

High Country News

For people who care about the West

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'Firebrand ways'

by Tony Davis 12/21/2009 Issue

Twenty years ago, they were Earth Firsters, living in tepees, trying to save spotted owls and grafting together a shoestring budget from their unemployment checks. Today, the Center for Biological Diversity has a budget of \$7 million, 62 full-time staffers and 15 offices nationally, in locations from Washington, D.C., to Silver City, N.M. By filing 600 lawsuits and countless petitions against the federal government, the center has won the listing of 380 species as threatened or endangered. It also says it has secured 110 million acres of critical habitat and proposed another 130 million acres. CBD has won a reputation as the country's most militant large environmental group, one that seldom shrinks from controversy.

From its Tucson headquarters, it's expanded its species-saving tactics to protect rivers, stop sprawl, battle overgrazing and even tackle climate change. Last year, the group helped get the polar bear listed as a threatened species. Here, one of CBD's founders, 45-year-old director Kieran (pronounced Keer-Onh) Suckling, looks back at how the group got where it is and explains how it differs from the "Big 10" green groups.

HIGH COUNTRY NEWS How did your group get its start? What were your roots?

KIERAN SUCKLING I was in grad school at SUNY Stonybrook, working on a Ph.D. in philosophy, with my dissertation on the relationship between species extinction and language extinction. I came out West for the 1989 Earth First! Rendezvous in northern New Mexico.

There, I chained myself across a road, blocking access to a timber sale. The timber industry in the Southwest was about to make a radical change in its practices. It had logged off the mesas and now they planned to go in and log steep slope canyons.

I got arrested in the process, along with a woman named Sherie. We fell in love while in jail, and she said, "I'm working for this guy, Peter Galvin, doing Mexican spotted owl surveys on the Gila National Forest (in southwest New Mexico) for the Forest Service. Why don't I see if I can get you a job?" Peter hired me, out of a VW van. One day, one of our survey crew got lost and wandered into Water Canyon, where a timber sale was going on, and found a spotted owl.

HCN The Mexican spotted owl at that point was on the Forest Service's "sensitive species" list. (It was federally listed as threatened in 1993.) What happened after your surveyor found the owl?

SUCKLING First, the Forest Service stopped the sale, then let it resume, saying the company had a contract. We had signed contracts saying we wouldn't divulge owl locations, but we went the next day to the *Silver City Daily Press*, with a map that told our story. We were fired within seconds. That was the start of us becoming full-time activists, starting as the Greater Gila Biodiversity Project.

HCN What made you decide to found your own group?

SUCKLING We were riled up. The government wasn't playing by the rules. The best way to save endangered species wasn't going to work inside the government. I was studying endangered species as part of my Ph.D. research. I realized, Oh my God, this owl species is going extinct. I couldn't keep studying patterns of extinction while letting extinction go on.

HCN What was your first major victory?

SUCKLING A Mexican wolf reintroduction lawsuit in 1990, our first. The Fish and Wildlife Service had formally declared the Mexican wolf unrecoverable. The Audubon Society and the Defenders of Wildlife had formed a wolf coalition to fight this. But they had no legal strategy beyond telling the government, "Pretty please." A study had been done showing a viable wolf recovery population could be introduced at White Sands Missile Range. They spoke to the general in charge of the range and he had no interest in wolves -- he shut them down. The strategy of the wolf coalition was to wait for the general to retire. We decided, let's just sue instead. It got settled with the Service agreeing to do a wolf study, which led to reintroduction.

That was the moment when we looked at it and said, "Wow." The environmental movement spent a decade going to meetings and demanding action and getting nothing done. They were asking powerful people for something from a position of no power. We realized that we can bypass the officials and sue, and that we can get things done in court.

HCN What role do lawsuits play in your strategy to list endangered species?

SUCKLING They are one tool in a larger campaign, but we use lawsuits to help shift the balance of power from industry and government agencies, toward protecting endangered species. That plays out on many levels. At its simplest, by obtaining an injunction to shut down logging or prevent the filling of a dam, the power shifts to our hands. The Forest Service needs our agreement to get back to work, and we are in the position of being able to powerfully negotiate the terms of releasing the injunction.

New injunctions, new species listings and new bad press take a terrible toll on agency morale. When we stop the same timber sale three or four times running, the timber planners want to tear their hair out. They feel like their careers are being mocked and destroyed -- and they are. So they become much more willing to play by our rules and at least get something done. Psychological warfare is a very underappreciated aspect of environmental campaigning.

HCN Were you hindered by not having science degrees?

SUCKLING No. It was a key to our success. I think the professionalization of the environmental movement has injured it greatly. These kids get degrees in environmental conservation and wildlife management and come looking for jobs in the environmental movement. They've bought into resource management values and multiple use by the time they graduate. I'm more interested in hiring philosophers, linguists and poets. The core talent of a successful environmental activist is not science and law. It's campaigning instinct. That's not only not taught in the universities, it's discouraged.

HCN How democratic is your group? Does the buck stop with you or is there a collective?

SUCKLING The buck stops with our leadership team: Me, Peter Galvin, our conservation director, and Sarah Bergman, our assistant director. Over our 20 years, we have gone through agonizing debates and battles over consensus decision-making and about a hierarchical organization and social structure. Ten years ago, it settled into this structure of strong leadership, where we give tremendous deference and

latitude to our activists to pick battles, tactics and strategy. It's extremely non-hierarchical, but not consensus-based.

HCN Did you plan all along to become a national group?

SUCKLING Not at all. Our initial vision was to protect the Greater Gila Ecosystem -- the Gila, Apache and part of the Cibola national forests, about 10 million acres. We got dragged onto the national stage against our will. It didn't take us long to realize that power politics that determine species protection do not occur in the Gila: They happen in Phoenix, Albuquerque and Washington, D.C. We decided first to be the Southwest Center for Biological Diversity, and deal with the whole Southwest. Then, other, grassroots environmental groups started calling us from around the country and asking, "How do I replicate this?" At their request, we started opening offices around the country.

HCN Has your mission changed since you went national?

SUCKLING It's still the same. Our national status came to clarify what drove us. Before, we focused on that 10 million acres, and we were doing that through timber sales, listing petitions, etc., all based in these species. As we've grown, the species focus continues to be the case. Our attachment is to species, not to the particular place.

HCN What about your global warming campaign -- what does that have to do with species protection?

SUCKLING It's driven by the need to protect plants and animals. Our global warming goals must be enough to save the polar bear. We need to cut emissions to 40 to 50 percent of 1990 levels by 2020. We need a net negative emissions policy by 2050 -- less than zero.

HCN How would you deal with conflicts between renewable energy projects and endangered species? After all, solar panels in the desert can harm sensitive species like the desert tortoise.

SUCKLING We strongly support a rapid ramp-up of solar energy and have mapped out 100,000 acres of degraded public and private lands in the Mojave Desert where solar development would not conflict with endangered species or wilderness. We've also advocated placing solar developments in burned-out state, private and federal lands along Interstate 10 between Tucson and Phoenix. With so many highly degraded, biologically fragmented lands available, good planning should be able to avoid conflicts between solar energy and endangered species. It's a no-brainer. But unfortunately, many developers have proven to have less than no brain.

HCN Contrast yourself with the "Big 10" environmental groups. What do you see as their strengths and weaknesses?

SUCKLING The environmental movement is strongest when it has a clear vision and is willing to be way out in front of political leaders, and is willing to cause controversy, which is absolutely necessary to change the status quo. I think it's weakest when it too closely follows the Democratic party instead of playing an aggressive nonpartisan position.

Climate change is a really great example. The national environmental movement has articulated no bottom line on climate reductions. It has let the Democratic leadership completely define climate solutions, so every climate bill has been weak. That's why Copenhagen collapsed. National environmental groups did not ask Congress to do anything creative. They waited for Pelosi and Reid to take the lead.

HCN In 10 years, would you like the Center for Biological Diversity to be as big as the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and other mainstream national groups?

SUCKLING Yes. At one point we thought we could do our jobs here in the West at a moderate size and rely on the big nationals' political muscle to carry our message in D.C. Now, after years of seeing the built-up political power of so many groups being squandered in D.C., we decided we need to have that political power ourselves.

Plus, there are endangered species in all 50 states, and we feel a responsibility to keep growing and reaching out until all of them are fully protected. We are in the midst of the sixth and possibly the greatest mass extinction crisis in the planet's 4 billion-year history. We have to do everything in our power, and increase our power, to stop it.

HCN Can you do that without growing corpulent?

SUCKLING I'm more than aware of the risks, but I do have confidence that we can be as big as big nationals and retain our firebrand ways. We have to. Otherwise, what's the point? There already is an NRDC. There's no need for another one.

Tony Davis reports for the Arizona Daily Star in Tucson.

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