Sierra Club's Electric Cars: Is It Time for More Technology or Culture Change?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
13 April 2012

The big money continues to talk. For environmental protection in extreme times, what have we got?

• A government much more intimate with BP, for example, than citizens want to know.

• Environmental groups promoting electric cars instead of advocating car-free living -- such as the Sierra Club, which accepted $26 million in donations from Chesapeake Energy, the natural gas fracker.

• News media usually adhere, as though they were corrupted, to the above kinds of influences. Real news can filter through, such as on climate change, but less frequently than a few years ago.

As distressing facts on accelerating climate change are amassing, we somehow keep going for the paycheck, the profits, and the "American Dream" out of sync with nature and long-term survival. As it is past time for deep, basic change, it might be too late to salvage a livable climate. At this rate, the more modest of the temperature-rise forecasts by the U.N.'s conservative IPCC will be the best-case scenario, as our window for altering energy practices in time to save a benign climate closes ever faster.

So when we open up a debate with the Sierra Club on their nonsensical campaign for more cars, we are calling out, "the Emperor has no clothes!" The time is up for bogus environmental action, or more politely, "solutions" that are way too little and too late. For those who think this is harsh or divisive, or who have not examined the realities of transport and land use that Culture Change has since 1988, you may find the email exchange later in this report disturbing and eye-opening.

It can be lonely to reject car-dependence in a public way and in one's daily life. For this reporter and activist, my zeal in adhering to a liberating lifestyle of pedaling my way to health -- while saving money and not polluting -- has found me left behind from the days of committed activism within a large community. The youth culture in rebellion was that community, and it permanently shaped me in the 1960s and '70s. Somewhere along the line since then, money became everything for all but eccentric members of society -- as people gave themselves over to the consensus of consuming.

But sometimes one can pounce on the madness. On April 9th an irritating email came from what seemed to be unknown source. The subject was, " There's a Party Near You". It turned out to be worse than the usual spam: a promotion for electric cars involving going off to see the new movie "Revenge of the Electric Car." As a bicycling, walking, mass-transit supporting grassroots activist concerned about smog, global warming, urban sprawl and road death, I found the message and campaign a sick kind of insult. In these life-or-death times for our embattled ecosystem, it felt as if one were about to be tortured by armed, U.S. tax-paid automatons, and then a go-between cheerily offers a brochure on the glories of voting for "Change" in our Land of the Free and Home of the Brave. (Or is it the Land of the Shopping Spree and the Home of the Slave?)

Fortunately, there's more than one of us out here on the fringes advocating car-free living. This is not a survey of who all we are, but I present three authorities that came forward after my salvo against the Sierra Club campaign that polluted my email inbox. First, a new effort from Pat Murphy, instrumental in making the popular documentary "The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil". Pat's new website is PluginScam.org, dedicated to

"Exposing the 'false solution' of Plug-in cars, both battery electric vehicles (BEV) and plug-in hybrid electric vehicles (PHEV)... Car companies, government agencies, and our President are involved in covering up the actual fuel economy (MPG) and associated carbon dioxide emissions of such vehicles. This website's... objective is to inform people about the MPG misrepresentation for BEVs and PHEVs done to provide false hope for the 'clean' electrification of personal transportation."

The other two helpful sources for shedding light on my exchange with the Sierra Club are Mark Robinowitz and Bill LeBon. Mark has been a long-time road fighter who has seen little, positive action from the Sierra Club, and Bill is a Culture Change contributor dating back to our group's Auto-Free Times magazine. Pat, Mark, Bill and I might spell trouble for any pro-car technofixer. Such a person's worst mistake was probably to send me spam about a "party" for electric cars. But wait, maybe I can repair the bridge I've burned, and still attend the party? I could bring party favors such as road kill à la asphalt spice.

TO: Gina Coplon-Newfield

Senior Campaign Representative for Electric Vehicles

Sierra Club

April 10, 2012

Dear Ms. Coplon-Newfield and fellow Sierra Club policy makers,

A spammy subject line is one thing, but consider that promoting more cars -- when electric ones don't save energy or reduce overall pollution, considering the mining and manufacturing, and battery or grid aspect of car production and operation -- is unkind to nature, something John Muir would not approve of. He stated he was on the side of the bears, not humans, if it came down to push and shove. Have you considered roadkill? One million animals a day on U.S. roads.

Electric cars may even worsen this holocaust if they are quieter. A new study, Loss of predators in Northern Hemisphere affecting ecosystem health is from Oregon State University, College of Forestry. As you must know, roads fragment critical habitat, and vehicles slaughter not just animals but people.

Your invitation/activist alert might have suggested car-pooling, transit or biking or walking to the movie Revenge of the Electric Car. (Good name, when cars kill whether in revenge or ignorance.) I might further suggest that you try being car-free 99% of your time, perhaps, and promote that solution, in order to care for Mother Earth all the way, or do so if you just want to hold onto your money and not give it to corporations. Or at least share cars for personal use and stop promoting them along with the unending asphalt, tires dust & fires, brake dust, etc. At least buying a used car keeps money in the community. Localism!

What was that $25 million gift the Sierra Club accepted from the fracker Chesapeake Energy? Gee whiz!

Please share this well-meant message with your fellow environmentalists -- even in your cars on the way to watching a movie about cars.

I know the Sierra Club comes out for biking too. But how about some consistency and more integrity instead of "compromisentalism?" It's also great to conform with science: Climate disaster has begun. It's also too late from the peak-oil standpoint to play with technology and try to preserve the oil-based consumer economy. Say, wouldn't nuke power also run electric plug-in cars, besides fossil fuel?

A thoughtful response is welcome. I cc responsible groups' listserves, and can post any replies there for you, or you can join them, and benefit from our knowledge.

Have a global warming day,

Jan

P.S. - Ivan Illich calculated that the adjusted average speed of the U.S. motorist is just 5 (five) miles per hour, considering all the time actually involved with the car. So, do we still need "better" vehicles if we can walk their real speed?

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Jan Lundberg

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On Apr 10, 2012, at 6:33 AM, Gina Coplon-Newfield wrote:

Hi Jan. Thank you for your note. You are completely right, of course, that walking and biking are the cleanest forms of transportation. As you know, the Sierra Club does a lot to promote programs that will incentivize walking and biking -at the local, state, and federal levels. It sounds like you're active in these efforts, which is terrific.

However, we know that for the foreseeable future, millions of Americans will continue to drive cars, and those cars pollute A LOT, so we need to simultaneously promote much cleaner cars (like hybrids and electrics), public transportation, walking/biking, and cleaner sources of electricity. I'm proud to work for an organization that is working hard to promote all of these.

Thanks for all you do to protect the environment.

Best Regards,
Gina

On Apr 9, 2012, at 5:54 PM, Gina Coplon-Newfield, Sierra Club wrote:

(Web version of this email: http://action.sierraclub.org/site/MessageViewer?em_id=234423.0&dlv_id=202761

Dear Jan,

There's a Watch Party for "Revenge of the Electric Car" Near You. - RSVP Today!

In 2006, the electric vehicles (EVs) market was effectively dead, but today EVs are making a comeback across the country!
And while EV owners can't stop raving about the newest models, Big Oil and its allies have been trying to spread ridiculous stories smearing EVs and hybrids... [Culture Change note: Lundberg Survey performed a study last month against EV's and alternative-fueled vehicles, part of Big Oil's campaign. However, Jan Lundberg, who ran Lundberg Survey in its heyday of the 1980s, has very different reasons than Big Oil's for criticizing EV's (and all cars). The story on the probably bogus study by Lundberg Survey is at Guest Opinion: Alt-Fuel Vehicles Remain Uncompetitive. Reuters picked up on it in its story, "Electric car revolution faces increasing headwinds". The study is publicized as freely available but was yanked weeks ago from Lundberg Survey's website.]

My reply to her has been unanswered after a few days:

Dear Gina,

I appreciate your quick response. However, it barely addressed my points. You would agree that transportation, energy and ecology are not small issues. So can the Sierra Club dismiss points against car domination with the claim that some people like to or need to drive? Some also like to dump pesticides and crankcase oil down storm drains, and may feel they need to. You told me that cars pollute "A LOT", but do two wrongs make a right? At any rate, I pointed out that your hybrids and electrics pollute "A LOT" too. I await your response and would like to know if you or the Club has done analysis on these issues.

If the Club's electric car and Green Transportation campaigns and the Club's position are based on assumptions regarding politics and money, I pose the question to you, "could the Sierra Club be working in part against fundamental change that is required to save the planet?" Being in favor of bicycling and walking is good, but either it is the answer (overall, along with sailing, riding horses, living near one's work, etc.) or just an option. Have you considered that saving the Earth as not an "option" but an imperative when time is running out for a livable climate? Or is that point something to deal with as President Obama would: do something nice with his left hand while the right one comes down like an iron fist against freedom, against peace, is pro-fossil fuels, and promotes nuke power?

Your being polite and praising my efforts does not make for an adequate answer, and seems to be out of the corporate play book. I asked you about the asphalt-sprawl factor. About road kill. About wasting money that may not be available -- for how many consumers? There are 200 million killing, polluting four-wheeled machines in this country; how many of them will become electric, given the post-peak oil/post-growth financial realities? What about my citation of U.S. motorists really going only 5 MPH? Is your campaign and the Club's position therefore untenable except for considerations of politics and money?

For someone to run a campaign not based on reality or kindness to the Earth and her creatures, which you might be doing as Senior Campaign Representative for Electric Vehicles, there must be money involved for you and the Sierra Club. Please tell me how much money; this would be transparency, and do you not justify publicly everything you do as part of your job and what the Club does as a public charity?

I apologize for an inaccuracy; I asked you about the $25 million Sierra Club took from Chesapeake Energy, a leading fracker; it was $26 million. You omitted addressing this collapse of ethics in my first inquiry, but the issue is intricately connected to Sierra's advocacy of cars, so I await your justification or renunciation: why should environmentalists trust an organization that would take massive pollution money? How much of that money went to your activities and salary? Follow-up question: to justify fracking as okay because it's "not coal," does this ignore the simple idea of curtailing energy use? Or would you say that because the Sierra Club also supports biking, walking and hiking, is slashing energy-use already "covered?"

Would you agree that thinking critically and being truly honest requires, when you are someone of obvious intelligence, justifying the slaughter of creatures and people on roads by inefficient machines of different propulsion? Are not expensive new vehicles for the elite only? Is this ever discussed at the Club: are we all screwed, including the driving elite, until the paradigm of car-dependence and paving the Earth collapses?

When half-baked solutions and politics-as-usual reign, as they seem do in your department if not for most of the Sierra Club, would a reasonable person aware of today's ecological realities conclude that you and your organization are therefore part of the problem? I knew David Brower, and I believe that he might agree. He would love to see Sierra Club Occupied by those who, like himself and John Muir, put the Earth first (which puts people first as well in the long run).

I am a journalist of long standing, having been active in news-gathering ranging from U.N. climate and sustainability meetings to civil mass disobedience for protecting ancient redwoods. I was previously publisher of what used to be called the "bible of the oil industry" in the U.S. As I no longer serve the corporate state, Culture Change (that I founded in 1988) attempts to get at the root of the intertwined ecological crisis and energy reality. You probably knew this when you responded to me. I request that you directly address my points in my first email and in so doing we try to raise awareness for the public. Isn't that what the Sierra Club is supposed to be about? The world is watching you and the Club, which goes with the territory that you and your management staked out for the public's and Nature's welfare.

Thank you for your cooperation in responding at your earliest convenience.

Jan Lundberg

p.s. - You cc'd Rachel Butler. Rachel, your position is with the Club's Green Transportation Campaign, so I am honored that Gina would involve you in this crucial discussion. Please comment on cars' color being more accurately red, not green -- for the blood of one million animals slaughtered on U.S. roads each day -- and grey for the toxic Big-Oil-asphalt that cars run on, that covers much of the fertile Earth. Please also address Gina's assumption that "we know that for the foreseeable future, millions of Americans will continue to drive cars..." -- even though something called peak oil has arrived globally, and a geopolitical event in the Persian Gulf can deal a crippling blow to driving-as-usual. And, fancifully enough, people may actually start caring for the Earth and stop driving if climate disaster finally wakes them up; apparently, it hasn't yet woken up Gina. How about you?

More of her original message:

It's important that we learn the EV facts -- that's why Sierra Club supporters across the country will be attending local watch parties for the new film Revenge of the Electric Car this week and next.

Watch the trailer now, and then sign up to attend a Revenge of the Electric Car watch party near you.

Revenge of the Electric Car is the new film from Chris Paine, director of Who Killed the Electric Car? It chronicles the global resurgence of EVs and follows the exciting story of four men racing to bring them to the general public.

Attending a watch party is a lot of fun. It's a great chance to meet other Sierra Club supporters and talk about ways to move beyond oil in your community. Some watch parties will even have EVs on hand that you can check out.

Sign up to attend a Revenge of the Electric Car watch party with other Sierra Club supporters today.

Big Oil's grip on the car industry has led to disastrous consequences. Oil contributes more to global climate disruption than any other fuel -- and gasoline-powered vehicles are a major reason why. They also create smog and other forms of air pollution, leading to health problems.

Many Americans have no choice but to drive, which is why a switch to EVs is a key part of the path toward reducing our emissions and our addiction to oil. Even with today's electricity sources, EVs are significantly cleaner than nearly all conventional vehicles -- and will only get cleaner as we shift to cleaner sources of power.

Electric vehicles are one key step in breaking our addiction to oil. Will you attend a watch party near you for Revenge of the Electric Car?

Thanks for all you do to protect our environment.

Gina Coplon-Newfield

P.S. If you can't make the event near you with fellow Sierra Club supporters, you can still stream the film on Netflix anytime, or watch it when it airs on public television April 19th.

[footnote: www.nytimes.com/2012/04/07/opinion/nocera-the-right-flames-the-volt.html]

Gina Coplon-Newfield

Senior Campaign Representative for Electric Vehicles

Sierra Club

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BIll LeBon's response, sent to the Global Warming Crisis Council, the San Francisco Peak Oil list, and cc'ing the Sierra Clubbers:

- Electric cars will mostly run on coal, nuclear and fracked dirty gas.

- The average car consumes more energy to produce than all the fuel it consumes in it's lifetime. Electric cars consume even more. The cost of a new car generally reflects the energy it consumed to make it, and electric cars are much more expensive than gas cars.
- Promoting "green" cars gives people a false impression that car culture can somehow be good.

- More than 100 Americans killed on roads every day (40,000 deaths/365=109) Way more American deaths than the Iraq and Afghanistan wars combined. 10 years x 40k/yr = 400,000 American car deaths since 911. We all know multiple people killed or maimed by cars. Not true of war and "terror". Who's the real terrorist? Plus those war deaths were caused by our addiction to car culture. Not to mention the over 1 million Iraqi and Afghani deaths.

- The science says we need 80-90% reduction of CO2. Most fossil fuels Americans burn are car related. Electric cars might reduce CO2 a few percent at best, but I suspect they will actually increase CO2 because they take so much energy to produce. Batteries don't last very long, are toxic and very expensive (energy intensive) to produce. (I know cause I been there too)

- Electric cars are just a toy for the rich as you pointed out. Who can spend 50k on a car that will only go 100 miles? No wonder sales are flat even with the Sierra Club promoting them.

- Neighborhood electric vehicles for old people, disabled, and local delivery will reduce CO2 compared with a gas vehicle. They go 30mph and get the equivelent of 200 mpg and can be produced for under $10k. Batteries are still problematic though.

Mark Robinowitz, of OilEmpire.us, added this background on the Sierra Club, replying to me through the same SF Peak Oil list and cc'ing the Sierra Clubbers:

As you know, Sierra Club has praised the various surface transportation bills (which appropriated money for more highways) because there were "baby steps" for reforming transportation planning. Meanwhile, those laws shoveled hundreds of billions to the highwaymen, but only more modest funding for public transit and barely anything for Amtrak. Reading the publications of the foundation funded environmental groups you would not know what most of the money in these appropriations was used for. The only DC based environmental group that opposed these laws was Friends of the Earth.

Sierra also fumbled the lawsuit they filed against the Intercounty Connector superhighway in Maryland. Poorly designed and it failed, resulting in construction of a three billion dollar Outer Beltway segment. When I lived in Maryland in the 1990s, the Sierra Club was trying to claim credit for efforts to stop the ICC but was not actually doing any of the technical work to document the legal problems of the highway. We managed to get the project withdrawn in 1998, although that was merely a temporary stall of the project and it came back in 2004. Sierra and EDF filed a poorly implemented lawsuit and it was thrown out of court. It opened for business last year.

Meanwhile, we have reached Peak Traffic - Peak Vehicle Miles Traveled. A number of "green" groups want to pretend this is because their policies have had the desired impact (I'm not sure if Sierra is claiming this, too). The reality is the price of petroleum went up as we approached Peak Oil and people decided to drive less. There's still lots of traffic but it's not getting any worse. Peak Traffic, not no traffic. I don't know of any foundation funded environmental group that admits this or suggests it is a reason to stop funding highway expansion. A few groups object to a specific road project but I'm unaware of any environmental groups that dare point out the large list of new and expanded highways that are considered Congressional priorities in the surface transportation laws (1991, 1995, 1998, 2005). I have found pro-highway websites and the Federal Highway Administration website far more helpful than the Sierra Club's resources when documenting highway plans and transportation policies.

I've never seen anything about Peak Energy in any Sierra Club publication, website, presentation, etc. Most just push the meme that we need to switch to alternatives without mentioning that the alternatives will have much less total production than the overconsumption we currently enjoy. Green capitalism is an oxymoron. A renewable energy powered society would have a smaller, steady state economy.

I heard Michael Brune speak around the time he replaced Carl Pope. He was reading from his book about how we are supposedly addicted to oil, although we are totally dependent on it for our food production and distribution system. (Is anyone reading this "addicted" to grocery stores and long distance food transport?) There was a small mention of Peak Oil in his book, but it was short and amateurish to be polite.

I wasn't surprised to learn that Sierra has been on the payroll of the natural gas industry.

Sierra's "Beyond Coal" campaign is pushing the idea there is so much natural gas that we run serious risks of exporting coal to China, so give us your money so we can fight this. When the shale gas bubble bursts, probably in Obama's second term, plans to export coal will evaporate. Meanwhile, they are not campaigning to turn off excessive lighting (why is it legal to light up billboards?) or discussing how we are all going to be forced to cope with energy depletion. Change your light bulb but don't turn it off?

Ideally, I would love to see the Transition Town approach replace the foundation funded environmental groups. It would be nice for the alleged "membership" groups to teach their members how to tear up their lawns to grow food, set up car and bicycle cooperatives, insulate homes, and the countless other tasks for "transition" to a lower energy society. That would be far more useful than campaigning to elect politicians who speak green(wash) while pushing "clean" coal, multimodal highways, safe nuclear power (sic) and other atrocities.

Mark Robinowitz offered these links:

road-scholar.org

Peak Traffic: Transportation Triage at the End of the Age of Oil -- how to use Peak Energy to stop highway expansion

"Compromise is often necessary, but it ought not to originate with environmental leaders.

Our role is to hold fast to what we believe is right, to fight for it, to find allies, and to adduce all possible arguments for our cause. If we cannot find enough vigor in us or our friends to win, then let someone else propose the compromise, which we must then work hard to coax our way. We thus become a nucleus around which activists can build and function."
-- David Brower

Sierra Club and Peak Gas

The scandal of the Sierra Club taking $25 million from Chesapeake Energy is not that Sierra Club is in bed with polluters (an old story) but that Sierra Club has zero interest in energy supply issues. If Sierra had looked at the reports from Post Carbon Institute www.postcarbon.org, the Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas www.aspousa.org or The Oil Drum www.theoildrum.com they would have learned that shale gas is wildly exaggerated in the supply and cannot possibly replace coal even if toxic issues around shale gas fracking are solved or ignored.

Conventional natural gas peaked in the U.S. in 1973. Fracking of “shale gas” is a toxic, short-term spike in production that may last a few more years but there isn’t enough natural gas for the fantasy of replacing coal with gas. Moving beyond coal means using much less electricity and relocalizing production.

We are at Peak Oil, Peak Natural Gas and near Peak Coal and Peak Uranium, but Peak Denial is probably far in the future.

Documentation about Peak Coal and Peak Natural Gas:

Peak Coal and Peak Natural Gas

geologist Art Berman explains why there is less shale gas than the industry claims

Sierra Club took $25 million from Chesapeake Energy "fracking" company to pay for "Beyond Coal" campaign.

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Pass the word! Are your donations to environmental groups mainly serving to prop up the status quo? Should you earmark your funding for just the legit campaigns?