

# ENERGIZING THE MOVEMENT

*In four years, SEAC goes from grassroots to global*



Members of SEAC celebrate the growth of the organization at a winter conference at Boston College.

By Jamie Meighan, *Ball State Daily News*, Ball State U.

It all started with an advertisement in *Greenpeace* magazine. When 15 student activists started the Student Environmental Action Coalition at the U. of North Carolina in 1989, they simply wanted to create a national student environmental movement. An ad in an established environmental publication seemed the best way to do it. Evidently it worked. "We had really no money and very little sense on how you organize a non-profit organization," says Alec Guettel, UNC graduate and part of the original SEAC group. "It was an exercise in being creative and using common sense."

The coalition is now the largest student-created, student-run environmental group in the country with more than 2,000 college and high school chapters in the United States. SEAC networks with environmental groups in 53 countries.

"SEAC formed out of a need for student environmentalists to be networked with each other — to feed off of each other's energy," says Beth Ising, national office representative.

Prior to 1989, no major environmental group focused on college students, so SEAC sought to fill that gap, she says.

In the beginning, goals of the group included training advocates, sharing information and developing resources, says Adam Berrey, director of public outreach.

In 1989 SEAC organized Threshold, the first national student environmental conference. It attracted 1,700 students from 100 campuses to Chapel Hill, N.C. At the conference, the country was divided into 17 regions, which function as grassroots coalitions.

"SEAC tapped into a national concern with the conference," Berrey says.

Then in 1990, SEAC organized Catalyst, the second national conference at the U. of Illinois, attracting 7,600 students, a huge jump in less than two years.

SEAC had made its mark.

Today the focus of SEAC has changed. Organizers are concerned about educating communities about the connection between social problems and the environment.

SEAC is concerned, for example, that three out of five hazardous waste dumps are located in low-income and primarily minority areas. They call it environmental racism.

Students across the country keep in touch through a national magazine called *Threshold*. The magazine includes articles about student chapters along with organizing tips.

Tim Stevens, campus organizer for the National Wildlife Federation's Endangered Species program, led a workshop at the first conference and has watched the group evolve.

"SEAC has served to unite and galvanize the student environmental movement," he says. "Student efforts were very disjointed before SEAC came along."

Stevens praises the group because leaders emphasize the importance of organization. That organization has resulted in campus chapters nationwide taking strides to increase community awareness and involvement.

Taking a lead from the national office, Josh Knauer, a sophomore and SEAC member at Carnegie Mellon U., decided to bring together students nationwide. When he electronically mailed information to 300 students about starting a student environmental network, he never anticipated such interest.

That interest was the genesis of the Student Enviro-Link (INTERNET mailbox address: env-link@andrew.cmu.edu.), which has enrolled 300,000 subscribers in 35 countries and is growing daily. "I think we may have just reached 36 countries; I got a message from Saudi Arabia today," Knauer says.

The Student Enviro-Link receives hundreds of messages about environmental racism, illegal clearing of forests and toxic dumping. Knauer and others sort the messages and redirect about six news briefs free to subscribers daily.

The service also works as a motivational tool to stop environmental injustice. Subscribers, including students, professors and professionals, have access to action alerts telling them about opportunities for activism.

When a lumber company illegally began clearing the

Redwood Forest in California, Knauer notified environmentalists. Groups nationwide flooded legislators' phone lines with more than 5,000 phone calls, and the illegal clearing was stopped.

At Indiana U., students are carrying out SEAC's mission of addressing environmental social problems. For the past two years, SEAC(IUB) has battled university officials over the sale of 6,000 acres of ranch land. The land is located in Noxibee County, Miss., a low-income area where segregation still exists. Federated Technologies Inc. of Mississippi and Hughes Environmental Systems want to purchase the land for a hazardous waste incinerator.

Indiana U. students declared the sale an act of environmental racism. The lands most commonly targeted for waste sites, like in Mississippi, are low-socioeconomic areas where protest is minimal.

Protest against this site continued to grow because Indiana U. students began working with national organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, African Americans for Environmental Justice, community and other university environmental groups.

"The foundation has not made a statement about environmental racism," says Barbara Coffman, assistant to the president of Indiana U. Foundation. "We have heard from African Americans in Mississippi that the facility will provide an economic boost and offer low-paying jobs for the citizens." The sale of the land is pending.

## Overpopulation: The forgotten environmental problem

Don't look to today's college students for a sign that world population growth is a growing environmental concern.

"It's really easy to say we shouldn't cut down all the trees or kill all the whales. You can slap a bumper sticker on your car that says so. But you won't find one that says, 'Don't have babies' because it's not that simple," says David Garza, a senior at the U. of Texas.

Scientists are concerned about the underreported, under-protested strain on the Earth from supporting a growing population, though. "I would say that the speed of the population growth is more of a problem," says Rhoda Perozzi, environmental science professor at Webster U. in St. Louis. "I think we're seeing a reflection of general attitudes in college students."

Scientists believe that by 2025 current population levels will have doubled, taxing the Earth with a larger and faster rise in population levels than ever before. Each individual will compound the drainage of goods and raw materials while contributing to the pollution and contamination of the planet.

"I think it's a really big problem," says Joe Sawyer, a junior at the U. of New Mexico and member of the Students Earth Action. "Most of the students aren't concerned about it, though." — **Anaya Milligan, Journal, Webster U.**



PHOTO: NASA

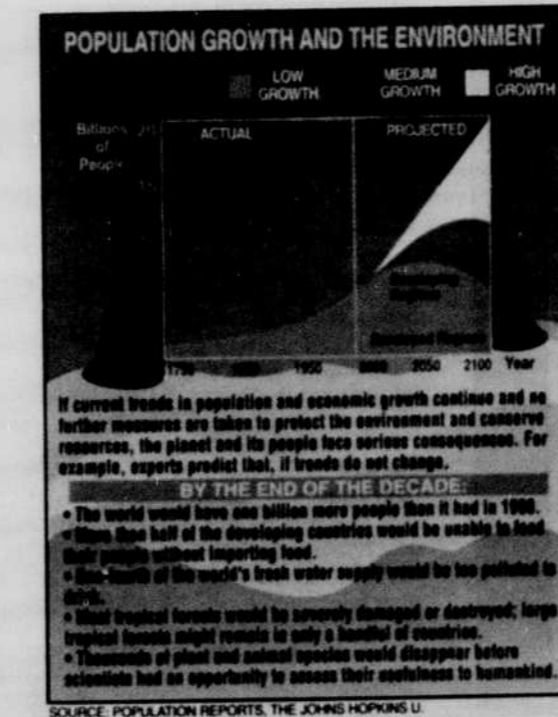
she says.

As SEAC celebrates its fourth year, organizers have focused on setting goals for the future. Berrey says the group hopes to broaden the student base of support and network across lines of culture, race and gender through the organization of 23 national conferences in the next three months. SEAC also will distribute *Campus Ecology*, a comprehensive environmental book which acts as an environmental blueprint for student organizations.

"Our mission statement is broadening and redefining the environmental movement," says Dave Hodges, SEAC national council coordinator. "The thing that's really encouraging to me as I look around the country I see people coming together around the environment," says Hodges, a U. of Arizona senior.

SEAC's mission of bringing together diverse groups of people with a common goal is becoming a reality.

"The thing we started out in 1989 is finally starting to happen. I look to the future, and I feel like we're just getting started," Hodges says. "We have a ways to go, but we're moving."



# PRESIDENTIAL PROMISES

*Students wait to see if Clinton and Gore deliver*

Student environmentalists hailed the election of President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore as a victory for their cause, though some remain skeptical about how much change will take place.

"The election of Clinton and Gore, for young people interested in the environment, was a great victory," says Beth Ising, national office representative for the Student Environmental Action Coalition, based in Chapel Hill, N.C. "Clinton's election redefines the way student environmentalists approach the environment. With Clinton, there is a real sense that he wants student environmentalists to be involved in the process."

Kelly McDowell, a senior from Michigan State U. and environmental activist, is skeptical, though, because both Clinton and Gore have many other political concerns.

"People who are not educated about the environment are more optimistic than those who are," she says.

Despite their views on the new administration, most students agree the environment is a large concern of college students.

"The condition of the environment is one of the biggest problems that face young people today," says Rhonda Diskin, a senior at Arizona State U., who has been active in environmental causes. She says students now feel included in the political decision-making process.

"I think we have people in the White House who will listen to our concerns about the environment and take our concerns seriously," Diskin says.

To ensure the White House listens, she says students will write letters, hold rallies and educate others about the issues.

One of the biggest concerns of Diskin and other student environmentalists is how the Clinton/Gore administration will balance environmental issues and economic goals.

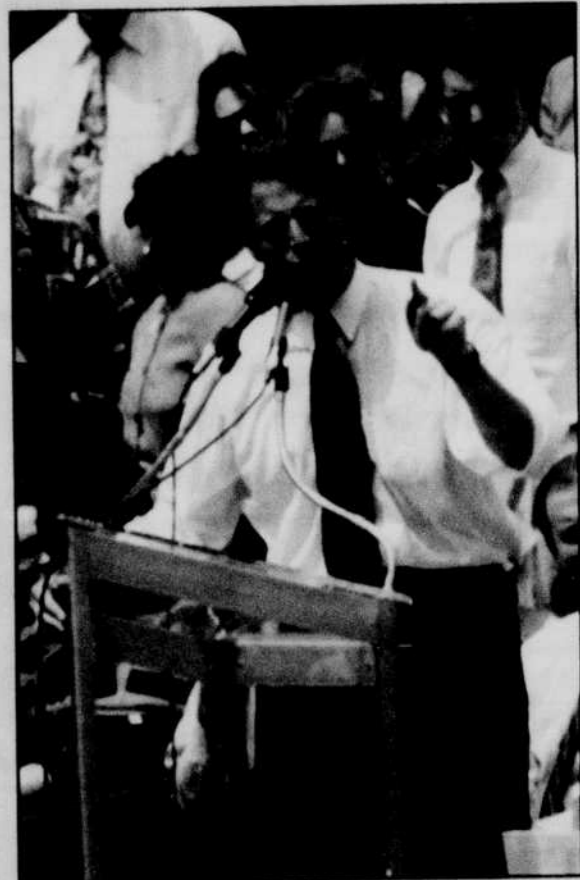
The Bush administration often described the relationship between business and the environment as adversarial, Ising says, "but Clinton realizes that jobs versus the environment is a false choice. Everything that's coming up on the Clinton agenda takes the environment into account."

Clinton defined his environmental agenda last year in an Earth Day speech at Drexel U. In the speech he spoke of a "new covenant for environmental progress." He promised his administration would "take the lead in promoting sustainable development." Among his other stated goals are to restore U.S. funding for the United Nations' population stabilization efforts. He promised to reduce energy consumption and increase energy efficiency by raising the average fuel-efficiency goals for auto makers to 45 miles a gallon and encouraging use of natural gas over oil, nuclear and coal.

Clinton also outlined his goals of preventing pollution by creating a system of tradable credits and tax incentives for business as well as drafting a national bottle bill to promote recycling.

In an exclusive interview with *U. The National College Magazine* before the election, Clinton highlighted global warming, waste management and the development of new, ecologically sound technologies as the three most pressing environmental concerns.

"Obviously if you control your energy costs, it's not only good for the environment, it helps the economy. So at home I would work on fuel efficiency, natural gas, alternative energy and conservation," he said.



Vice President Gore promises environmental progress.

So will Clinton make good on his promises?

Michigan State's McDowell is skeptical. "You can't be truly environmental if you're going to support economic growth," she says. "Gore is better than most politicians, but he's too moderate to get anything done."

Ben Beach, spokesman for the Washington, D.C.-based Wilderness Society, a group concerned with protecting the environment, says he is encouraged by the steps Clinton has taken in his first few months in office.

"We're pretty avid supporters of the energy tax because not only will it benefit the economy, but also the environment," Beach says. Clinton favors an energy tax to help reduce the budget deficit and encourage energy efficiency.

Many business leaders, however, have yet to be convinced that Clinton's environmental policies will benefit the economy. Allen E. Murray, chairman and chief executive officer of Mobil Corp., says the energy tax will have a negative effect on the economy.

"Mobil does not support the enactment of energy taxes of any type since they are narrowly based and will adversely affect the economy and America's competitiveness worldwide," Murray says. "The keys to long-term economic improvement in the U.S. are reducing the size of government and cutting federal spending."

For now, some of the most immediate environmental decisions facing the new administration will be the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Endangered Species Act, which is coming up for renewal in the next few months, Beach says.

In terms of the environment, NAFTA is controversial because many jobs will go to Mexico, which has lax environmental standards and poor labor laws.

While the administration, and in particular Vice President Gore, author of *Earth in the Balance*, has given environmentalists new hope, Ising says students' work is far from complete.

"Student environmentalists at SEAC don't intend to sit back; the administration needs to be pushed. Students in this country need to consistently remind the administration what is important."

By Liz Szabo, *Cavalier Daily*, U. of Virginia