

National Sierra Club News: Let me tell you what's going down!

It's a Brave New Orwellian World we're moving into...

By Kate Bartholomew, Chapter Chair, Atlantic Chapter

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Let me begin with the glaringly obvious: after eleven years as Sierra Club Executive Director, Michael Brune is stepping down, with his final day being December 31, 2021. The transition is in process now with Dan Chu currently Executive Director of the Sierra Club Foundation, serving as Acting Executive Director of the National Club assisted by Eva Hernandez-Simmons in the new role of Sierra Club Managing Director. A nationwide intensive search for a new Executive Director will begin with the new year.

Though there has been much varied speculation about the circumstances surrounding Michael's departure, I think it's safe to say it was simply a natural transition at a new juncture in his life. He recently turned 50, and his once young children are now in their early to late teens. Eleven years is a significant time to serve in the role of leading an organization as complex and diverse as ours. After all, our executive directors aren't appointed for life like Supreme Court Justices or elected by a College of Cardinals. Michael brought us through the Chesapeake scandal; the fracking fight; transformational realignment regarding equity, justice and inclusion; adoption of the Jemez Principles; unionization of National and chapter staff; survival of a Trump presidency; and the now the beginnings of Structural Realignment — he deserves some rest and our gratitude.

Ah, yes, about that Structural Assessment, or Change, or Realignment, or whatever. Suffice it to say that the process has been at least two years coalescing around the idea that there were problems in the organization that needed to be addressed and the only way to do that was to completely revamp the whole organizational structure — even the parts that were working, and even in chapters and groups that were functioning quite well without change. This is a grand scheme of standardization in what is, by its very nature as a grassroots organization, a heterogeneous amalgamation of functioning parts unique to each demographic. The finished plan has undergone a number of revisions and is only now being finalized through National Sierra Club Board of Director resolutions. The next step will be the rolling implementation phase, set to occur over the next two to two and half years. Much depends on funding and staffing.

Just to be clear, last year during the 2020 Annual Council of Club Leaders and National Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting, both the CCL and the Chapter Chair Representatives voted nearly unanimously to oppose the provisions of the Structural Assessment as outlined. Then on April 16, 2021, the Atlantic Chapter sent a detailed letter to the National Club explicating the points of the plan we had issues with and suggesting alternatives. We received no response. Nor did the CCL or CCR. The only thing we are told is: "You'll just have to trust us."

These are the ten resolutions the National Sierra Club Board of Directors passed in March and May of this year. They are available on Campfire, but searching on the site is designed to be difficult and obtuse — accessing ancient Mayan glyphs is easier — so I’m providing a synopsis of them for you here. Essentially, here is what you need to know (*all commentary in italics*):

1. Structural Assessment Implementation

This resolution basically charges the Executive Director (and/or their designee) to work with the Board-appointed Implementation Planning Team, in consultation with the Board ExCom, to craft and propose a long-term Structural Assessment Implementation Team for consideration and approval at the Board’s May 20-22 (2021) meeting. Then the Implementation Team is to give the Board periodic updates and be vested with the authority needed to select Chapters and Groups for participation in pilot and early-stage rollouts for each initiative area.

2. New Vice President Role

The Board directs the Board ExCom to build on prior work by VLAC (*Volunteer Leadership and Activism Committee —god, I hate acronyms*) in order to propose a resolution for amending SR 5.15.1, to define the Fifth Officer role as the Vice President for Chapters and Volunteers (in a manner consistent with other officer roles), for approval prior to the Board’s May 2021 leadership elections.

3. Networks

The Board acknowledges the need for more flexible structures to support and advance local-level activism in an inclusive, community-based way. The Board resolves that networks, already in use by some chapters as a local structure, be documented, standardized, and promoted as an option for chapters to support local activity and activism. Distinct from and not to be confused with the Grassroots Network, networks are local structures, reporting to the chapter, that typically focus on a single purpose or project; are free from the bylaws requirements for a group in good standing; and can easily include non-members and more fluid leadership teams.

4. State Tables

The Board supports the identified need to enable deeper coordination between chapter and national volunteers and staff operating within each geography. The Sierra Club’s continued goal is to run powerful campaigns that are locally relevant and nationally consistent, in an ongoing relationship with local activism and expertise. The Board endorses the concept of state tables as a streamlined coordinating structure for all staff and volunteers working on issues within a state, with a chapter staff person serving to convene and facilitate the state table. State tables will not act as decision-making bodies and cannot prevent campaigns, programs, or chapters from executing on their priorities; rather, state tables will facilitate multi-stakeholder conversations, across staff and volunteers, to enable

coordination and ensure shared learning within a specific geography. Most likely the chapter would be the convening body. *(This is actually one idea that makes a great deal of sense.)*

5. Group Bank Accounts

The Board acknowledges the financial/legal risks and administrative burdens highlighted by the Structural Assessment regarding Group Treasurer roles. The Board notes that Chapters currently provide fiscal management for a number of Groups. It resolves that this practice should be standardized and expanded, prioritizing Groups that are eager to make the change and those that are not able to meet standards of sound financial management. The Board recognizes that this will be a significant change effort. It acknowledges Groups' concerns about control over resources and timeliness of disbursements, as well as Chapters' need for support in assuming these responsibilities. The goal is to decrease burdens on Groups & Chapters, strengthen their mutual alignment, streamline budget reconciliation and decrease risk for the entire Sierra Club. *(This is one of the transitions that is most difficult to standardize and, for the Atlantic Chapter, a long way down the road.)*

6. Executive Committee Elections and Governance

The Board directs the Implementation Team, in consultation with the Board's Volunteer Leadership and Activism Committee (VLAC), to create a working group to examine and recommend changes to group and chapter ExComs and their election processes, to advance the Sierra Club's values of equity, inclusion, and justice and the long-term goal of building a powerful grassroots movement. These could include a broad set of approaches, ranging from small-scale (e.g., additional training or documentation for nominations/elections) to structural (e.g., new processes/governance models for ExComs). *(This is the resolution that could lead to outside appointments to chapter ExComs to meet standards of equity, justice and inclusion. But that also looks a lot like tokenism, which is antithetical to the Jemez Principles, so I'm confused...)*

7. Minimum Chapter Staffing

The Board resolves that it establishes a goal that every chapter has access to a meaningful baseline level of staff and establishes the following implementation plan to meet this goal, including training and support for chapter fundraising. Recognizing that this change will involve and affect long-term funding and budgeting strategy, the Board directs the creation of a Chapter Funding Task Force in collaboration with the Finance and Risk Committee. *(Some chapters have no staff, while others have more than 10 staff people — the Board is recognizing that every chapter has the need for some staffing. Another positive idea)*

8. Regional Orientation

The Board recognizes the overarching needs identified by Structural Assessment -- of ensuring that each chapter knows and can build relationships with their dedicated national staff resources, those national staff can effectively share findings and coordinate strategies for building chapter capacity with their staff

colleagues, resource needs are accurately assessed and met, and service delivery is oriented around regional and local support. This is the creation of Regional Service Hubs to provide support in areas such as Human Resources, Equity and Digital Strategies in hopes of making these more accessible to chapters and groups. *(This could work quite well depending on how large the regions are and how sparse the National staffing is in each region.)*

9. Staff Executive Role for Chapters

The Board recognizes the gaps identified by the Structural Assessment Project Team that led to this recommendation, in supporting chapter capabilities and effectiveness, volunteer and staff accountability, and chapter representation in the organization's executive decision-making conversations. The Board asks the Executive Director to consider options for representing chapter needs and perspectives in executive-level decision making and to update the Board no later than September 2021 on a near-term strategy to address this need. The Board further directs the Structural Assessment Implementation Team, in consultation with Chapter Director Representatives, the Office of Chapter Support, Human Resources, and the Volunteer Leader and Activism Committee, to assess the training and support needs of chapter directors and other chapter staff leaders, for potential inclusion of any needed enhancements in the 2022 budget. It is through this resolution that there will be an increase in National staff overseeing, managing and "supporting" local chapters and groups to ensure accountability. *(Increased training — if substantive — has always been a ubiquitous request of chapter and group leaders.)*

10. Chapter Director Management

The Board recognizes the gaps in equity and capacity highlighted by the Structural Assessment Recommendation and the 19-month long process of organizational feedback as it relates to Chapter Director management. The Board resolves that the Sierra Club begin a multi-year transition of Chapter Director administrative management from chapter executive committees to Sierra Club staff with professional training, experience, and accountability in these areas. Already in use by some chapters, ExComs will shift to a co-lead model with the chapter director and their manager, with a shared role in developing and executing work plans and ensuring their coordination with the chapter's strategic plan. For significant administrative management duties (including performance assessment and hiring/firing decisions), staff managers of chapter directors will consult with the Chapter ExCom to gather their input, with the goal of alignment between the staff manager and ExCom. *(Through implementation of this resolution, chapters lose all autonomy in chapter staff hiring, firing and management. Through the rolling actualization of this paradigm, all chapters will be run by a National Sierra Club staff hired and managed Chapter Director (the Atlantic Chapter hasn't had one since 1985) who will then hire the other chapter staff (in consultation with the chapter ExCom) and who will, along with her or his manager, be consulting with the chapter ExCom on various issues and at various times.)*

From my perspective, we are being colonized by National staff wherever we turn and our capacity to protest has been eliminated. This will no longer be a grassroots organization. Volunteers will be window dressing to entice large donors.

Then, this past weekend (September 9th through the 12th), I attended the Annual Council of Club Leaders and Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting, and, if possible, the situation became more dire. The Board passed several other resolutions. The objective of these resolutions was to begin implementation of recommendations for Restorative Accountability made in the report by Ramona Strategies in response to a number — 60 — of self-reported incidents, and later documented, of bullying, sexism, racism, sexual harassment and sexual assault within the club's 9,000+ staff and volunteers.

Certainly the revelation of these horrible and egregious acts demanded an immediate and decisive response, and many of the recommendations are more than appropriate and perhaps long overdue, including better training in recognizing and dealing with bullying, sexual harassment, all the -isms, underlying systemic racism, toxic behavior, mandatory reporting, as well as clearer policies and guidelines on all these issues. That so many individuals suffered in silence for so long is unconscionable and restorative measures long overdue.

However, seeking to rectify institutional weaknesses can't justify demonizing and marginalizing an entire category of individuals within the organization. While the reported instances involved staff on staff, staff on volunteer, volunteer on staff and volunteer on volunteer behavioral misconduct of varying degrees, future reported misconduct will be investigated by a special team comprised only of National staff — no volunteers — and offenders will be presumed guilty. It will be incumbent on the accused to prove his, her or their innocence, directly in conflict with U. S. Constitutional and Civil law and basic due process. One hopes the National coffers runneth over.

The silencing and constraining of volunteer leaders goes even further when looking at the additional resolutions passed this last weekend. Every one of them strictly defines the mandated and permitted functions of volunteers, the trainings required, the needed assessments, the proscribed behaviors and the context in which a volunteer may be suspended or removed from a managerial or leadership position. All assessments are hierarchical, no peer review is deemed adequate, and the whole flavor borders on militaristic.

Here are the resolutions in abbreviated form:

Requirements for Volunteer Leaders Who Exert Managerial Control Over Employees

The Board directs that the People, Culture, and Equity Department conduct/provide for all Volunteer Leaders to whom the organization continues to delegate managerial authority (including on an interim basis) materials that relay and reinforce the following expectations and responsibilities: their Mandatory Reporter Obligations; their obligations to comply with and not interfere into, or otherwise attempt to gain access about or intervene in, investigations; their obligations to maintain and support confidentiality and -- where requested -- anonymity in the investigation process; and their obligations to fully implement any assigned corrective actions.

Training and Advice for the Board

The Board shall ensure that it has sufficient training and regular access to legal advice regarding proper execution of its fiduciary obligations to the organization. To this end, the Board shall: provide input to the Executive Director on the frequency of advising it wishes to receive from the General Counsel and the level of involvement it wishes the General Counsel to have in Board Meetings and, where appropriate, Executive Sessions.

Expectation Setting for Volunteers (A)

The Board directs the Outings / Activities Governance Team to review current policies and training/ materials around: situations in which volunteers might interact with minors; and alcohol and drug use in the context of Sierra Club outings and events; assess whether current Sierra Club policies and trainings/ materials in these areas are sufficient; propose any needed policy changes, including recommendations for Board action if required; and propose any needed training or other support for policy revisions to be understood and adopted by all relevant stakeholders. The OAGT should conclude its policy review by the end of 2021. Specific recommendations for policy revisions should be identified by the end of Q1 2022, with a timeline for rollout and training on new policies to take place within 2022.

Expectation Setting for Volunteers (B)

The Board directs VLAC, in consultation with the Volunteer Accountability Process Reform Team and the Office of Chapter Support, to lead the development of appropriate materials that clearly communicate: the responsibilities and requirements that attach to volunteer involvement generally; the heightened responsibilities and expectations for anyone who holds a formal volunteer leadership position; and the agreements or releases that will be required to be signed by volunteers pursuant to any of the above.

Recently we also learned that another of the major “Architects of the Change” (my nod to Frank Herbert), Deputy Executive Director Lucy Mayo, will be transitioning to the part-time role of Strategic Advisor at the end of November and then leaving Sierra Club completely sometime between February and March 2022. Thus two of the highest ranking executives present when this process began — Brune and Mayo — are departing concurrently with the beginning of its implementation phase. There remains

a robust Implementation Team comprised of Board members, lead volunteers and national staff to move the plan forward.

So, that is all the “news” that’s less than fit to print emanating from Oakland, California, in brief. From what I can tell there is no intention to send a delegation to Glasgow in November, nor a plan to respond to the recent IPCC Report. I know that the Grassroots Activist Teams are busy — which is heartening — but where and how the National Club comes to roost at the end of this change remains to be seen, as does where we, the grassroots volunteers, fit in its New Order.

If, as we are being told, changes will be made strategically as the plan is implemented, and modifications and adjustments instituted when the best idea doesn’t turn into the best reality, then all my guarded caution is just that — the wariness of a jaded cynic. And, truly, most Sierra Club members will not be aware of or impacted by these shifting sands of restructuring because these particular silica crystals are all under the feet of volunteer leaders and staff. It’s just that I’m a tremendous believer in transparency and democracy — open doors and communications — and feel everyone deserves to know the inner workings of any organization to which they belong.