

Maya Khosla Responses to Progressive Workers Union - Sierra Club Board Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Questions

Why are you running for Sierra Club Board of Directors? List your qualifications and reasons for seeking to be elected.

Your answer

My reasons for seeking to be elected are to continue necessary work of addressing the climate crisis, ways we can work together to combat harmful extractions from the natural world and to highlight ways we can address inequalities that place lower income communities at higher environmental risks including wildfire and the toxicity of industrial effluents such as carcinogens. My reasons for seeking to be elected are to enter into necessary dialogues where all are heard and respected. As a woman of East Indian origin, I am eager to join in the Sierra Club's efforts to build ways to transform the existing power structure, to achieve balance through unique partnerships and collaborations, and most of all to work towards questioning racism in all its forms in the US and also elsewhere in the world.

Senior Wildlife Biologist (2013-present); Sierra Club Member, Redwood Chapter (2018-present); Sonoma County Poet Laureate (2018); Co-organizer, Sonoma County Climate Summit (2021); Film Director (2015-2016); Co-Director, Turtle Diaries Project, India (2011-2013); 2020 Environmentalist of the Year Award (Sonoma County Conservation Council); 2020 PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Award for, "All the Fires of Wind and Light"; screenwriting for "Village of Dust, City of Water," highlighting social justice issues and water related crises.

What is your experience supporting unions, workers rights, or economic justice? Please detail your involvement and solidarity efforts.

Your answer

I stand in solidarity with colleagues in construction (utilities, housing), who belong to and gain great strength from their respective labor unions. They have often asked me why the biological sciences professions are not unionized. In my opinion, that is the great weakness of my field. Because I am regularly out in the field documenting my colleagues' work, my documentations stand as evidence of their high integrity, and can, and has, been of great use in times when their work is being questioned by the powers that be.

My hope is that the communities within the Sierra Club will enter into productive dialogue that always includes PWU -- as a necessary means of addressing hierarchical structures and systems within the Club.

What organizational change or actions would you propose and support to improve the work lives of Sierra Club workers?

Your answer

The Sierra Club is in the throes of changing its structure, and I would act to make sure that SC workers are not left out of any process, that decisions are not simply handed down, and that these decisions are a product of open, respectful, dialogue, which promotes camaraderie and transparency. In my view, these are important factors that foster moving forward with good working relationships. I favor openness over closed-door meetings and decisions, diplomacy and respect over distrust. And above all, I favor clear documentation of a process, to mark our progress.

If elected, what could you as a Board member do to ensure PWU has a role in decisions that impact Sierra Club workers ?

Your answer

If elected, I would always opt for and ask for open dialogue. I would always request that all working groups and task forces -- all groups -- include the PWU member(s) in as an integral part of the process. And would request that can feel free to speak openly, to listen and be listened to as part of the process. Decisions would need to be based on mutual understanding -- even if agreements take a while. I would speak for the need for transparency and accountability, and arriving at decisions through collaboration rather than having decisions made without appropriate thoughtful inputs.

Where do you see Sierra Club's role in addressing social and economic inequality, including gender and racial disparities?

Your answer

Displays of gender inequality and racism can be overt but it's often quite subtle, so I feel the need to approach racist attitudes question by question, by showing respectful behavior rather than talking about it in general terms. Having experiences such inequalities in the workplace, I strive to confront it at every level. More often than not, it's a tough, long journey. Also, there tends to be a continuum between inequalities in all forms and Environmental Justice.

I see the Sierra Club addressing social and economic inequality, gender and racial disparities by example. The path forward is about good fostering productive exchanges, good person-to-person interactions, rather than about the whole group move forward at the same time -- which is too much to tackle all at once. Harms need to be addressed with specific examples, with clarity. There's a real opportunity here -- and the key is to believe in making progress one good exchange at a time.

What in your experience demonstrates your ability to speak truth to power even if it carries risk or might be unpopular?

Your answer

Of several experiences, I am selecting a recent example. In 2021, the Board of Sonoma Clean Power held meetings to consider adding forest-based biomass to its energy portfolio. I was one of the individuals speaking truth to that power structure. My colleagues and I wrote a letter explaining that forest based biomass energy is polluting, ineffective, and expensive, contributes to the climate crisis where it is being used, and also emits massive amounts of toxic byproducts including dioxins and benzene, which are known to cause cancer to humans. We cited case studies: in 2017, a biomass facility in Scotia, Northern California, emitted over 10,000 pounds of benzene and over 12,000 pounds of formaldehyde that affected nearby communities. Members of the Blue Lake Rancheria in Humboldt County, especially children and the elderly members of the tribe, endured severe health impacts from toxic emissions from the large (11 megawatt) biomass power plant less than a half mile away, which has since been abandoned and replaced by clean solar and wind power projects. In Mendocino County, a wood pellet plant in the small, mainly indigenous and Latinx community of Capella violated its permit from the Air Quality Management District three times, emitting unacceptable levels of particulates and other pollutants.

What priorities would you bring to the Sierra Club Board?

Your answer

I would articulate the importance of open dialogue, along with suggestions for good listening. I would bring suggestions from colleagues, and would articulate the need for respect and transparency. I would argue against a top-down structure in all situations. My actions would encourage the Board Members to always consider the effect of climate change on peoples who are disadvantaged, and to for such information to guide

their thinking. I would argue for the safety of lives to be placed over the short-term gains of an industry and would call for actions to lower emissions -- for human health reasons, for climate-related reasons, and to protect the wild that provides free ecosystem services to us. I would call for clear documentations and making conclusions based on actual data rather than models and hypotheses that favor industrial interests over human lives and the lives in the wild. And finally, I would encourage outdoor explorations in collaboration with others.

Are there any other comments you would like to make to inform our 400+ members?

Your answer

So far, my explorations in the wild (which sometimes overlap with work out there) have shown me that it's healthy for us to value the wild places that appear in Sierra Club calendars every year. These journeys have also taught me that I am one of the few women of color engaged in documenting the wild places -- and their incredible importance for our health and the health of the planet. Training other women is one step I have taken to make change happen. If elected as Board member, that would be one of my areas of focus while serving the Sierra Club. These places, and the value of these places, could be a part of our conversations -- and could even bring us all together in ways beyond the level of meetings. They good even bring great jobs -- ecotourism guides are not as common in the States as they are in many other countries.

These places, and the processes and lives they support, could teach us compassion and make us healthy. I'm not saying we all need to meditate under a Bodhi tree, but that the path to mutual respect and open dialogue can be unexpected and powerful in ways we cannot imagine -- without being there for a while. Elected or not, those efforts to encourage explorations will continue!