

Letter to Sierra Club Executive Director Ben Jealous and Board Members 12/14/2023

To:
Ben Jealous Contact <deanna.spence@sierraclub.org>
Sierra Club Board Contact <board.liaison@sierraclub.org>

A BIT ABOUT ME

I have been a member of the Sierra Club since 1981 when Reagan began an all-out assault on the environment. I was fresh out of college. With a Physics degree from MIT, I took a job at close to minimum wage in a factory to avoid contributing to the arms race.

I was barely making ends meet, but I wanted to support the work of the Sierra Club. I was especially interested in the urgent need to wean the US off of fossil fuels. And to end forced automobile dependency. As a child in Europe, I knew what sustainable land use and transportation looked like.

In 1981 I was already talking about the Climate Crisis, then called Global Warming.

In the 1990s I was asked to serve on the Executive Committee of the Sierra Club – Santa Barbara Group. I was also asked to lead hikes.

BEING CANCELED

After decades of this service, on October 12, 2023 I received a call from the National Sierra Club that I was banned from leading hikes. Not just banned from leading hikes. Banned from attending hikes.

My neighbor (who comes on some of my hikes) was stunned. He asked if someone had died on one of my hikes. I said no. That would have been OK. This was far more serious.

They said that I had violated the new "inclusivity" rules of the Sierra Club. Apparently, they are sufficiently broad and vague that almost anything can fall into the accusation.

The punitive system of the Sierra Club has no due process and no transparency. So I have no idea for sure who filed this complaint.

But they were able to confirm that no actual person who came to one of my hikes was "excluded" or filed a complaint against me. I am quite sure I know what happened. One man who had a grudge against me figured out a way to use this "inclusivity" rule to get me canceled.

Interestingly, I was not canceled from serving on the Executive Committee. But my wife was so outraged by the behavior of the Sierra Club that she urged me not to do any more work for them. I chose not to run for another term.

A BIT MORE ABOUT ME AND WHY IT MATTERS

Over the years, I have built up a following of over 700 people who signed up to be notified of my hikes. There is no gentle way to tell them that their favorite leader is now banned from hikes by the Sierra Club. Some who wondered why I stopped leading hikes have already expressed doubts about renewing their Sierra Club membership.

I am also a local journalist. In addition to my print newspaper column, I have been writing a column for twenty years for a regional news service. One of the most popular features in my column? My articles of my Sierra Club hikes. Many people have hostility toward the Sierra Club. But thousands of people read my articles and enjoy the accounts and photos. It has been a great promotion of the Sierra Club. But that won't be happening any more.

Again, there is no nice way to tell my thousands of readers that their favorite hike journalist is now banned from hikes by the Sierra Club.

For decades I have also supplied hike photos to our regional Sierra Club newspaper, the Condor Call. Received by over 5,000 members. That is no longer possible.

Our annual year end Holiday Party for many years has featured a slide show of my hike photos. When we table at Earth Day and other events, guess whose hike photos are featured to promote our outings?

CANCELING USED TO BE BY THE OTHER SIDE

This situation reminds me of the McCarthy era of my parents' generation. If you had a grudge against someone, all you had to do was accuse them of being a Communist. No real evidence was needed. Working for social justice was enough "proof". Just report it to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the machinery would do the rest of the dirty work.

TRYING TO FIND SOMEONE TO CLEAR MY NAME

A lawyer friend at the Environmental Defense Center was outraged at how I was treated. He said he wouldn't blame me if I never wanted to help the Sierra Club again. But he suggested I clear my name. And the only way to do so would be to find someone high up in the Sierra Club who could cut through the broken system.

I tried in vain to find anyone who knew someone high up in the Sierra Club. All the people who used to be there seemed to be gone. I have been so focused on our work here in our region I never took the time to find out what was happening or changing at the National level. Apparently, a lot was changing.

I did attend one National meeting years ago here in Santa Barbara. I met a few top people at that time. I decided to track them down when I was canceled to get their insights. I hoped they might still know people high up who could explain what was going on.

SHOCKING DISCOVERY

What I learned from them shocked me. Back around 2018-2019 I learned that a massive program of "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)" was proposed. At a cost of around \$15 million per year. Out of a budget of maybe \$80 million. Over 100 full time equivalent employees would be hired out of about 800 existing employees.

People who challenged this were purged.

A BIT MORE ABOUT ME AND REAL SOCIAL JUSTICE

I grew up in a very progressive family that values civil rights and social justice. As a child I was sent door to door to deliver social justice literature in our neighborhood. We belonged to all of the major social justice organizations and I have continued to do so.

Our own family had to move because of physical attacks based on our ethnicity when I was a child. During COVID, my wife and I were evicted from my home of 31 years by a greedy new landlord. I am painfully aware of real issues of inclusivity, social justice and the lack thereof. Which is why it is especially outrageous to see this term being used to create real injustice and exclusion.

Obviously, we all want more people to feel welcome at the Sierra Club. But it seems this was as much about purging current leadership as it was about trying to bring in new people.

"INCLUSIVITY" CAUSES EXCLUSION

I was one of the few Sierra Club hike leaders left in our region leading weekend hikes. In the past few years, almost all of the local hike leaders have resigned. There was not a single reason. But most said they were done dealing with an ever-growing list of Sierra Club rules and requirements.

But there was another round of quiet resignations more recently. Hike leaders were obligated to fulfill an Outings Leader Training (OLT). You might think this was about the challenges we might face as outings leaders. Things like making sure that people are prepared for the outing. That they have adequate water and proper clothing. That we are prepared for a wide range of medical and weather problems that might arise and that really do arise. No. The OLT had questions like, "What would you do if a man showed up for a hike in a dress".

This was too much for some of the leaders. We have real challenges to deal with. Like wealthy property owners illegally placing boulders in the public right of way to keep people from parking at trailheads.

I would have loved legal help from the National Sierra Club to fight back. But I figured they have more important issues to deal with. Like the Climate Crisis.

MISALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

But then I found that they had hired lawyers to go after me and others who were accused of "inclusivity" violations. It was shockingly disorienting to realize that the National Sierra Club has a bizarre mismatch of priorities relative to a planet that is on fire.

Creating an army of DEI workers seems like a recipe for finding problems, even where none exist.

The claimed need for "inclusivity" has resulted in the opposite. Instead of the diverse group of people who had been enjoying our outings, almost everyone is equally excluded now.

For years I have pushed back against claims that the left and the right are equally insane. That is getting difficult when things like this happen.

I also understand that the Sierra Club is running a \$40 million deficit now. I have raised tens of thousands of dollars for the Sierra Club. Obviously, I won't be doing that anymore. I talked to another purged person who said the same thing about his own donations and fundraising.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Why am I writing to you? Yes, I would like to have my name cleared. But mostly I am writing in the hope that one of you will see that the Sierra Club has veered badly off course. At the very time in history when they are most needed.

I would very much appreciate hearing back from any of you who might be willing to admit that something has gone very wrong when a loyal and passionate Life Member like me has been canceled. When hike leaders are quitting. When the organization is running a massive deficit. And when the Climate Crisis is threatening our planet and paid staff people are writing questions about men showing up in dresses for hikes.

I realize that there are still some good people doing good work for the Sierra Club. I don't want to trash the organization. But I want to hear back from at least some of you an admission that something is very wrong and needs fixing. Thank you for taking the time to read my comments!

Membership Number XXXX9732

Robert Bernstein
XXXX Road
Goleta, CA 93117
(805) XXX-XXXX (H)
robert (at) robert.name