Today's Environmental Activists Stand on David Brower's Shoulders

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When environmental activists protest in front of the White House to stop the Keystone oil pipeline, or demonstrate at the Southern California Edison headquarters to demand that the company close its San Onofre nuclear plant, they are carrying out the legacy of David Brower, who helped transform environmentalism from a polite cause dominated by don't-rock-the-boat upper-class conservationists to an activist movement that uses political action, including unconventional tactics, to protect consumers, workers, communities, and wilderness areas from abuse by speculators, developers, corporations, and even government agencies.

Brower, the longtime leader of the Sierra Club and founder of the Friends of the Earth, the League of Conservation Voters, and the Earth Island Institute -- who died in 2000 -- would have been 100 on July 1. To celebrate his life and legacy, several environmental groups are sponsoring a year-long series of activities. Brower's son Kenneth recently published *The Wildness Within: Remembering David Brower*, featuring interviews with 19 key environmental activists and thinkers who discuss Brower's influence. An exhibit of wilderness photography, *Thinking Like A River: Art, Advocacy, and the Legacy of David Brower*, is now on display at the David Brower Center in Berkeley.

"I wish we didn't have to be angry all the time," Brower once said, "but someone has to get angry."

He was angry not only at polluters and despoilers but also at other environmentalists who disparaged confrontation and protest. For more than half a century, his activism earned him accolades as a founder of the modern environmental movement. He was often criticized for being unwilling to compromise. But he recognized that the stakes were high. "When they win, it's forever," he often said. "When we win, it's merely a stay of execution."

"Thank God for David Brower," said Russell Train, who headed the federal Environmental Protection Agency in the early 1970s. "He makes it so easy for the rest of us to be reasonable."

Brower, who is one of the people profiled in my new book, *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame*, was born in Berkeley in 1912. His interest in the wilderness stemmed from his family's frequent hikes into the nearby hills and camping trips in the Sierra Nevada. When Brower was 8 years old, his mother lost her sight because of a brain tumor. He took her on frequent walks in the hills around Berkeley, which gave him a greater appreciation for the area's natural beauty.

Brower dropped out of the University of California, Berkeley, after two years because of financial hardship.

In 1935, after working at a concession stand in Yosemite National Park, Brower became the park's publicity manager. He was increasingly alarmed over the destruction of wilderness areas by projects such as the Hoover Dam on the Colorado River, by devastating corporate logging of national forests, and by environmentally harmful mining permitted by the Federal Bureau of Land Management.

A world-class mountaineer, Brower trained soldiers in climbing and skiing and saw combat in Italy during World War Two. He led daring assaults involving hazardous rock climbing to overcome enemy positions, for which he received the Combat Infantryman's Badge and the Bronze Medal.

Environmental pioneer John Muir founded the Sierra Club in 1892. Its initial mission was to expand the number of national parks in America. When Brower first joined the organization in 1933, "most of the three thousand members were middle-aged Republicans," primarily hikers and wildlife enthusiasts, according to Muir's biographer, Stephen Fox. When Brower was hired as the Sierra Club's first executive director in 1952, he was one of only of only two staffpersons.

During his 17 years in that position, Brower expanded and revitalized the organization with his ethos that public education and political action were vital to the preservation of the wilderness. In its obituary, the *New York Times* noted that Brower "sought to protect redwoods from loggers, animals from furriers, porpoises from tuna fishermen and the public from nuclear energy and any number of projects proposed by the Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Bureau of Reclamation."

Under Brower, the Sierra Club led campaigns to establish 10 new national parks and seashores, in California, Oregon, Washington, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Kentucky. In the 1950s he led a high-profile campaign that stopped the federal Bureau of Reclamation from building a hydroelectric dam on the Green River that would have flooded parts of Dinosaur National Monument in Utah. To win that battle, however, the Sierra Club agreed to a compromise, reluctantly giving the federal government its consent to build a dam and reservoir in the lesser-known Glen Canyon in Arizona. The Bechtel Corporation

made a fortune constructing the dam and also oversaw the excavation of one of the world's biggest coal mines, Peabody Coal's Black Mesa mine, on the adjacent Navajo Reservation, which polluted the local water supply.

Brower later said he felt that the Sierra Club's compromise had been a huge mistake. "Polite conservationists leave no mark save the scars upon the Earth that could have been prevented had they stood their ground," he once said. Eventually this doggedness would cause friction at many of the organizations where he worked.

Frustrated by his failure to save Glen Canyon, Brower invested significant Sierra Club resources in campaigns to stop any more dams inside national parks or monuments. In a drive to prevent a dam in the Grand Canyon, the Sierra Club ran controversial full-page advertisements on the back page of the *New York Times*. The most famous of these asked readers, "Should We Also Flood the Sistine Chapel So Tourists Can Get Nearer the Ceiling?" and sparked a nationwide protest against the planned dam project. The Sierra Club also played a key role in passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964, which initially protected 9 million acres of public land and now protects over 100 million acres.

These victories brought the Sierra Club national attention and many new members. But they also angered some politicians. These power brokers successfully pressured the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to revoke the Sierra Club's tax-exempt status in 1967 for being too "political." In response, Brower created a separate tax-exempt nonprofit, the Sierra Club Foundation, and the Sierra Club continued to engage in political battles. Brower eventually came to believe that the IRS's action was a blessing, liberating the Sierra Club to build political muscle and mobilize its growing membership to vote, lobby, and protest.

To raise public awareness about the wilderness, the Sierra Club developed coffee-table books that included stunning nature photographs, many by Ansel Adams, so readers could fall in love with the wilderness and feel a connection to conservationists' call for its preservation. "We're not blindly opposed to progress," Brower once said, "we're opposed to blind progress."

Brower took an outspoken stance against Pacific Gas and Electric's for a nuclear reactor at California's Diablo Canyon near San Luis Obispo. Some members of the Sierra Club board -- with ties to the utility's executives -- did not share that position, and as a result, in 1969 the board asked Brower to resign.

When Brower took over leadership of the Sierra Club, it had 7,000 members and a $75,000 annual budget. When he left, it had 77,000 members and assets of $3 million. (Today the Sierra Club has 1.4 million members.) Later in life, Brower rejoined the organization's board, held an honorary position as vice president, and received the club's John Muir Award in 1977.

Brower gained wider attention when John McPhee wrote a three-part profile of him in the *New Yorker* in 1971 and then expanded the article into a best-selling biography, *Encounters with the Archdruid*; the title refers to an insult that one property developer used for Brower.

After leaving the Sierra Club, Brower founded two new organizations: the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) and Friends of the Earth (FOE).

The LCV has played an important role in electoral politics by endorsing candidates and educating and mobilizing voters. It generated lots of publicity in 1970, immediately after the first Earth Day, when (in partnership with the organization Environmental Action) it published the first scorecard rating politicians' voting records on environmental issues, including a "Dirty Dozen" list of members of Congress with the worst records. Every two years since then, the LCV has ranked every member of the House and Senate on his or her environmental voting record.

This was a brilliant maneuver, helping educate the public about environmental issues, providing the media with an easy-to-report story, and giving ammunition to LCV's local and state chapters to support or oppose their congressmembers. In its first year, the LCV worked successfully to defeat several of the Dirty Dozen members seeking reelection. These reports and electoral campaigns are among Brower's most lasting legacies. The LCV claims that since 1996, 49 out of 79 Dirty Dozen politicians have been defeated. In 2008 over 80 percent of the 1,500 candidates endorsed by LCV won their elections.

At FOE, Brower used confrontational tactics, including marches, boycotts, and sit-ins, to generate publicity and develop an ideology of radical defense of the environment. But Brower had a falling out with FOE leaders, who wanted the organization to focus more on policy research and legislation and less on protest. Brown left FOE in 1984.

Irrepressible, after leaving FOE, Brower founded yet another organization, the Earth Island Institute, to promote conservation and environmental projects around the world. Its efforts to address toxic dumping and public health problems in poor communities helped push the larger environmental movement, including the Sierra Club, to recognize the class and race aspects of environmental problems. The Earth Island Institute has launched dozens of campaigns and then spun them off as separate projects and organizations, including Rainforest Action Network, Urban Habitat, International Rivers, Energy Action, Ethical Traveler, Fiji Organic Project, International Marine Mammal Project, Reef Protection International, and Women's Earth Alliance.

Brower constantly warned that mainstream environmental organizations were too closely aligned with and were sometimes co-opted by corporations and corporate-funded foundations that disdained confrontation. By employing tactics used by suffragists, civil rights activists, and the antiwar movement--including civil disobedience aimed at corporations as well as government -- Brower helped inspire a new wave of environmentalism by Greenpeace, Earth First, and other organizations. Over time, the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, and other mainstream groups, too, were influenced by the more radical wing of the environmental movement.

In the late 1990s Brower built bridges between environmentalists and labor unions, two movements that were often at odds, in hopes of igniting a progressive "blue-green" coalition. In 1999 he helped organize the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment. Its initial target was Charles Hurwitz, CEO of the Houston-based Maxxam Corporation. Maxxam's Kaiser Aluminum subsidiary was locking out striking workers in five cities, and another subsidiary, Pacific Lumber Company, was clear-cutting ancient redwoods in northern California. Calling these two Maxxam-owned companies "icons of corporate irresponsibility," the alliance issued its "Houston Principles," which Brower helped craft, pledging greater cooperation in protecting jobs and fighting pollution.

In November 1999, the 87-year-old Brower participated in the "Battle in Seattle," the massive protest against the World Trade Organization that brought labor and environmental groups together again. A year later, Brower died in his home on Grizzly Peak, above Berkeley.

In his book *Let the Mountains Talk*, Let the Rivers Run, Brower reflected on what he had hoped to accomplish with his life: "We urge that all people now determine that an untrammeled wilderness shall remain here to testify that this generation had love for the next."

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