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Immigration & environmentalism

The Sierra Club would destroy any chance of effective activism if its members approve a resolution against high levels of immigration

The saying used to be: "Politics makes strange bedfellows." These days, a more accurate version might be: "Strange bedfellows makes politics." Nevertheless, the older adage remains true for a great many issues. A few years ago, the odd alliances surrounding one of these issues were exposed as debate raged over giving benefits to immigrants.

California's Proposition 187 prevented illegal immigrants from receiving a variety of benefits, including health care and schooling. A similar measure at the federal level was included in welfare "reform," blocking even legal immigrants from receiving benefits.

Although the debate was about benefits, the larger issue of immigration levels quickly became important. Diverse parties such as Julian Simon, The Wall Street Journal and migrant labor activists argued in favor of immigration and against strict border patrol policies. On the other side, Pat Buchanan, labor and even some environmental leaders presented a range of reasons why immigration should be sharply restricted.

It was a battle that could not be resolved. Even California's government, which claimed to spend millions on immigrants because the federal government mandated social services while not allocating tax dollars to pay for them, acknowledged that migrant workers play a vital role in the state's agricultural economy. This key role is recognized by federal immigration law, which continues to make allowances for "seasonal" workers.

Nevertheless, despite continued and unacceptable scapegoating of immigrants, the economic cost of immigration remains unresolved. In a

traditional economic model, most studies — including those by conservative economist Simon and moderate researchers at the Urban Institute — suggest immigration leads to economic growth.

Growth is a complex issue, however, and there are still reasons to concur with labor that increased immigration risks reduced wages. Conversely, though, labor could potentially organize and effectively mobilize migrant workers.

The presence of environmental leaders in the initial debates created a complex wrinkle in the sheets of this particular political bed, however. Many environmentalists claim immigration is harmful because of the increase in U.S. population it represents.

Now this wrinkle has returned; Sierra Club members are about to vote on a resolution that would force the traditionally neutral group to take a stance against immigration because of overpopulation concerns.

The anti-immigration stance held by environmental groups was troublesome during debate over Proposition 187, and it continues to be troublesome today. Concerns about overpopulation are legitimate, but sharply restricting immigration is not a solution.

According to environmental leaders who oppose high levels of immigration, it is important to stop the inflow of people because immigrants currently make up more than half of all population growth in the United States. While this is true, it is fundamentally wrong for several reasons.

Most significantly, it rests upon the faulty supposition that all population growth is equal. In reality, the

reason the United States is environmentally destructive has more to do with patterns of consumption than with the number of people who live here.

Placing the blame for industrial pollution, resource consumption and environmental degradation upon immigrants masks the real problems of industrial capitalism and borders on racism. Rather than suggesting those living within the United States reduce consumption, environmentalists who oppose immigration are blaming the harms of our lifestyles on new arrivals, many of whom are minorities.

In addition to this racist masking, attacks on immigration miss the fundamental problem of overpopulation — worldwide resource loss. There are a finite number of resources in the world, but those will be consumed whether people live in the United States or in Latin America and other countries with high rates of emigration.

Moreover, reproductive rates frequently drop for immigrants who come to the United States. This suggests immigration could help alleviate at least the raw numerical aspect of overpopulation.

Finally, environmentalists miss a prime opportunity to fight one of the biggest current environmental problems when they rally against immigrants. Immigrant and other minority communities are often the victims of what is commonly termed "environmental racism": the deliberate dumping of toxic waste and output of other pollutants in poor, minority communities with little political clout.

If the Sierra Club and other environmental groups come out in favor

of strict border control and anti-immigration legislation, they come out against the civil rights of immigrant minorities and in favor of the frequently racist and overzealous border patrol.

This sort of political statement would make it difficult for environmental groups to work closely with minority groups who are working to stop environmental racism. The key to future environmentalism will be working with local activists and grassroots organizations, as effectively argued by author Mark Dowie in his book "Losing Ground."

By coming out against immigration and consistently trying to use legislative means to solve community problems, the Sierra Club would be positioning itself as the environmental representative of rich, white people. And while it may be important to make rich, white people realize the degree to which their actions enforce harmful consumption patterns — a fact proven by a recent Oregon Department of Environmental Quality report that indicates most air pollution in the state is caused by non-industrial output — the Sierra Club isn't likely to scold its own membership and funding base.

If environmental groups want to effectively combat the problems the planet faces, including overpopulation, they need to work with the groups being affected rather than blaming them. Many University students are Sierra Club members, and they, along with the entire group's membership, should vote to reject this racist and ineffective resolution.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu

DRAWING BOARD



FYI

CORRECTION

In the article, "Old school hip-hop artists to host 'gangsta-free' performance" (ODE, March 6), the story should have stated that the Hieroglyphics' March 10 show at the McKenzie Ball-

room is open to all ages, not 21 and over. The Emerald regrets the error.

LETTERS POLICY

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