

# APPLY THE BRAKES:

ANTI-IMMIGRANT  
CO-OPTATION OF THE  
ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

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# APPLY THE BRAKES: ANTI-IMMIGRANT CO-OPTATION OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

## Introduction

This report is intended to explore how anti-immigrant forces have corrupted the dialogue on population and the environment, and will examine the anti-immigrant environmentalist network that has influenced the environmental movement for the last 14 years. In 2009, an article in the Population Special Issue of the *Earth Island Journal*<sup>1</sup> mentioned a new organization and website named Apply the Brakes (ATB hereafter). A few months later, the Center for Immigration Studies<sup>2</sup> — an anti-immigrant organization known to trade in racism — cited ATB in a memorandum denouncing Sierra Club leadership for not addressing the issue of immigration. At a time when more people of color, labor and human rights organizations are engaging in environmental concerns such as climate change and “green jobs,” ATB could very well threaten those fragile coalitions.

## An Ecological Philosophy of Bigotry

Allegedly the “result of a meeting of long-time conservationists held in Western Oregon in the spring of 2006,”<sup>3</sup> ATB has kept a very low public presence outside of environmental circles, but its mission is clear: ATB concerns itself with “domestic population growth”<sup>4</sup> and has a pronounced anti-immigration focus.

The discussion that ATB seeks to broadcast is essentially neo-Malthusian. The theory was born when Thomas Malthus published “An Essay on the Principle of Population in 1798” in which he stated that the discrepancy between the rate of population and the rate of food growth would lead to a permanent food shortage for humans. Malthus’ works gained influence in rapidly-

transforming 19th Century England and, combined with later Social Darwinism, were used to justify ideologies that essentially blamed the victims of early industrial development — a development that swallowed up, displaced and destroyed populations, and which was itself highly artificial and environmentally destructive — for their own misfortune.

Specifically, anti-immigrant activists belonging to the neo-Malthusian tradition claim that populations are constrained by the carrying capacity of the environment, and that population growth causes environmental degradation. They argue that immigrants contribute to the degradation of the environment by urban sprawl, congestion, pollution, waste generation, water consumption, land conversion, depletion of natural resources, and biodiversity loss, and have gone so far as to create a formula (change in pollution multiplied by change in population) to demonstrate these relationships.<sup>5,6</sup> Neo-Malthusian doctrine has been invoked over the years by these individuals and organizations to argue that compassion for those starving and destroyed eventually backfires, leading to greater future catastrophe.

ATB arguments on immigrants and population pull directly from the neo-Malthusian stance — displacing blame from the negative influence of economic globalization onto populations that are the worst impacted. This push by ATB to distort “cause and effect” serves to intentionally transform a holistic environmental philosophy based on greater care towards the world and each other, into misanthropy. Ecological thinking based on dynamic and interconnected natural systems turns into a philosophy that treats national and state borders as

unchallengeable nature. People become pollutants, with all the racial overtones of such a social construction.

## The Genesis of Apply The Brakes

To fully understand the ATB network, it is important to understand not only the philosophy driving the organization, but also the histories of its key participants. Don Weeden is one of the leaders promoted on the ATB website,<sup>7</sup> and is involved with funding the project through his family foundation. William G. (Bill) Elder appears to have selected much of the ATB website content and is also listed as website editor.<sup>8</sup> Both Bill Elder and the Weeden Family Foundation have histories within the environmental movement that significantly precede the ATB network, and understanding their efforts provides much context for ATB as a whole.

While the majority of conservation leaders highlighted on the ATB website are united in their common advocacy for population “stabilization” and for stringent restrictions on US immigration, each spokesperson also provides his or her own unique slant. (Brief biographies are located in Appendix A.) The overall vision of the ATB consortium is brought into focus, however, only by examining the interwoven histories of its primary coordinator, William G. (Bill) Elder, the white nationalist John Tanton, the anti-immigrant network SUSPS (Sierrans for US Population Stabilization), and its main funding source, the Weeden Foundation.

## Bill Elder and SUSPS

Bill Elder, a former Boeing employee and health-care consultant<sup>9</sup> based in Issaquah, Washington, has long been involved in anti-

immigrant and population activism. Elder joined the Sierra Club in 1994<sup>10</sup> during a recruitment effort that drew in activists from anti-immigrant organizations. Elder served as the Population Coordinator for the Sierra Club's Cascade Washington State Chapter during the late 1990s<sup>11</sup> and into the new millennium.<sup>12,13</sup>

Past political efforts by Elder have focused on themes of population, planning, and growth. These endeavors include running unsuccessfully in 1996 for the Washington State House of Representatives as an independent candidate<sup>14</sup> and defeating two Issaquah, Washington school bond measures in 1998 and 1999. Elder also served as Executive Director for the now-defunct Alternatives to Growth Washington, an organization "committed to researching and fostering a re-examination of growth related public policy issues"<sup>15</sup> which existed in the early-2000s.<sup>16</sup> Alternatives to Growth Washington was heavily influenced by Alternatives to Growth Oregon, a group then headed by Andy Kerr.<sup>17</sup> Kerr is also affiliated with the present-day ATB consortium.<sup>18</sup>

It was during his tenure as Executive Director for Alternatives to Growth Washington that Elder became immersed in a controversial national network named SUSPS, originally referred to as Sierrans for US Population Stabilization.

## The Leadership of SUSPS

The exact structure of SUSPS has never been clear, and the group's leadership has lacked transparency from its inception, which SUSPS lists as 1996.<sup>19</sup> SUSPS is unincorporated, and roles within the coalition shift often; individuals step up or stand aside in order to provide the most effective messenger for the most pressing message. For instance, in 2001, Bill Elder testified before a congressional subcommittee in the capacity as "SUSPS Chairperson,"<sup>20</sup> but a 2004 article listed Elder as merely a "spokesperson" for SUSPS.<sup>21</sup> That same year another article simply referred to Elder as an individual who "leads" the network.<sup>22</sup> Other "leaders" of SUSPS included Brenda Walker and Fred Elbel.<sup>23</sup> Walker is a regular

columnist for the white nationalist website VDARE — named after Virginia Dare, allegedly the first white child born in the United States.<sup>24</sup> Elbel is a founder of Defend Colorado Now who, when challenged about statements blaming impoverished people of color for environmental problems, wrote "Damned right. I hate 'em all - negroes, wasps, spics, eskimos, jews, honkies, krauts, ruskies, ethopans, pakis, hunkies, pollocks and marxists; there are way too many of them [original spellings maintained throughout]."<sup>25</sup>

## John Tanton and the birth of SUSPS

The original impetus for the establishment of SUSPS was a 1996 decision by the Sierra Club Board of Directors to adopt a policy of neutrality on US immigration — a decision in response to warnings that a cadre of anti-immigrant activists were attempting to push immigration restriction as a Club focus.<sup>26</sup>

As the oldest and largest environmental organization in the US, the Sierra Club had long been a target of anti-immigration activists. In 1986, John Tanton — a white nationalist who has also played a significant role in the birth or funding for a dozen other anti-immigration groups<sup>27</sup> like the Social Contract Press, Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), VDARE, and SAGE — wrote in a memo that "the Sierra Club may not want to touch the immigration issue, but the immigration issue is going to touch the Sierra Club!"<sup>28</sup> Prior to the founding of FAIR and other radical anti-immigration environmental groups, Tanton himself headed the Sierra Club's Population Committee during the early 1970s.<sup>29</sup> Members of FAIR and others from among the Tanton network of anti-immigrant organizations — linked to the eugenics movement and organized white supremacy<sup>30</sup> — would be significantly involved in the controversies to come.

## Anti-Immigrant Backlash Targets the Sierra Club

Though difficult to see what SUSPS intends

to keep hidden about its genesis, what is clear is that SUSPS was synonymous from its inception with dramatic attempts to shift the Sierra Club to a strict platform of immigration restriction. In 1998, SUSPS activists placed a proposition on the ballot within the Sierra Club that would have reversed the Board's neutrality policy, and would have forced the Club to adopt an anti-immigration stance. The proposition failed 60%-40%,<sup>31</sup> and as a result of this loss, SUSPS changed tactics from ballots to board elections.

The nebulous nature of SUSPS worked to its political advantage, allowing it to dodge issues of membership and funding while still working in close association with more highly structured and better-funded anti-immigrant groups and leaders. In the 2002 and 2003 Sierra Club elections, three SUSPS-backed candidates were elected to the 15-member board — first Ben Zuckerman (board member of the racially-tinged Californians for Population Stabilization), followed by Paul Watson (Founder of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society) and Doug LaFollette (Wisconsin's Secretary of State).<sup>32</sup>

By the 2004 Sierra Club elections, SUSPS needed to elect only three additional candidates to the board in order to control the organization and impose its anti-immigration plank. Its three main candidates were Richard D. Lamm, national advisor to Tanton's Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR); Frank Morris, board member of Tanton's Center for Immigration Studies; and David Pimental, board member of the Carrying Capacity Network whose president, Virginia Abernethy, described herself as a "white separatist." As newcomers to the Sierra Club, this SUSPS slate was supported by mailings from anti-immigrant organizations and postings on white supremacist websites urging their audience to join the Club and influence the vote. This targeting of the Club for a takeover was described by a former Club President as the "greatest threat in [the organization's] 112-year history."<sup>33</sup> In a highly contested election, the SUSPS-

backed candidates were defeated by a large margin, and the threat of a Sierra Club takeover was averted by its membership.<sup>34</sup>

In 2005, SUSPS again tried to both field candidates and put a ballot measure to Sierra Club voters — all of which were also defeated by wide majorities.<sup>35</sup> Additional background on SUSPS, its candidates during the 2004 election, and the role of Tanton's network of anti-immigrant organizations during this period, is covered in greater detail in a Center for New Community's 2004 special report *Hostile Takeover: Race, Immigration and the Sierra Club*.<sup>36</sup>

After these failures, SUSPS leader Bill Elder appears to have refocused his attention to a project more capable of paving the way for anti-immigrant “population control” successes. In a 2005 *E Magazine* article, Elder was described as a “dissident Sierra Club member whose focus now is on creating the Environmental Leaders Forum to address population issues.”<sup>37</sup> The “Environmental Leaders Forum” appears to be an earlier name for Apply The Brakes, and is mentioned as a “Weeden Foundation project” in the summary of a grant given to The Rewilding Institute (TWI) for the 2009 financial year. TWI is headed by long-time ecology activist Dave Foreman, and according to documents from the Weeden Foundation, TWI and “Environmental Leaders Forum,” planned to “work closely [...] to get conservation groups and activists to endorse a position recognizing the role of population growth in harming biodiversity and causing climate change.”<sup>38</sup> Not surprisingly, three Rewilding Institute fellows, including Foreman, double as ATB leaders.<sup>40,41,42</sup> In his current position as editor for ATB, Elder provides overlap in leadership between the earlier efforts of SUSPS and the “green” anti-immigrant organizing of today.

## The Weeden Foundation

Despite the leadership of Bill Elder and the road laid by SUSPS, there would be no ATB network without the Weeden family, whose

foundation is in the business not just of conserving habitat, but of molding opinion — within the environmentalist milieu as well as in the public at large. The Weeden Foundation provided seed money for ATB,<sup>43</sup> and the Weeden Foundation and Apply The Brakes share the same mailing address and phone number.<sup>44,45,46</sup> Don Weeden, the head of the Weeden Foundation, speaks regularly about the ATB network at environmental conferences and meetings on population growth.<sup>47</sup>

Created in 1963 by the late Frank Weeden, The Weeden Foundation provides grants “used to address the adverse impact of growing human populations and overuse of natural resources on the biological fabric of the planet.”<sup>48</sup> Its funding is significant; for the financial years 2001-2008, total annual grants from the Foundation exceed a million dollars in all but two years.<sup>49</sup> Alongside its funding for national and international “Biodiversity” projects, the Foundation also has a “Population/Consumption Program”<sup>50</sup> whose domestic grants often go to fuel anti-immigrant bigotry. From 2001-2008, the Weeden Foundation disbursed nearly \$700,000 in grants to controversial Tanton organizations with ties to white nationalists, such as Californians for Population Stabilization, the Center for Immigration Studies, and NumbersUSA.

The objective of the Weeden Foundation in funding these organizations is to create enough anti-immigrant leadership overlap to steer the environmental movement towards a course fueled by bigotry and racism. The leadership of the foundation is not content merely to fund these organizations, but to hold high-level leadership positions as well. For example, Weeden Foundation Executive Director Don Weeden<sup>51</sup> is also on the Board of Directors for the Tanton-created NumbersUSA,<sup>52</sup> whose Executive Director Roy Beck was a featured speaker at the white supremacist Council of Conservative Citizens in 1997. Additionally, Alan Weeden,<sup>53</sup> the father of Don Weeden, serves on not just the Board of Directors of the Weeden Foundation, but also on the Board of Directors of FAIR, also

founded by white nationalist John Tanton.<sup>54</sup> During the early 1990s, the Weeden foundation made at least one donation to FAIR at the same time that FAIR was still accepting funds from the pro-eugenics and white supremacist Pioneer Fund.<sup>55</sup> Alan Weeden was also one of the FAIR board members who met with then Pioneer Fund President Harry Weyher in 1997 — three years after FAIR had ceased taking Pioneer Fund money — to discuss fundraising for FAIR.<sup>56</sup>

A set of Weeden Foundation grants strategically made during the 1990s was extremely significant for “green” anti-immigration efforts to come. In 1990, the Weeden Foundation gave a grant of \$275,000 to the Sierra Club, earmarked for population work. At the time, Alan Weeden was a member of the Sierra Club Foundation's Board of Trustees, as well as a member of the Club's national Population Committee. This initial amount was followed by supplementary grants in the following years — spending that made “population advocacy in Washington [...] the best funded of all Sierra Club programs” at the time.<sup>57</sup> The funding may have helped the mushrooming of population committees within the Club. As Club member Frank Orem described:

*In 1989, when I got into the Sierra Club and population issues, there was only the national Population Committee and one local committee in Los Angeles. There are now [in 1993] 200. I came in to work on population, among other things. There are some people on the population committees who have been leaders on other environmental issues. Others are activists outside in groups which are concerned with population and immigration and they came into the Club to work on that.*<sup>58</sup>

This trend — of expanding Sierra Club population committees by drawing in activists from anti-immigration organizations — may be seen in retrospect as setting the stage for the attempts (which were also funded by the Weeden Foundation) by SUSPS to take control of the Sierra Club between 1998 and 2005.<sup>59</sup>

The Foundation's funding strategies are deft and effective because they produce short, medium and long-term results. Weeden's spending on domestic population campaigning — for the most part anti-immigration activism — makes up only small portion of its total annual grants, but this funding is leveraged for maximum possible effect.

## The Weeden Strategy

Recipients of Weeden Foundation grants end up amplifying each other's work and establishing feedback loops. For example, in 2005, *E Magazine* — a legitimate and respected environmental journal — received a \$15,000 grant “to underwrite the research, writing, and public relations/distribution costs for their coverage of population and immigration topics.”<sup>60</sup> The magazine then published an article on immigration matters that both cited materials prepared by the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) and also quoted Roy Beck of NumbersUSA.<sup>61</sup> Both CIS and NumbersUSA had received Weeden Foundation grants that same year.<sup>62</sup> In addition, the article also cites Tanton's Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR,) and Bill Elder is quoted several times. While the article presents opposing voices and is clearly editorial in nature, it illustrates the manner in which Weeden Foundation-supported anti-immigrant projects are situated close enough to each other to create a virtual echo chamber. It is precisely this echo chamber that the Apply the Brakes network currently aims to strengthen, as its ranks become more visible, and as it promotes its ideas into environmental and ecological discourse.

There should be no taboo on discussing population — a topic clearly tied to environmental concerns, as in fact is every human interaction within ecological systems. What should be rejected are racism and simplistic arguments that over-emphasize the “numbers game” at the expense of other factors — interlocking issues of production and consumption, patterns of land use, technology and planning, globalization

and poverty, the status of women in society, as well as wasteful cycles of boom and bust. This remains true no matter how much ecological damage we believe societies may have produced. Such a social and ecological outlook is vitally important in overcoming “man versus nature” thinking.

## An Ecological Future Worth Fighting For

Environmentalists who believe in holistic diversity need to be on guard — not just regarding Apply The Brakes, but also regarding other anti-immigrant groups using similar rhetoric. Groups with misleading or seemingly transparent names like Progressives for Immigration Reform, Negative Population Growth, and NumbersUSA — as well as others in Tanton's network of anti-immigrant organizations — all seek to inject bigotry into environmental and population issues.

While ATB claims that its arguments are solely influenced by ecological concern over population numbers, and that essential conversation is being blocked by “political correctness,” their political alignment and associations raise serious questions. The precarious ecological state of the world should be the impetus for environmentalists to reexamine our history, and to change our current practices to those of an eco-politic that pays particular attention to the voices and experience of women, people of color, and working class people. It is not political correctness, but environmental conscientiousness that pushes us to challenge environmental leaders who promote, work alongside, or excuse white nationalist and eugenic interests, and to ask whether these people should be allowed to lead the population debate.

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