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Civil Disobedience and Climate Disruption

Posted on March 22, 2013 by Michael Tobis • 3 Comments



Melanie Martin [reports](#) that on January 22, the Sierra Club announced that it would engage in civil disobedience for the first time in its 121-year history.

Here is [the press release](#):

San Francisco, CA – The Sierra Club Board of Directors has approved the one-time use of civil disobedience for the first time in the organization’s 120-year history.

Recognizing the imminent danger posed by climate disruption, including record heat waves, drought, wildfires and the devastation of superstorm Sandy, the Sierra Club board of directors has suspended a long-standing Club policy to allow, for one time, the organization to lead a group of environmental activists, civil rights leaders, visionaries, scientists, and other high-profile individuals in a peaceful protest to dirty and dangerous tar sands. The action will be by invitation only and is being co-sponsored by 350.org.

“For civil disobedience to be justified, something must be so wrong that it compels the strongest defensible protest,” said Michael Brune, Sierra Club Executive Director.

“We are watching a global crisis unfold before our eyes, and to stand aside and let it happen – even though we know how to stop it – would be unconscionable. As the president said in his inaugural address, ‘to do so would betray our children and future generations.’”

“The Sierra Club has refused to stand by. We’ve worked hard and we have had great success - helping establish historic fuel economy standards for cars and trucks, stopping more than 170 coal plants from being built, securing the retirement of another 129 existing plants, and helping grow a clean energy economy. But time is running out, and the stakes are enormous. We can’t afford to lose a single major battle. The burning of dirty tar sands crude is one of those major battles. That’s why the Sierra Club’s Board of Directors has for the first time endorsed an act of peaceful civil disobedience,” said Brune.

“The recent decision made by the Board of Directors is not one we take lightly,” said Allison Chin, Sierra Club President. “As a nation, we are beginning to achieve significant success in the fight against climate disruption. But allowing the production, transport, export and burning of the dirtiest oil on Earth now would be a giant leap backwards in that progress. The Board is answering the urgency of this threat with our decision to engage, for one time, in civil disobedience.”

The Sierra Club will continue to use all other legitimate tools and channels to protect the nation’s water, air, land and people from polluters, and will focus intensely on moving the nation to safe, clean energy alternatives and away from the fossil fuels that have caused the climate crisis.

Melanie Martin uses this unusual action by the Sierra Club to advocate “escalation” by “radical” groups:

As moderate groups like the Sierra Club take a step toward the place where radicals have long stood, radicals owe it to the movement—and to the moderates—to follow their lead and escalate our actions.

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This does not mean changing our principles, like a commitment to nonviolence. Rather, our principles can guide us into more boundary-pushing action that helps the movement to enact greater political change. As we shift into more radical territory, the moderates can more fully occupy the space we left behind, which will become the new moderate. Because a larger distance between the moderate and radical flanks tends to help the movement, radicals don't want to see that distance closed up as the increasing urgency around climate change brings the moderates ever closer.

The radical flank of the environmental movement can heed this call by combining resilience and resistance, escalating its troublemaking, and getting serious about inclusiveness. Through this work, radicals will continue to provide strong leadership and direction to the environmental justice movement, so that the next time a moderate group like the Sierra Club feels the need to step it up, they'll be able to crib from the radicals' notes—just like they did in front of the White House last month.

The political territory is shifting because of climate change. If radicals respond by opening new possibilities that align with their principles, the government will find itself under increasing pressure to adopt and enforce more environmentally sound policies, and to end the most harmful projects. Local communities will take on more responsibility for enacting and enforcing the policy changes they've been pushing for through direct action, which will give people a more direct say in the issues that affect them.

By pioneering new tactics that inch toward these changes, radicals keep the movement in motion, and expand the possibilities for what it can accomplish.

Of course this is exactly what the Sierra club wanted not to happen.

Getting people to understand that our situation is serious is crucial. If I were convinced that “escalating troublemaking” could achieve that goal I'd probably have to support such troublemaking. We may need to be “radical” in the value-neutral sense at least of going to the root of the problem. But we have to take care to be inclusive. We need a social consensus, not a narrow victory.

In some circumstances nonviolent civil disobedience has been crucially important, leading to social consensus in favor of radical change. In other cases it has just strengthened the status quo while some people went to jail. Some of us still remember Martin Luther King as a loose cannon and a troublemaker, and now he is practically considered a saint. He succeeded where others failed because he forged a dream of unity out of a situation of division:

“ . . . that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood . . . little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.

We need to get past framing sustainability as a battle of one group against another. If we're in a fighting mood we can focus on the battle between our better nature against our worse: our hopes against our fears, our generosity against our greed, our common interest against our hostilities. Our enemies are not just around us but within ourselves as well. We need to picket our own selves.



But we need to forgive ourselves too. Anger can be motivating but we need to forge a shared vision of a humane and sustainable future.

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3 Responses to *Civil Disobedience and Climate Disruption***Pete Dunkelberg** says:

March 22, 2013 at 2:50 pm

I agree with Sierra and Melanie Martin. To satisfy you, perhaps Ms Martin could have said properly that progressives should be even more creative, instead of the words that frighten you as desired by certain others. In realty radical groups such as the Tea “party” (actually not a party, just the R base) are not likely to be very helpful in the near term anyway. Before opposing Ms Martin, recall the Overton Window.

“We need a social consensus, not a narrow victory.”

- a) Which comes first? Anyway we don’t need a loss, narrow or otherwise.
- b) I’m glad MLK didn’t wait for that before acting.
- c) We need to stop burning carbon, but we don’t need to insist on all or nothing.

Reply

**Michael Tobis** says:

March 22, 2013 at 3:18 pm

Hmm. I don’t think I argued against civil disobedience. I admit I’m nervous about it and particularly about “escalation”. They warned me this would happen as I got older! You can feel free to discount it appropriately.

But really this is a case for mindfulness and vision, whatever actions people take.

Reply

**Steve Bloom** says:

March 23, 2013 at 9:30 pm

“Of course this is exactly what the Sierra club wanted not to happen.”

No. Michael Brune will have been very happy to see this piece, I can assure you. The “one-time” business was simply a reminder to the many, many SC local chapters and groups that they’re not to go out and do such things on their own. The unstated practical reason for keeping CD on a tight leash is to avoid litigation aimed at seizing SC assets or those of board members (who are elected volunteers, btw). So while I don’t expect to see large-scale CD by the SC, it’s entirely clear that this event wasn’t intended to be the last such.

Re nervousness, current climate trends should make you more so.

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