

**“50 Years of Environmental & Social Justice Losses:
It Didn’t Have to Turn Out This Way!”**

Paul Cienfuegos’ December 2nd, 2014 Commentary on KBOO Evening News

(His weekly commentaries are broadcast every Tuesday evening. You can view or listen to them all at PaulCienfuegos.com, CommunityRightsPDX.org, or subscribe via iTunes.)

Greetings! You are listening to the weekly commentary by yours truly, Paul Cienfuegos.

I recently watched a documentary about the musical group, Peter, Paul, and Mary. They were active, both musically and politically, for 50 years. They sang at the March on Washington, where Martin Luther King Jr gave his “I Have a Dream” speech. They sang at the rally to oppose the already-built Diablo Nuclear Power Plant in San Luis Obispo, California, that was built on an active earthquake fault. They sang for the United Farmworkers who were organizing to stop toxic pesticide spraying that was harming and killing farmworkers. They sang for one major social movement after another, for fifty years!

As I watched this documentary, I could not help but notice a very sad truth – and this truth seemed to have entirely escaped the documentary filmmakers - none of the single-issue activism profiled in the film has been successful. None of it. The Diablo Nuclear Power plant in California is still operating. The farmworkers still do backbreaking work and have few legal protections. Racial discrimination is still so bad that the number of black men being murdered by police officers now matches the numbers of black men who were being lynched a century ago. I could go on and on.

Because of the work that I do, I happen to have an analysis as to why decades of single issue environmental and social justice activism has been mostly unsuccessful in this country. The problem is that activist groups have been working entirely within a system of law that legalizes the massive harms caused by large corporations, and which distances We The People from having any real authority to govern ourselves.

This problem did not go unnoticed by those citizens who witnessed it at the time. In fact, in 1994, more than 400 grassroots social movement leaders wrote an Open Letter to fifteen of the largest environmental organizations in the country, pointing out that the problems that the environment was facing were structural in nature, and could not be tackled simply by mobilizing the activist community - always in a defensive posture - one corporate harm at a time.

Here is an excerpt from that letter sent in 1994 to the leaders of the fifteen largest environmental organizations in the country:

Some of us are associated with national environmental organizations, while others are actively engaged in community struggles for environmental justice and democracy. We are of diverse colors and backgrounds, ... and include trade union and religious and electoral activists, as well as survivors of industrial disasters...

What prompts us to send this letter to you is our conviction that you have not identified those subverting Congress as our real adversaries in the struggle to save our communities and the natural world: the leaders of today’s giant corporations, and the powerful corporations they direct.... [Not] since slavery was legal have the laws of the land been used so shamelessly to violate the democratic principles we hold dear....

The leaders of giant corporations govern as monarchs of old who claimed legitimacy under divine right theory.... We believe that it is too late to counter corporate power environmental-law-by-environmental-law, regulatory-struggle-by-regulatory-struggle. We don't have sufficient time or resources to organize chemical-by-chemical, forest-by-forest, river-by-river, permit-by-permit, technology-by-technology, product-by-product, corporate-disaster-by-corporate-disaster.

But if we curb or cut off corporate power at its source, all our work will become easier.... [A] century ago, corporate leaders convinced courts to transform our laws. Ever since, wielding property rights through laws backed by our government has been an effective, reliable strategy to build and sustain corporate mastery....

[If] you do not write and talk about today's large corporations; if you do not educate and mobilize your members as you know how to do, our legislatures will face crisis after crisis.... Corporate leaders will strengthen their grip on the law and escalate their takings across the Earth. Together, we can end the nation's long silence about corporate power and manipulation. We can work together to save our democracy in order to save our communities and our natural environment. We want to meet with you to plan strategies for confronting corporations.

This Open Letter was sent to the leaders of: Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace USA, League of Conservation Voters, National Audubon Society, National Parks and Conservation Association, National Wildlife Federation, Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, Wilderness Society, Zero Population Growth, American Oceans Campaign, Center for Marine Conservation, Defenders of Wildlife, and Environmental Action Foundation.

What was the response to this Open Letter, sent by more than 400 grassroots environmental leaders? Only the Sierra Club had the courtesy to acknowledge receipt of the letter. Not one of the fifteen biggest environmental organizations in the country ever responded to the letter, or took steps towards becoming more focused on the structural causes of the massive environmental and social justice catastrophe that continues to unfold.

Twenty years later, these large environmental organizations continue to focus their work on one regulatory struggle at a time, one chemical at a time, one forest at a time, one river at a time, one permit at a time, one corporate disaster at a time. It didn't have to turn out that way.

So the next time you wonder why our beautiful Mother Earth is in the mess she is in, you can thank our largest environmental organizations, for their continuing refusal to address the structural causes of this endlessly growing crisis. And if you would prefer to put your time and energy into more effective activism, that is challenging the structures of law that allow corporations and the 1% to cause so much harm in the first place, I urge you to get involved in the Community Rights movement. I have posted a link to this Open Letter on my blog, if you want to read the entire letter and see who those 400 folks were who signed it.

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