship with Chesapeake Energy? Why it happened, some of the background for that, and your role in understanding it?

05-00:39:21
Cox: Well, at this period, we were looking for ways increasingly to fund our newly resurgent campaign of Beyond Coal. This was an effort to target both the planning of new coal-operated plants to produce electricity and existing plants that were aging out. We were beginning to expand, from the Midwest where we began in Illinois, nationally. It was also a period—

05-00:39:53
Eardley-Pryor: Let me pause you on that, Robbie, just because Beyond Coal is, now, such a great example of new climate activism that's been incredibly successful, ongoing to this day, and even spreading beyond US borders to an international effort to shut down coal plants. When did the concept of going after coal plants, this Beyond Coal campaign, when did that come onto your radar? When did you first learn about this strategic effort within the Club or even outside the Club?

05-00:40:27
Cox: Well, we were receiving reports at the board level, obviously, and just in conversations at the national headquarters receiving reports. Bruce Nilles, one of the original founders of the Beyond Coal effort coming out of Illinois, developing more and more leadership for this program. I mentioned that because of the need for resources to fund that, because it was becoming a principal avenue through which to work at the state level, because the

licensing of coal-burning power plants and the renewal of licensing happened with state utility commissions. This was the one area of energy policy that was at the state level that we could begin to target despite the Bush administration. But we were also losing other sources of revenue at the time because of one of our major anonymous donors who had contributed millions of dollars had ended his support for the Sierra Club after a director had released his name publicly against his wishes.

05-00:41:40
Eardley-Pryor: Just because it is publicly known, this is David Gelbaum we're talking about?

05-00:41:43
Cox: Right, yes.

05-00:41:44
Eardley-Pryor: And I do want to pursue that issue as well, but let's just continue with the natural gas story because it's in the context of needing to find a replacement for that [David Gelbaum] money. But that's a story I'm interested in hearing as well, but we'll revisit that.

05-00:41:59
Cox: Okay. Well, all of this was coming together to foreground the importance of diversifying our revenue stream. It was not possible to depend just upon renewal of member dues, but on donations. But we lost a major donation in that [David Gelbaum] case. We had also begun developing a program called "business partnerships" where we were looking to develop partnerships with businesses that we could work with and develop a kind of support in a way that would contribute money to the Sierra Club. That was where—

05-00:42:39
Eardley-Pryor: I remember Lou Barnes—

05-00:42:40
Cox: —oh.

05-00:42:42
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, I'm sorry—

05-00:42:42
Cox: —go ahead.

05-00:42:43
Eardley-Pryor: I was going to say, I recall Lou Barnes [former Sierra Club chief financial officer] talking about partnering with credit card companies to have the Sierra Club brand as part of the credit card company, and being able to capture some of the funding that the credit card is generating as a way to build the Sierra Club revenues, which is pretty darn innovative.

05-00:42:58
Cox: Well, yeah, the affinity card business. That became a major continuing business partnership that we developed.

05-00:43:09
Eardley-Pryor: And I think the first nonprofit to do that work. That was really, again, the Sierra Club spearheading the way that nonprofits behaved, let alone environmental nonprofits.

05-00:43:09
Cox: Well, it was. I believe that's true. We were the first with that. So, it was within this context then that I recall that Carl Pope came to me as [Sierra Club] president and to the vice president who was standing with me at the time and said that he had an opportunity to receive an additional business partnership with contributions coming into the Club on an annual basis that was significant in its size, and it was with Chesapeake Energy, a natural gas company.

05-00:43:50
Eardley-Pryor: And let me just ask, who was the vice president that you were standing with, that you and Carl are having this discussion with?

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Cox: I believe it was Jennifer Ferenstein, or it may have been Joni Bosh, I can't recall, and I'll verify that. [Robin Mann, vice president from 2007–2010]

05-00:44:05
Eardley-Pryor: And this is in, of course, the context of a story we'll get into about the donations, the secret donations, from David Gelbaum no longer coming.

05-00:44:14
Cox: Correct.

05-00:44:16
Eardley-Pryor: Okay, just so I can understand the context for Carl coming to you and saying, "We have this new opportunity in wake of needing more money."

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Cox: That's true, and it was a natural gas company, so there were questions. But it's important to understand that this was happening in '07, '08. We were only then beginning to appreciate the role of natural gas in a mixed energy economy. Earlier, we had gone through an exercise of attempting to identify what were the energy sources we could piece together to replace coal, for example, and discussions of natural gas had arisen as early as 1979 as a bridge fuel. Barry Commoner, for example, in his book *The Politics of Energy* had spoken of natural gas as a bridge from fossil—intensive fossil fuel from coal to a clean energy economy for when the technology caught up an ability to produce 100 percent of clean energy.

05-00:45:26
Eardley-Pryor: That is just fascinating to me that [Barry] Commoner in the late seventies—around the time that he ends up running for president in 1980—

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Cox: That's true.

05-00:45:33
Eardley-Pryor: —he's talking about gas as a bridge fuel to a more renewable future. I mean that's just really cool, and it's cool that that was even on your radar at the time, thinking about this.

05-00:45:44
Cox: Yeah. Well, looking back, I believe it was obviously a mistake to have accepted that money. But within that context where energy experts are—the advice we were getting from some of the experts led us to think of natural gas for a limited period, only as a bridge. I think we failed to appreciate the fact that natural gas facilities once built would have a lifespan that would retard replacement with cleaner generation of clean energy. And I think we underestimated at that time the importance of methane and the escaping methane gas from the way in which energy producers were drilling and producing natural gas.

05-00:46:34
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, let me do say, I appreciate the looking back and having "hindsight is 2020" on that, but I think you're right on the money to say how, in that moment, this is long before—from our perspective in 2020, we can say that solar and renewable wind energy is at a price point that competes with fossil energy. But that certainly wasn't the case in 2007.

05-00:46:56
Cox: No, not at all. No, the price point was quite different at that time. That's fifteen—twelve years earlier.

05-00:47:03
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, and so to think about that [natural gas] as a bridge fuel, that really was the widespread thought of the time. Even knowing that gas plants would have a longer lifespan, that you needed to have these [gas] peaker plants at that time to produce energy in times when there is less wind or there is no sunlight, and it was long before battery technology was starting to escalate.

05-00:47:24
Cox: Yeah, it's a completely different context at this point. But during that interim period in which we did receive the money, it did fuel an expansive, aggressive Beyond Coal campaign, there is no question about that. And the victories that we achieved during that—hundreds of coal plants that were either forestalled, never coming online, or announcements being that they would be phased out by X date or permits canceled—we could not have done that much in that short period of time without the infusion of a lot of that money that came in from Chesapeake [Energy].

05-00:48:04
Eardley-Pryor: So, in reflection on that, I heard you say, in hindsight, it was a mistake to take that money. But in the moment, it doesn't sound like it was the mistake. It sounds like it was necessary in order to elevate the Beyond Coal campaign to what it's become.

05-00:48:19
Cox: Well, that was our rationale, and that was our consciousness at the time. It proved to be an embarrassment later, as technologies changed and there was more opportunity to find replacement for coal other than natural gas. And we also had a change in [Sierra Club] leadership. By 2010 for example, Carl Pope had resigned as the executive director, and I was on the search committee that helped to identify his replacement in Mike Brune. When Mike discovered that we were, in fact, receiving money from Chesapeake Energy, he called an emergency session of the board in Washington, DC, and announced that it was his intention to cancel that contract. And at this point, I think, word had leaked out that we were accepting the money, and we felt it was becoming an embarrassment for the Sierra Club to continue to rely upon natural gas, even as a bridge fuel, because we were all evolving in our understanding of energy sourcing. And that decision was made [to stop receiving money from Chesapeake Energy], and it was fully supported by the board, and it had my support as well to cut off that funding.

05-00:49:36
Eardley-Pryor: All of this seems to be in the context of discussions we've had earlier about being ideological versus philosophical. You could be a purist and have a very clear point of view that any fossil fuel company is something that the Sierra Club will not deal with, or the philosophical point that says this might be necessary in the moment, a little deal with the devil, in some way.

05-00:50:00
Cox: Oh, there were such arguments inside the Club over this and some of our other business partnerships. And the arguments are summarized as, "Accepting such money spoils us, it taints us with their sin," essentially. And on the other hand, someone once said, "If you take the devil's money, you are at least redeeming it and putting it to the work on the good side." And it was a practical decision that was made.

05-00:50:33
Eardley-Pryor: I want to ask about the knowledge of this acceptance of money. Who knew? It sounds to me like when Mike Brune came in in 2010, that this was a surprise to him. So, in light of—maybe this is an entrée point for us to get into the discussion about David Gelbaum's secret donations and that relationship. How secret was this money coming in from Chesapeake Energy, and who knew?

05-00:51:01
Cox: Well, the Sierra Club has had a long policy dealing with anonymous donors at the—respecting the donors' wishes is often conditioned in charitable giving, and it could be for different motives. [David] Gelbaum, for example, was very

concerned about his family and the publicity that might lead to threats to his family or concerns for their safety. He was very protective of that relationship, and hence, requested anonymity in his contributions. We respected that. There is a policy, however, that when an anonymous donor approaches the Sierra Club, the executive director must notify the president, vice president, and treasurer, I believe—in other words, the executive committee. And Carl [Pope] did that. When he notified me, I raised the question initially whether the Club should accept the money directly from [co-founder and former CEO and chairman of Chesapeake Energy, Aubrey] McClendon and Chesapeake Energy, or whether that money could be routed through the foundation that Chesapeake had, because a nonprofit foundation was far more acceptable, I think, to our membership. And I left it to Carl to make those arrangements, and quite frankly, I'm not sure how he engineered that.

05-00:52:23
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, so you don't know if that funding did come directly from Chesapeake or was routed through a foundation, as you suggested?

05-00:52:30
Cox: My understanding, but I cannot verify this, is that it did come from Chesapeake.

05-00:52:35
Eardley-Pryor: Okay. And you mentioned—

05-00:52:37
Cox: Or McClendon, I think.

05-00:52:38
Eardley-Pryor: Who was McClendon?

05-00:52:40
Cox: Audrey McClendon was the CEO of Chesapeake Energy.

05-00:52:43
Eardley-Pryor: Okay, that's great. Back to the story about David Gelbaum and this massive amount of money that was coming in through him. What were his intentions in giving these donations? What were the reasons why he was giving so much money to the Club, even if anonymous? Was his desire to see how that money would be used?

05-00:53:04
Cox: No, he was very supportive of the Sierra Club's overarching conservation agenda, including our work on climate change and public lands. He was a strong environmental advocate himself in his personal dealings. None of us had any problem accepting that money and to this day chagrin the leak of his identity that caused him to walk away from his contributions.

05-00:53:40
Eardley-Pryor: I'm just wondering even how the agreement in which Carl [Pope] knew about that money, and that the president and vice president and treasurer also knew, how then, when a new executive committee came into the board of directors, was that information curtailed? I mean, there's a new director or a new president, a new vice president, a new treasurer that would then become knowledgeable about these secret donations. Was there some sort of nondisclosure agreement that happened at the end of a president's term to not talk about any of these relationships?

05-00:54:13
Cox: I don't believe it was ever memorialized in such an official way. It was simply the knowledge passed along.

05-00:54:21
Eardley-Pryor: Got you. Just being respectful. But then that, eventually, led to somehow a leak about this money coming from David Gelbaum?

05-00:54:30
Cox: It did, and I'm not sure how this individual discovered the identity, but it was out.

05-00:54:39
Eardley-Pryor: What happened in the wake of that, within the Club? What kind of internal dynamics happened in the Club when this news was announced?

05-00:54:47
Cox: Well, it caused us to have to tighten the security of confidentiality of such agreements, and a reprimand of the director in an attempt to impress upon the board—the board didn't need much sermonizing. They understood the enormity of the loss of Gelbaum's money, which was in the millions, and the pressure that then led to identify other more diverse revenue streams.

05-00:55:18
Eardley-Pryor: I see. And that's the context in which the Chesapeake Energy opportunity arose?

05-00:55:23
Cox: Yes.

05-00:55:24
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Share, if you would, another controversy that involves the relationship of the Sierra Club to The Clorox Company, and what happened during this time in the late aughts, the 2008 to 2010 period, with the Club's relationship with Clorox?

05-00:55:43
Cox: Well, we were approached by Clorox, who was intending to roll out a new household cleaning product called Green Works and a desire to have the Sierra Club endorse that, to be able to put the Sierra Club logo on its label.

The Sierra Club was very interested in attempting to get into and reform different industry sectors that were the sources of toxic pollution and toxic products on the shelf. Because if we could affect that or find some way to leverage change within the industry, we would have an enormous input into the consumer market in changing their behaviors that, in turn, would lead to a diminution of toxics in the waste stream, for example. So, we did sign an agreement with Clorox—that was headquartered right across the [San Francisco] Bay, I believe, from our [Sierra Club] headquarters—and went forward with that, received annual royal payments. This became quite controversial within the Sierra Club because this was not anonymous. We wanted to actually publicize this, and certainly Clorox wanted to publicize it in order to have consumers choose Green Works, which was a nontoxic, organic-produced substance, as opposed to other household cleaners that had toxic chemicals in them. That was the overarching principle that led the Sierra Club to make this business partnership.

05-00:57:23

Eardley-Pryor: Well, I was wondering was there—what kind of debate was there within the board or others that were making a decision to engage in that partnership, to follow through on it? I think you did a great job explaining intentions for why some people in the Club thought that that was a reasonable partnership to make, to try to change the organization of the industry from within and have some leverage within. What was the debate about actually going forward with the decision, even before it became publicized?

05-00:57:50

Cox: Well, particularly among some of the older generation of Club members that were—that had had battles with chemical companies, including Clorox. So, Clorox had become a label that was tainted by its membership in the toxic industry sector. And so, it was the same dynamic of whether one cooperates in order to reform a sector or remains pure and having nothing to do with it. And Clorox was such a prominent label that it was just too much for some people to be able to accept even the strategic rationale that we were putting out, that we tried to articulate as quickly as we can, that we were moving away from the very grievance people were concerned about through this leverage, by encouraging support for a nontoxic option in the marketplace.

05-00:58:56

Eardley-Pryor: This [Clorox] issue arose in the wake of David Gelbaum's money being outed as some sort of secret funding. And so, I can see how some people in the [Sierra Club] membership would be concerned about what the Club is doing in order to maintain its revenue streams and seeing this and not being able to see the strategic reasons or value behind the partnership.

05-00:59:19

Cox: Yeah. The Clorox controversy was not connected to the Chesapeake money at the time because that was anonymous, and Clorox was its own controversy, drawn in upon itself.

05-00:59:32
Eardley-Pryor: Right, but just thinking about Gelbaum being outed and that, itself, being controversial in some ways, was known at the time. And so, in light of all that.

05-00:59:38
Cox: Well that's—yes, yes.

05-00:59:40
Eardley-Pryor: So, what ended up happening as a result of this controversy that did erupt around Clorox?

05-00:59:47
Cox: Well, ultimately, we ended that as well. And I think that became almost a mutual decision with Clorox itself deciding the relationship had served its purpose. The Sierra Club, and then especially with [Michael] Brune's coming in [as Sierra Club executive director in 2010], we chose to end that as well. It was just too much controversy around it. We are also developing other sources of income, increasingly, most importantly, from Mayor [Michael R.] Bloomberg of New York.

05-01:00:22
Eardley-Pryor: Share with me, if you would, what that was, because I was going to ask—the follow-up question I was going to ask was, what were these new revenue streams in light of these big donation chunks or partnerships in some ways going sour among some of the membership? How did the Club maintain its funding?

05-01:00:37
Cox: Well, the principal source among outside donations, of course, was Mike Bloomberg, who became interested in our Beyond Coal campaign, dedicated to work on climate change through his foundation. Our [Sierra Club] development team, our fundraising team, had developed a relationship with Bloomberg, as had Carl Pope, personally, working with Bloomberg. And as a result, the [Bloomberg Philanthropies] foundation became very interested in the Sierra Club as the most effective vehicle through which to work to move the needle on carbon, to eliminate CO2 from the atmosphere, and to eliminate coal-burning power plants. So, we received an initial grant to be spread out over a number of years of $50 million from Bloomberg.

05-01:01:30
Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

05-01:01:31
Cox: And in the years since then, he renewed that commitment with another 50 million in subsequent years.

05-01:01:38
Eardley-Pryor: That is substantial funding.

05-01:01:41
Cox: It is substantial, yeah.

05-01:01:42
Eardley-Pryor: And I've heard of these structures, too, that there is a sun setting. So, instead of creating an endowment that you can continually draw funds from, to instead say, "Here's the money, you have it for a short time, so really make good use of it." And clearly, he thought that the Club did, in order to re-fund it again.

05-01:02:00
Cox: Well, he did, but I must say—and this is part of the evolution of foundation funding more generally in the US—the Bloomberg [Philanthropies] foundation required fine-tune, granular metrics be met in order to continue the funding in the next quarter or the next year. Like the number of contacts made in the neighborhood that was being mobilized, for constituents turnout out at a utility commission, [metric tons of CO2 removed, etc.] down to the fine points of reporting from our staff and our volunteer activists on the ground that would be gathered through quarterly reports back to the foundation to justify the money. Very quantifiable requirements increasingly coming out of major foundations.

05-01:02:55
Eardley-Pryor: And I imagine that also would require greater staffing in order to be able to amass that knowledge and share it back with the Bloomberg foundation.

05-01:03:04
Cox: It did require some additional staffing on the financial side, but on the other side, it allowed for an enormous expansion of Beyond Coal organizers in the states all over America. So, we were able to then newly hire hundreds and hundreds of organizers in Michigan, North Carolina, Illinois, all over the country, that could work to advance those [Sierra Club] chapters' work to mobilize citizens, in those days to bring expertise into utility hearings, for example, or into legislatures. Those ground-level organizers were, in turn, reporting to regional managers. Because we had so many staff hires, we were having to institute regional grassroots organizing managers who, in turn, reported to our field director, Bob Bingaman in Washington, DC, and to the co-pairs of the Beyond Coal campaign itself.

05-01:04:13
Eardley-Pryor: How did that Beyond Coal campaign structure of new hires and staff members relate to what you told me earlier about these co-pairs that were part of the second Project Renewal restructuring?

05-01:04:26
Cox: Well, yes, that was a prime example of the co-pairs was the Beyond Coal campaign. A volunteer leader who was the co-pair with Bruce Nilles became an expert in energy policy, a brilliant woman, knew the details. I mean, she could have been a full-time staff member working with Bruce.

05-01:04:48
Eardley-Pryor: And who are you talking about there?

05-01:04:50
Cox: I'll have to confirm the name and insert that later. [Verena Owen]

05-01:04:53
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. That's good to bring her up though. Well, you mentioned that in the 2010, you were involved in—well, Carl Pope stepped down as his role as [Sierra Club] executive director, and you were involved in a search for a new executive director. In light of these ongoing challenges with trying to find new funding and the direction of the Club evolving, what was the experience you had in hiring a new executive director in the wake of Carl leaving? What were your hopes that that person would do in this new setting that the Club had—the new course the Club was following?

05-01:05:28
Cox: Well, one of our principal criteria was hiring somebody that had strategic capability that Carl [Pope] had. Carl was brilliant as a strategist, still is. And within this new environment, of a great deal of resources now coming into the Sierra Club for its climate work, somebody that not only could manage a growing, complex nonprofit organization, but continue to guide it in a really smart, strategic manner. I remember one exchange I had with Mike [Brune] during the interview process, and we had superb potential hires coming through in-person interviews in San Francisco. We presented Mike with a set of problems that the Sierra Club was facing or potentially could face. I remember Mike pausing and in a very calm manner said, "Those are precisely the kind of problems I would enjoy attempting to solve" and went for the problem rather than trying to back off or fumble, but there was a kind of inner confidence and a calmness with which he engaged with some of these thorny issues we were bringing up.

05-01:06:52
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. I'm wondering about, in that context of hiring, the Club's long experience with executive directors in hiring somebody from outside the Club, particularly in light of the challenges the Club had in bringing in outsiders in the eighties, the previous executive directors that did not work. And then realizing that they would elevate Carl [Pope], who had been a part of the Club for so long, knew the organization, knew its ins and outs, and the things that he thought needed to change within it, and then took on that mantle. What was it like making a decision of bringing somebody from outside the Club to lead it at this time?

05-01:07:28
Cox: There was not an obvious candidate emerging from within the inside of the Sierra Club. The candidate I would have turned to, if there had been, would be Bruce Hamilton, who was the conservation director, right-hand person with Carl, just a knowledgeable, deep knowledge of the environmental movement in the Sierra Club, still working as the assistant to Mike Brune. We also were

cognizant of those past hires of Doug Wheeler and Michael Fischer that did not work out. And so, I think we were attempting to identify people from within the environmental movement itself, at least, as opposed to business or government coming in. And, of course, Mike Brune had been the executive leader of Rainforest Action Network that was also based in San Francisco. So, we had some working knowledge of his operation and how he worked, his leadership, and the support his staff had for him. Mike also had developed high-level contacts in the movement and in the entertainment industry in Hollywood. He was charismatic, obviously bright, and it appeared to us that, given his age, a relatively young executive director, that the Rainforest Action Network, given its scale, much smaller than the Sierra Club, that Mike was at the point where he—it was clear that he would enjoy the challenge of moving up to the next level of operation. And it turned out to be a really smart hire. He has worn well with the Sierra Club. He has been a strong leader, and he is particularly sensitive to evolving challenges within the larger society right now, particularly with issues of justice, race, ethnicity, and so forth, as well as with the importance of building out a broader progressive movement where environmental groups are not of their own silo, working alone, but increasingly not only in just coalitions, but in a true partnership with others, in a progressive movement that shares many values across these organizations.

05-01:10:02

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. That's really good to hear. You mentioned how, in 2010 when Mike Brune does come onboard, he calls this emergency board meeting to say, "We're no longer accepting Chesapeake gas money." And it makes me think about the question, what did the Sierra Club do for new funding? You mentioned [Michael] Bloomberg's big donation came in and got renewed. What I'm wondering is, perhaps, the role of micro-donations? The fact you can have these small, five-, ten-dollar, twenty-dollar donations that I see happening in political campaigns now able to raise or generate significant income. Is that something the Club has shifted to as well? Beyond just its membership money, beyond these major donations, is there an effort to try to capture these micro-donations as part of Club finances?

05-01:10:53

Cox: Well, two other broad areas: in addition to membership dues and in attempting to recruit new members, the Club was also developing greater communication capacities online—social media, through other outlets—to engage millions of people in supporting Sierra Club campaigns. Their contributions, their signatures on petitions, we were capturing all of that now, increasingly and aggregating that data as part of a base of income we could regularly renew or expand. So today, the Sierra Club counts as its membership base what it calls "members and supporters." And I don't know the current account, but the last I saw was like 2.5 million members and supporters.

05-01:11:52

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, I think they're up to three and a half million now.

05-01:11:55
Cox: Three and a half million now. Yeah.

05-01:11:56
Eardley-Pryor: That's not necessarily dues-paying members. It's people that are engaging in Sierra Club activities.

05-01:12:02
Cox: Engaging in Sierra Club activities through supporting calls for action, or contributions made in soliciting for support of a campaign. So that's one broad area that's been increasing a more diverse revenue stream. The other is estate planning. I mentioned in an earlier conversation between us that we were doing more work with older Sierra Club members to get them to add the Sierra Club to their estate planning. And so, we were beginning to receive the payouts from estates as they were being settled increasingly, as well as other large donations.

05-01:12:46
The Sierra Club Foundation has had a major role in developing sources of income through its different donor circles that it cultivates, and it will sponsor certain inside briefings from the executive director of the Sierra Club for donors at a certain level, or events in Washington [DC] or in certain special locations to give them an outing, in a sense, but also an opportunity to meet with national leaders of the Sierra Club for insider briefings. And so, we've developed a concentric circle of medium- to larger-sized donors through the [Sierra Club] Foundation. And then, the Sierra Club requests grants from the Foundation to come over to the Club side, the 501(c)(4) operation, to undergird a lot of our campaigns, at least for the educational component since a lot of our campaign work is information campaigns to educate the public, to educate the public officials, that's not linked necessarily to direct asks or advocacy appeals.

05-01:13:56
Eardley-Pryor: That's great, that's great context to think about how the Club's finances have evolved over time. It's wonderful perspective. And particularly in light of, you mentioned, these education campaigns and the need to engage at these new state-level entities around energy issues, I mean a whole set of principles and topics that traditional Sierra Club activists might not have as much experience in but needed to have.

05-01:14:19
Cox: Right, yeah, absolutely.

05-01:14:20
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. I want to ask as well, in 2011, I have a note you became the chair briefly of another board advisory committee called Visibility and Outreach. What was it that that committee did, and what was your role in it?

05-01:14:34

Cox: That committee's charge was to enhance the Sierra Club's identity within a marketplace of competing organizations, to clarify its—the term at the time being used was "brand." What is the Sierra Club's core identity, and how is it enhanced or publicized? Or, how do we move beyond the public thinking of the Sierra Club simply as developing calendars, for example, which was in the minds of many, to help understand the Club as the principal guardian of the environment, both its public lands and the health and safety of communities? We were fortunate to have as a new hire in that area, Club operations, the former editor of the Los Angeles newspaper, Bob Sipchen, Pulitzer Prize winner himself. And he brought a lot of expertise in branding and modernization of Club communication vehicles, including the importance of hiring as a new staff a specialist in public opinion polling. Because we needed a better understanding of market segments of where the Club was recognized and what was the recognition. How did they identify us in that segment, or other segments where we had potential for growth but we weren't known? And so, we had to build a knowledge base of our audience essentially in communication terms. So, Bob brought a lot of recognition of these different communication challenges from his background in the news media.

05-01:16:28

Eardley-Pryor: Help me understand how this expansion of the marketing or the branding that the Club has—and even bringing in these polling specialists to understand where growth opportunities are, and where the Club can evolve in terms of its branding—help me understand the relationship of that to, then, the expansion of Club activism in different areas. How do those things interact and intersect?

05-01:16:54

Cox: Well, the Sierra Club has had an analogy for decades of a ladder—a ladder of engagement. That, initially, one encounters the Sierra Club through some news event or a personal relationship. They might attend a local chapter or a group program meeting to learn about an issue. Their initial action might simply be nothing more than signing a petition that's handed around. But increasingly, we attempt to engage members that have some interest in becoming more active through different layers of involvement of activity—joining a committee, taking on leadership, and so forth. But our challenge was developing a greater base of activists and leaders within areas, such as the Hispanic community, where we had less recognition or support.

05-01:17:53

So, one of the things we developed out of the Visibility Committee and Bob Sipchen's leadership was Spanish-language radio, Sierra Club radio, and beginning to communicate a lot of our work, websites, and so forth in Spanish language, as well as English—of having training events in different communities, of working in alliance with nontraditional allies in urban areas, for example, and attending conferences of religious leaders. In Texas, for example, an alliance with hunters and then even an NRA [National Rifle Association] alliance at a certain event, with posters and petitions being

handed out on something that threatened the interest of both who use the outdoors. So, just a lot of interest in attempting to expand the Sierra Club's identity and recognition among new audiences, and building out the communication vehicles to do that.

05-01:19:04
Eardley-Pryor: As a means to then bring them into whatever points of activism they might be passionate about?

05-01:19:11
Cox: To do that, as well as simply support for the Sierra Club's initiatives through letter-writing, donations, money, as well as activism—the full gamut of involvement with the Club.

05-01:19:23
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, do you have any other thoughts about—I was going to take a pause, if you don't mind, before we dive into your post-board of director experiences, your time after you cycle off the [Sierra Club] board after being on it for twenty years. Is there anything that you want to reflect back on about that time that you were on the board, as it came to its end?

05-01:19:46
Cox: I think that we've covered most of the key issues. I was increasingly being interviewed by some interesting journalists as I was nearing my career end. Former *New York Times* environmental columnist Andrew [C.] Revkin invited me into his classroom at Pace University for a rather lengthy interview on camera with his students to talk about how the Sierra Club operates and some of my involvement with the Sierra Club. So that's—

05-01:20:21
Eardley-Pryor: That was a great interview! I saw parts of that, and I thought it was really cool because, in part, it sounded to me like the students had read a lot of your scholarship. They had read, at least, your book *Environment Communication* [*Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*, SAGE pub., 6th ed, forthcoming 2021] this foundational book that still is the textbook on environmental communication, and then were able to engage with you in this online dialogue. I thought that was a really cool use of technology, and reflective of where you were at in your career with the success of the book.

05-01:20:48
Cox: Yeah, Andy Revkin was actually teaching a course in environmental communication, and the required textbook for his class was my textbook, *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere.* And it's now a co-authored textbook with my PhD student Phaedra Pezzullo, whom I've mentioned several times in our interviews. We're about to bring up our sixth edition next year of that book.

05-01:21:12
Eardley-Pryor: That's a heck of a successful book. And I think Phaedra had mentioned that it's even being translated into Chinese right now?

05-01:21:18
Cox: It was. An earlier edition was translated into Chinese. It's been translated into Korean and, I think, a couple of other languages.

05-01:21:27
Eardley-Pryor: That to me, itself, is fascinating—thinking how the cultural context of communication could be so different in those cultures, and yet some of the ideas in it are still fundamental enough that they can translate to those separate cultures.

05-01:21:41
Cox: It's been interesting. I've been surprised, and I felt honored that they would be taking up the book. That's nice to see.

05-01:21:50
Eardley-Pryor: Well, if you don't mind, Robbie, can we take a little break here before we dive into the next section?

05-01:21:55
Cox: We will do that.

05-01:21:55
Eardley-Pryor: Great.

[break in audio]

05-01:21:59
Eardley-Pryor: All right, Robbie. So, I want to move into this period just before you cycle off the [Sierra Club] board of directors. In the spring of 2013 is when your term, your last term ends on the board of directors. But in January of 2013, there is a decision to change a 100-year-old—102-year-old policy in the Club as to how it can conduct its activism and its protests. Can you talk about what that change was, and why you think it mattered?

05-01:22:29
Cox: Yes, part of the Sierra Club's mission statement for decades and decades, or a century, that it would pursue our mission of protecting the Earth and the communities through all lawful means. And that was interpreted always as, we would not engage in a civil disobedience, even peaceful civil disobedience, because that, after all, was civil law disobedience. But in the context of climate change, I think the Sierra Club and other organizations were realizing the exigence, the urgency of intervening on certain key decisions that were either going to exacerbate climate change or be an opportunity to pause or pull back. The [Keystone] XL Pipeline construction was one of those moments where, if it was completed, it would be a straw sucking out from the earth even more carbon deposits, sunk carbon that was

now being released, and that would fuel another round, for decades, of emission of CO2 into the atmosphere.

05-01:23:42
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, I remember Bill McKibben framing the XL Pipeline in particular as "game over" for climate.

05-01:23:48
Cox: That phrase was being used widely. So, Michael Brune really brought the issue to the board and requesting modification of the policy. But I have to say that Mike supported a process whereby we did reach out to our leaders throughout the Sierra Club, surveyed broadly, conversations unfolded around this. We were, obviously, very conservative in going into this direction because of the fear that it would unravel for those who are untrained in the use of civil disobedience. Everyone was conscious of its importance in the civil rights movement of the sit-ins, and the training, and the commitment to a certain set of values in order to act in a way that didn't bring disrepute onto the movement itself. The ultimate rationale was really the rare use of civil disobedience, only at a point where it also made strategic sense to employ that intervention. That was one of the things that I raised with Mike when we talked and had a phone conversation about it. I said, "I can support this change if we have very clear guidelines that it's used in a context where the strategic purpose is made clear, and there's appropriate training, and it has clearance from certain levels of the Club before it is authorized. That it can't simply be a common tool in the toolbox of local entities and activists who can use it anytime they wished." There had to be a carefully monitored use of the policy.

05-01:25:37
Eardley-Pryor: And tell me again why you think it needed to have those layers of approval in order to be used?

05-01:25:45
Cox: In order to forestall the misuse of it that would bring negative consequences for the Sierra Club, and not to overuse it because if it's common everyday use, then it loses its strategic value. And in fact, when we did use it the first time at the gates of the White House in protest against the XL Pipeline, it received enormous publicity all over the country. Because here it was, the Sierra Club in its over-one-hundred-year history, now willing to do this because of the importance of the issue and the imminence of the decision being made about the pipeline. So, it was used wisely and strategically, and if you use it for everyday common events, and without a lot of training and dignity to carry it out, it loses its value.

05-01:26:40
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. So that decision, that policy is changed in early 2013, and in that spring is the end of your term on the Sierra Club board of directors. What were you feeling, coming to the end of this time period, knowing you were

cycling off the board of directors that you had been a part of for 20-some years almost?

05-01:27:03
Cox: Well, I was feeling that I had been part of it for twenty-some years, and it was probably time. I was also becoming very sensitive to the board reproducing itself in a sense, that longtime directors had such an incumbent advantage that it was taking up space for more diverse candidates to come forward to have an interest. I made a decision that I would not seek reelection after my one-year term off, but rather I requested to be appointed to the Nominating Committee in an effort to seek reform of the election process itself, as one avenue to try to open up the Sierra Club at its national leadership level to a more inclusive and diverse set of leaders.

05-01:27:56
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. And that Nominating Committee, it sounds to me like an extraordinarily powerful committee in decisions that it makes to then allow entrée onto the board.

05-01:28:06
Cox: Well, it is the funnel through which leaders have a chance to be on the national ballot itself, an opportunity for members to support them to the board, unless one comes through the petition process, which takes a great deal of signatures in order to qualify for that. That was one of the election reforms we made after the Groundswell Sierra effort was to increase the number of signatures that were required because, at the time, it was widely viewed that you only needed to get a few hundred signatures and you could qualify for the board of directors. And that became known among our opponents and was kind of an invitation to run for the board of directors. So, we tried to guard the process a little more, but still make it available under California nonprofit regulations.

05-01:29:02
Eardley-Pryor: I remember you telling me earlier that you were interviewed by the Nominating Committee in the early nineties, but they felt like, at the time, you weren't quite ready to be on the national board. But within a few more elections, you did find yourself placed under the board and quickly put into the presidency. In light of that, I'm wondering, now that you have a chance to serve on this Nominating Committee, if you can share how those decisions are made as to who does get a green light and who does not?

05-01:29:30
Cox: Well, for one thing, I wanted to alter the terms of election so that incumbent directors running for reelection would not be able to, let's say, get the endorsement of other directors on their ballot statement. That was an advantage incumbents had that a new member rising through the ranks being interviewed would not have usually. I had also recommended—it was not adopted—that the board change its bylaws to reserve one or more seats on the

board for special appointment in order to ensure balance on the board, greater diversity. I was disappointed that that was not accepted.

05-01:30:24

But in terms of the nominees that we considered, we were looking not simply for people that had Sierra Club experience at the chapter level or on a committee—certainly, that knowledge of the Club—but by this point, the movement had really matured, and there were really great leaders among many different organizations, many of whom had worked with the Sierra Club, and those could bring in new perspectives, and particularly those that were more diverse ethnically, different than the usual aging, white membership of the Sierra Club board of directors. And we made a special recruitment effort to try to identify and bring more and more on. It was a challenge because of the Club's reputation, because of the incumbency factor. It was not a welcoming route to, then, be involved with the Sierra Club because of the power of reelection by incumbent directors.

05-01:31:29

Eardley-Pryor: Do you think that that has since changed?

05-01:31:34

Cox: I think the board has become more diverse, younger certainly, reaching out beyond traditional Sierra Club routes of membership. So, I think the Nominating Committee and the board itself has been more welcoming, and the membership more willing to support younger members and more diverse members of the board.

05-01:31:59

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, in addition to this Nominating Committee work, it's not that you ended your time of engagement with the Sierra Club, it's just you were no longer on the board of directors. But another part of your continued engagement with the Club is that, the following year in 2014, you then served on a different campaign as a volunteer co-chair, where you mentioned these co-pairs. What was the campaign that you joined, and what did you do in 2014?

05-01:32:28

Cox: Well, this was a campaign that came out of the result of a lot of conversation that the leaders were having, Mike Brune was having with his staff, the Beyond Coal campaign was having with the board. While we were actively involved in shutting down fossil fuel sources of energy, it was felt we weren't doing enough to be proactive in getting a message about clean energy out to the public and helping to advance that conversation nationally for willingness to support wind, solar, conservation, battery power, and so forth. And, ultimately, this came together as a proposal for a campaign. Initially, it was called Mineshare, but we settled on the term Ready For 100. And that referred to the fact that our goal would be conversion to 100 percent clean or

renewable energy in cities and towns and states across America, and that we were ready now to advance that vision.

05-01:33:40

We had done focus groups and opinion polling in preparatory to designing this campaign that revealed something really interesting. We found a disconnect between what people were willing to support—clean energy, including 100 percent clean energy—but people thought it was unattainable, that it was maybe in the remote future, the technology didn't exist, there wasn't the political will to support it. We found all of this in our opinion survey. Well, for goodness' sakes, that's calling out for a convincing public will campaign. That is to say, if the public becomes convinced, becomes convinced that clean energy technology exists, that there are examples of where it's working, and if that can be amplified in a narrative that is compelling and gets national attention, we'll have more of a constituency behind clean energy initiatives, starting at the grassroots level, local, cities, and towns across the United States, and then other large institutions, universities, businesses. So, that was the conceptual underpinning for this.

05-01:35:02

Eardley-Pryor: Who were you working with to develop this new strategy for what became Ready For 100?

05-01:35:07

Cox: This incredibly savvy, bright, young woman, Jodie Van Horn was right there at the beginning who helped us conceptualize this to develop what we call a theory of change, how we would go about accomplishing this—in other words, a strategy that would move this forward. And I can mention that just briefly, the strategy really had two component parts: One was to target local cities and towns initially, starting with a small subset, give them grant money to support local activists, have staff resources, and to target them with a compelling message that clean energy works, it's ready now. With success in those initial pilot towns and cities, we then had something that we could broadcast or amplify more broadly.

05-01:36:06

So, the second part of the strategy was what we called an echo chamber. What we would do was take these early successes and broadcast them more broadly, nationwide, using editorials in major news outlets, celebrity spokespersons, news events coming out of the cities themselves that are picked up and shared widely on Facebook, Twitter, and social media. And then, that would become reinforcing. As more of the message circulated in a national narrative, there was more awareness on the part of yet other cities, "Yeah, this is happening now, the train's leaving the station, we can get behind this, too." As of today, starting with five local towns that we gave grants to, there are now 165 towns and cities across America that made a commitment that they will move toward a clean energy infrastructure, sourcing their energy sources from one of the many sources of renewable or clean energy.

05-01:37:14
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Nothing succeeds like success, to build on it though.

05-01:37:19
Cox: That really was operationalized as the strategy behind this campaign.

05-01:37:23
Eardley-Pryor: And even as it continues today. I even recall just recently seeing new cities that agreed to sign on board. So, this kind of grassroots activism is still happening and spreading.

05-01:37:34
Cox: It's spreading, and we've lined up mayors across America, mayors for climate change, mayors for clean energy. Youth organizations have taken this up. It's been a wildly successful campaign, and I give so much credit to Jodie Van Horn for the leadership on this effort.

05-01:37:51
Eardley-Pryor: That's wonderful. I also understand that you continued to remain involved on environmental issues, not just with the Sierra Club itself, that you also served on the board of another nonprofit group called EarthEcho International. Who are they, and how did you end up serving on the board with them?

05-01:38:09
Cox: Sure. EarthEcho International was a family foundation initially set up by the grandchildren of Jacques Cousteau, famous for his underwater exploration television show. Alexandra and Philippe Cousteau. Philippe, particularly, taking the lead with this foundation. Its mission was to work with high school and college students to help educate them in the importance of preservation of the Earth with a leading interest in water, rivers, oceans, clean renewable water, and more broadly linking water issues, the legacy of the Cousteaus, to issues of climate change, and to develop educational materials going into the school curricula across America, working with major school districts, Los Angeles, Chicago, others, to input curricula developed by EarthEcho International to bring awareness of these issues to a younger generation.

05-01:39:18
Eardley-Pryor: That sounds like great work. How did you get on their radar, or how did they get on your radar? How did that relationship evolve?

05-01:39:25
Cox: Well, the chair of the foundation was David Sontag, who was the former senior vice president for 20th Century Fox and had worked with Jacques Cousteau earlier and was a family friend with Philippe Cousteau, the grandson. But David ended up being a colleague of mine as he retired from 20th Century Fox, and he joined the communication faculty at the University North Carolina working with film and television production with some of our students. David knew that I had stepped down from Sierra Club board duties and approached me and asked if I would be willing to serve as board member of EarthEcho.

05-01:40:11
Eardley-Pryor: That's so great. Well, that leads to another question I had about what was going on in your academic career now that you're cycling off of your deep engagement at the board level, the national [Sierra Club] board of directors level, but still doing environmental activism there and within other organizations and other committees. What was going on your academic career during this time as you cycled off the national board of directors?

05-01:40:34
Cox: Well, by that point, I had also retired in one sense from the University North Carolina as an active professor meeting classes, working with faculty committees. But I wanted to continue my scholarly writing and research program, and so I was working more as an emeritus professor. I had more opportunity to engage in publications. I was asked to co-edit a major work that defined the field of environmental communication, brought together contributors from around the world, defining different aspects of environmental communication from media to journalism covering climate change, working with a colleague in the UK, Anders Hansen. So, we brought out a major volume for Routledge, our publisher, that covered the field of environmental communication in way that was comprehensive, that brought it all together in one major publication. [Hansen and Cox, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Environment and Communication,* 2015]

Well, at that point, SAGE Publications in London also contacted me, that it was time to assemble the classic works of scholarship that had developed since the birth of the field of environmental communication just before the turn of the new century and then up through the last couple decades in a four-volume series, if I would identify and help select the classic articles, and then write the introduction and a background on the growth of the field, define it. [*Environmental Communication*, SAGE, 2015]. And so, SAGE brought out four volumes representing that scholarship. So, I've tried to keep my hand particularly in attending to the growth and nurturing and the definition of the field itself that I'd had such an interest in from an early stage in my own career, so attending our own.

05-01:42:32
Eardley-Pryor: It looks as you're reinitiating on your role in helping form that subdiscipline itself. I'm asking in the context of that, how did you stay abreast of the explosion of the field to know what were the key debates and how they were evolving to reengaging your scholarship this way?

05-01:42:50
Cox: Well, for a while, I served as an advisory editor for one of the lead journals in the field, the journal of *Environmental Communication*. Initially, it was called *Environmental Communication*: *A Journal of Nature and Environment*, in short to just *Environmental Communication* today. You get a sense of the scholarship emerging increasingly internationally, developing the different areas of the field, drawing on that to continue keeping current my own

textbook along with Phaedra Pezzullo, bringing out a new edition every three years. So, continuing to have to look at the literature, be part of conferences. I would be speaking occasionally to different universities and in doing that looked into an area that I would like to talk about in a keynote, research that was new. So, it keeps me current thus far.

05-01:43:48

Eardley-Pryor: On that, I'm wondering, what is it that you hope, with this field that you helped give birth to and have helped nurture and redefine over time, what is it do you hope will happen with that field? What is your vision for it, and in what ways do you still hope to contribute to it?

05-01:44:09

Cox: Well, I had a vision for this field earlier on in 2007 when the journal *Environmental Communication* was launched. I was invited to write the inaugural essay in the journal, and I had been working with colleagues at UNC Chapel Hill who were out of the field of conservation biology. And they defined the field as a "crisis discipline" in the sense that we were losing endangered species, that we had only a limited time to make a difference, and that our scholarship should matter in terms of impacting decisions being made now that would preserve biodiversity or allow that to elapse. And I wanted to bring that concept into the field of environmental communication, so I developed an essay called "Nature's Crisis Disciplines," and asked the question, does environmental communications as a field have an ethical duty? [Robert Cox (2007) "Nature's 'Crisis Disciplines': Does Environmental Communication Have an Ethical Duty?" *Environmental Communication,* 1:1, 5–20] And in the essay, I've tried to elaborate what I thought that duty was—to allow our scholarship to inform decisions that are being made as a result of communication in the public sphere about the sustainability or enhancement of both natural and human communities. And that it was not advocating a partisan kind of scholarship but using our scholarship in a rigorous way to inform decisions that others were making that mattered in the outcome of the race to save a lot of the special resources and species.

05-01:45:49

Eardley-Pryor: It sounds to me like it's your hope or your vision, at least at that time, and I imagine it continues, is that to take this theoretical world in the ivory tower and to make it so it has some sort of legs. That it can be implemented in a way that has noticeable effects for change.

05-01:46:09

Cox: Well, that's precisely the hope the I have going forward. I'm in the process right now of revising the chapter in *The Routledge [Handbook of Environment and Communication]* volume that updates it. ["The Media/Communication Strategies of Environmental NGOs," *The Routledge Handbook of Environment and Communication*, 2nd edition] And in doing that, I'm calling for more of our scholarship to be oriented toward outcomes, or how does particular framing of a news article about clean water connect to

constituencies in that media market and decisions being made about water? So, as I say, what I remain interested in, nurturing and being part of the field, trying to ensure the outcome or the future orientation of the field is increasingly oriented toward mattering in the public sphere where outcomes are being debated today.

05-01:47:01
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, and not to remain in this academic realm in its own echo chamber. That's great.

05-01:47:06
Cox: Absolutely.

05-01:47:07
Eardley-Pryor: You mentioned earlier Barry Commoner, and I think of him as a scholar-activist, as somebody who helped set that frame for what that could be. And I think your life and career, both in the academy but especially in the realms of activism at a national level, you embody the scholar-activist through your life. I can appreciate you having that vision, that you hope that others take on that mantle in this field as well.

05-01:47:37
Cox: Well, thank you, but I have to say there are so many young graduate students now coming out of environmental studies, communication, the social movements, political science, that feel that they need to be in the field in some way to have credibility in their own pedagogy and teaching and research. So, it's a wonderful happening that's unfolding in the universities today.

05-01:48:04
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. As we move towards the end of our discussion today, and the end of your oral history, I'd like for us to talk about your reflections on the Sierra Club and how it's changed over time, and how it's remained such a dominant force in American politics, particularly around the environment. What are your thoughts as to how the Club has changed, and why it has changed?

05-01:48:33
Cox: Well, I think there are so many dimensions that explained the Sierra Club's sustainability and growth today, from getting involved in advocacy on electoral decisions after President Johnson stripped us of our tax-exempt status [in December 1966]. That was a huge opening that freed the Club to be a more activist organization. I think the advent of a law program [the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, now called Earthjustice] and developing competencies in all aspects of the public life and decisions. Obviously, the evolution of new technologies and means of communication has transformed a lot of the activism of the Club in its ability to be impactful, globally in some cases.

05-01:49:24

One of my hopes for the Club is that one of its initial strengths is not only continued but even given greater resources and enhanced, and that is its grassroots identity. The Sierra Club remains unique among the large national organizations. There are smaller organizations like the Sunrise Movement and 350.org and others that are emerging with the boots on the ground, with younger activists, and so forth. But among the big ten environmental organizations in the United States, the Sierra Club remains somewhat unique in having hundreds of thousands, and today even millions of members and supporters that are willing to be constituent powers in moving the political process. And there's always been a tension in the Sierra Club between staff and volunteers, between national and chapters. In some ways, that's worrisome, but in other ways, it's healthy because that tension ensures that neither can let go of the other. Grassroots activists do require the resources of a credible national organization able to operate at a scale beyond individual competencies. The national Sierra Club needs boots on the ground operating in towns and cities, and states, in Puerto Rico and Canada, in order to get its national priority campaigns moving ahead, to move the needle on carbon for example.

05-01:51:09

Eardley-Pryor: On that point, Robbie, you make mention of this dialectic between national versus chapters or staff versus volunteers, and that you need both. Those relationships exist on a spectrum, and I'm wondering if you think that spectrum has moved in a certain way that you think—that you wish was different, that you think it needs to be more balanced, or if you think it's in the appropriate place today?

05-01:51:36

Cox: Well, I think there is some worry on the part of some chapters and local activists that the sheer volume of national organizing staff being placed into states, into chapters, at times overwhelms local chapter authority and volunteer willingness. There's that concern, that's real, that's out there. Now, the Sierra Club is going through its own internal process today to reassess the right balance for this and the reporting relationships and coordination between chapters and national. I think both ends of this spectrum realized they've got to do a better job. This will always be a challenge for the Sierra Club given this identity of being a grassroots, democratically oriented, but national, powerful organization.

05-01:52:35

Eardley-Pryor: Do you think the shift that the Club has had on these traditional issues of land management and forests and wilderness to this new sense of involving itself in renewable energy, in topics of climate change, that transition that has happened where the Club has maintained work in the traditional fields of forestry and wilderness, but now taken on the mantle of climate change and all that it entails. Do you think that the structure of the Club is still appropriate? Do you think that the Club's relationship of grassroots and chapters and

national is still the right way for the Club to move forward given this broader spectrum of topics it is now engaged in?

05-01:53:20

Cox: Well, I think the Club's structure is what makes possible the spectrum of issues that are brought together in one organization that can relate them and have the resources to empower them. And the Club didn't just come lately to issues other than forestry and public lands, but starting in the seventies and eighties, certainly beginning to be concerned about air and water. Certainly, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* awakened the eyes of so many people. Earth Day 1970 continued to broaden our sense of the environmental movement, and within the last two decades, of course, climate change adding to that. I don't worry so much about those different pillars of issues that draw people to the Sierra Club. My concern is ensuring that the Sierra Club continually adapts and evolves, that it respects the grassroots power that gives it its strength and credibility, and that it navigates the current social challenges of diversity, justice, inclusion, and continuing to be part of the conversation in America today.

05-01:54:39

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. In order for the Club to survive ongoing years and years in the future, it needs to address these issues. I have a note here from previous discussions we had about the shift from legislative and political advocacy to electoral activity and endorsements from the Club, as part of its spectrum of change over time. How do you recognize that change, and what do you think about it?

05-01:55:05

Cox: Well, that change happened several decades ago as we realized we had to be supportive of elected officials if we were going to ask them to come over to our requests to make decisions on our issues, on water, on climate change now. And increasingly, members of Congress were saying to us two or three decades ago that "I've been with you on your issue on wilderness areas, but where were you when I had difficulty being reelected?" And that rationale really resonated, I think, with some of the earlier leaders of the Club, and we began moving into electoral politics. And like every new change in the Sierra Club, there were some that opposed, that were afraid the Sierra Club would become an adjunct of the Democratic Party, that it will be partisan. And the Sierra Club has made an effort for a long time—it's become harder lately—to be bipartisan and to endorse Republican and Democratic candidates for office, including for the US Congress. We've had a Republican member as president of the Sierra Club with Chuck McGrady. It is much more difficult now because the environment has become a polarized issue with one party [Republicans] being anti-science, anti-climate, anti-environment. It's very difficult then to endorse such political officials if that's their stance.

05-01:56:39
Eardley-Pryor: I wanted to ask you about that, in the context of the challenges against the notions of truth itself today. What role does environmental communications have in this new environment?

05-01:56:50
Cox: I think the Sierra Club is one of the voices that is strongly out there in support of science, of science literacy, of the pushback against this know nothing movement that echoes an earlier age in American politics of the Know Nothing party. Respect for science, science-based decisions, has always been part of the legacy of the Sierra Club, and to be able to defend its decisions in the public sphere never more so than today.

05-01:57:23
Eardley-Pryor: But if this respect for science that the Club advocates and relies upon to be effective is something that, itself, is questioned today at a broad level across the US political spectrum, what role then for environmental communications? Does it need to change? Are there new ways that environmental issues need to be communicated in this different environment where truth itself is questioned at a broad scale?

05-01:57:51
Cox: I think the politicians themselves, certainly those involved in the current presidential race [Joseph Biden and Kamala Harris for the Democratic Party], have made this one of their principal issues to speak about the integrity of science, that truth matters. Media institutions such as the *New York Times* even puts that out as a message in some of its full-page advertisement. I think it's more and more a recognition among a broad spectrum of the American public that the nature of truth, and particularly the respect for science, is on the table now for visible public discussion and is becoming, frankly, a voting issue.

05-01:58:32
Eardley-Pryor: I want to ask you here in conclusion about your thoughts on your legacy as an activist, as a professor, as somebody who helped shaped the direction of the Sierra Club itself to engage in these issues that it is engaging in today. What are some of your thoughts on your personal legacy now, towards the end of your career here?

05-01:58:54
Cox: Well, my thoughts as a professor go back to my students. One always hopes that you have some influence that what they have gained under your mentorship or your example carries forward. I've certainly seen that in a number of students, Phaedra Pezzullo [University of Colorado Boulder], Billie Murray [Villanova University], others around the country, Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz [University of Iowa], Christina [Foust, University of] Denver. The students that are out there developing courses in environmental communication, that are part of their community, city commissions that are doing that work, many of them teaching at universities but involved in their

own campaigns. They are engaged scholars, and they're reflecting that to their students.

05-01:59:51

And the Sierra Club, I hope some of the influence I've had, if I've left a sense of civility or an attempt to continue to look forward over the horizon, but to use some sense of judgment to balance competing interests, of trying to bring people together and to do so in a way that respects the other, and to be able to sustain the culture that enables the organization itself to prosper and remain healthy. That's why I'm so encouraged by one of the vision statements I've seen just recently of the Sierra Club—to envision a world that not only experiences justice that's sustainable and healthy, that respects people from all walks of life, that's involved in this common endeavor to preserve the planet and the communities that inhabit the Earth. That it's that kind of encompassing, humane, humanistic vision that has to still be what infuses the life of the Sierra Club and, I hope more broadly, the environment movement.

05-02:01:08

Eardley-Pryor: Robbie, it's been a delight to hear your oral history and to hear these stories of your engagement over a lifetime of activism and scholarship. I want to say thank you very much for all the time and knowledge that you've shared here in this experience.

05-02:01:23

Cox: Well, Roger, thank you for the work you've done in researching Sierra Club officials in your interviews. I want to thank the Oral History Center at The Bancroft Library and UC Berkeley who put this as part of their operation, to preserve this history of an important nongovernment organization in America in these recorded and preserved transcripts of a certain slice of history. It's important, so thank you.

05-02:01:54

Eardley-Pryor: Important to capture the voices of the people who actually made that [Sierra Club] institution possible. It's been a delight. Thank you for the pleasure and the opportunity to do so.

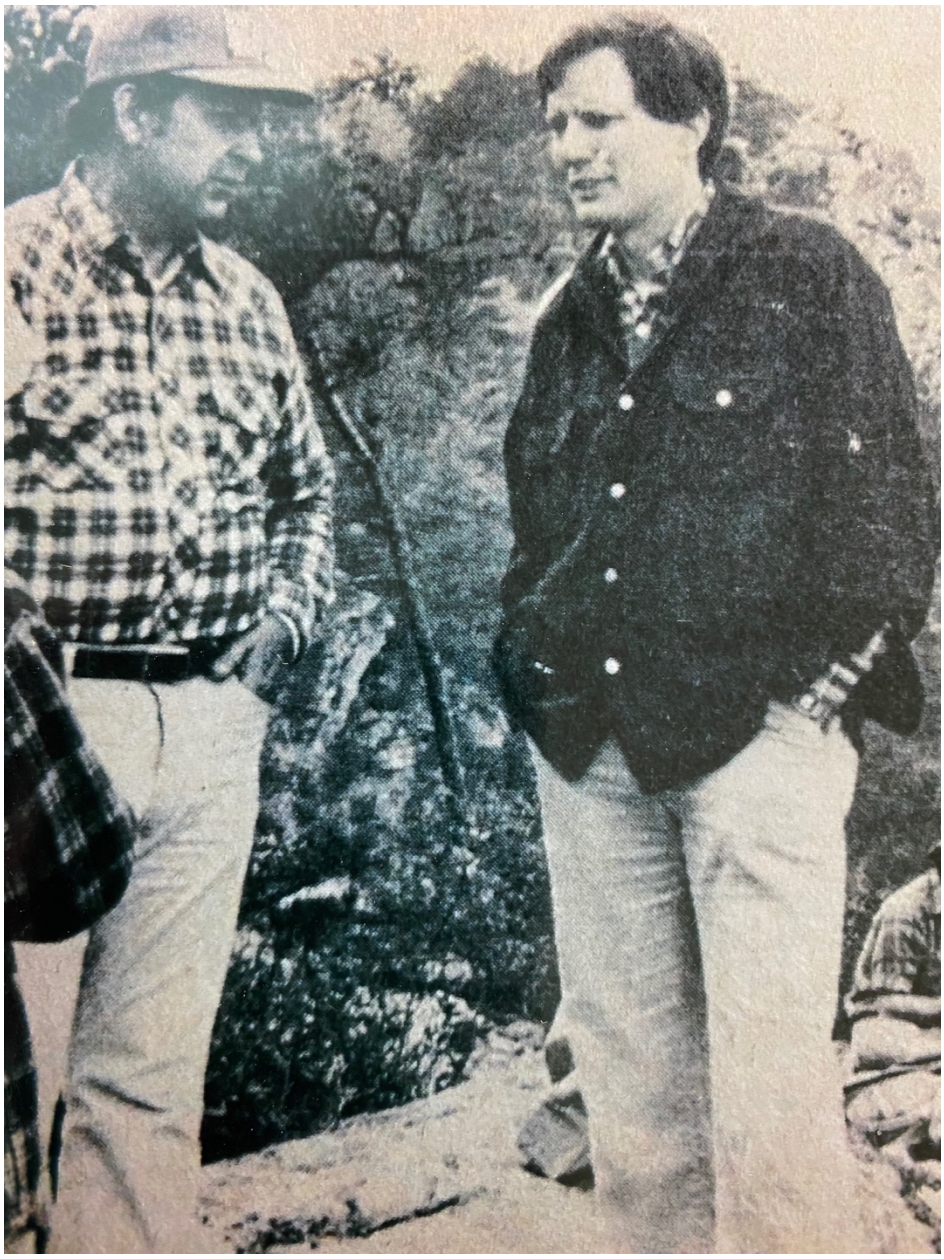
05-02:02:03

Cox: Well, thank you, Roger.

[End of Interview]

Appendix: Photographs courtesy of Robert Cox and Phaedra C. Pezzullo

Robert Cox (left) and Julia T. Wood (right) look out the window of Bingham Hall, which housed the Department of Communication where they both worked as professors at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Photo courtesy of Phaedra C. Pezzullo. (circa 1975)

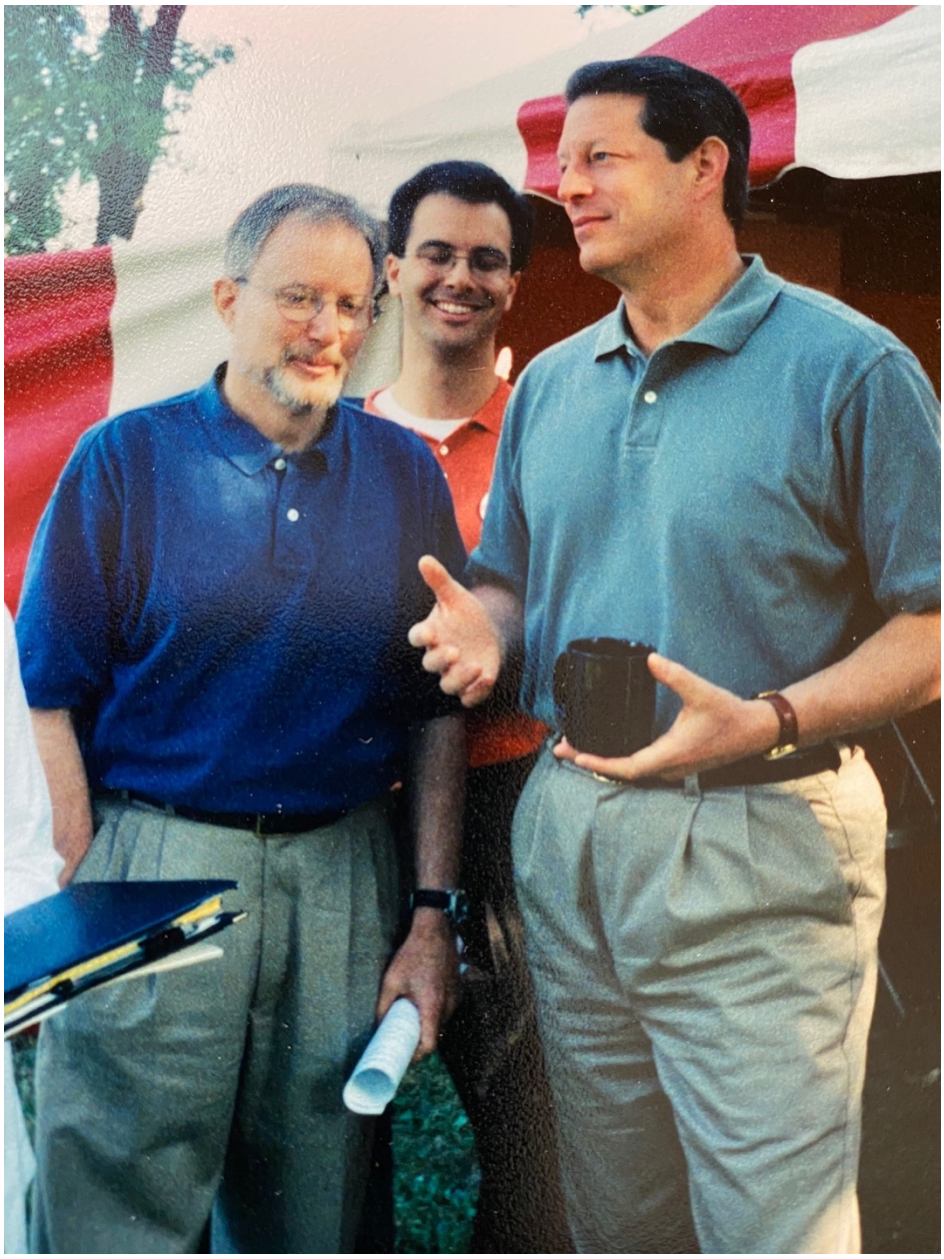


Robert Cox (right) with North Carolina Secretary of Natural Resources Joe Grimsley (left) discussing what would become the North Carolina Wilderness Act of 1984. (1984)

Robert Cox discussing Project Renewal recommendations for revising governance structures at a working retreat for the Sierra Club board of directors. (1994)

Robert Cox shortly after being elected for his first term as president of the Sierra Club. (1994)

Robert Cox (center) speaking as Sierra Club president at the
US Capitol Building while delivering to House Speaker Newt Gingrich
several green bags containing copies of the Environmental Bill of Rights petition
signed by more than a million Americans. (November 1995)



Robert Cox (left) and US Vice President Al Gore (right)
in Grand Rapids, Michigan, delivering the Sierra Club's public endorsement
of Mr. Gore for US President during the 2000 election. (July 2000)

Robert Cox accepting the National Communications Association's first
Christine L. Oravec Research Award for best book in Environmental Communication.
Photograph courtesy of Phaedra C. Pezzullo. (2006)

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Nature's "Crisis Disciplines": Does Environmental Communication Have an Ethical Duty?

Robert Cox

This essay proposes a heuristic conservation between the emerging field of environmental communication and the "crisis discipline" of conservation biology in order to generate a set of ethical postulates for research, teaching, and professional consultation. To the extent that social/symbolic representations of "environment" embody interested orientations, such discourses potentially constrain and/or enable societal responses to environmental signals, including signs of ecological crises. The essay argues that, implicit in this and other functional premises, lies a principal ethical duty of environmental communication: the obligation to enhance the ability of society to respond appropriately to environmental signals relevant to the well-being of both human communities and natural biological systems.

Keywords: Conservation Biology; Crisis; Crisis Discipline; Environmental Communication; Ethical Duty

There occur moments in the emergence of a field of inquiry when it seems beneficial to reflect on its mission or its self-understanding of the values or goals that it claims to pursue. Such a conversation appears to be underway in the field of environmental communication. For example, in the preface to volume 3 of *The Environmental Communication Yearbook*, Stephen Depoe noted that 2006 would mark the 10th anniversary of the founding of the Environmental Communication Commission within the National Communication Association; the 15th anniversary of the inaugural Conference on Communication and Environment; and the 25th anniversary of Christine L. Oravec's (1981) *Quarterly Journal of Speech* essay entitled

Robert Cox is a Professor of Communication Studies and the Ecology Curriculum at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Professor Cox has served on the Sierra Club's Board of Directors since 1994, and has also served two terms as president of the organization (1994–1996 and 2000–2001). This essay is based on the keynote address he presented at the 2005 Conference on Communication and the Environment held at Jekyll's Island, GA. Correspondence to: Department of Communication Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3285. Email: rcox1@email.unc.edu

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Abstract and first page of Robert Cox's essay on the ethical responsibility of environmental communication in the first issue of the then-new journal *Environmental Communication*. The essay was based on the keynote address Cox presented at the 2005 Conference on Communication and the Environment held at Jekyll's Island, Georgia. (May 2007)

Julia T. Wood, Professor of Communication Studies with a focus on personal relationships, intimate partner violence, feminist theory, and the intersections of gender, communication, and culture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 1975, Dr. Wood and Robert Cox married. (2009)

Robert Cox during one of his many treks through the Himalayan Mountains of Nepal. (2013)

Julia T. Wood and Robert Cox in North Carolina. (2014)