

Your roots are showing - don't be convinced by seeming grass roots efforts

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Particularly now that the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act is at hand, much is being made of the supposed grass roots endorsements that are supposed to benefit all of the fishermen who the endorsers claim to be representing. This being the case, I thought it might be useful to examine what "grass roots" really means and to contrast some bona fide grass roots fishing groups with some that, in spite of their billing, might not live up to such a claim.

I'll start off with the Wikipedia entry for grassroots; *"a grassroots movement (often referenced in the context of a political movement) is driven by a community's politics. The term implies that the creation of the movement and the group supporting it are natural and spontaneous, highlighting the differences between this and a movement that is orchestrated by traditional power structures."*

This definition is fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't go quite far enough.

The minority staff of the United States Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works recognized in the just released report **The Chain of Environmental Command: How a Club of Billionaires and Their Foundations Control the Environmental Movement and Obama's EPA** what they termed a "Billionaires Club" which has gained access to *"a close knit network of like minded funders, environmental activists, and government bureaucrats who specialize in manufacturing phony 'grassroots' movements and in promoting bogus propaganda disguised as science and news...."* I have been researching and reporting on this network for most of the past two decades. While the report's authors limited their efforts to the Obama Administration, the Democratic Party and the Environmental Protection Agency, their "Billionaires Club" has been exercising its influence since long before the current administration was in charge and its influence seems to be unaffected by party politics. It is not orchestrated by any traditional power structures but rather one that is fairly new, frighteningly effective and in existence only through the approval and encouragement of both the legislative and executives branches, regardless of party affiliations.

I'll get to what real grassroots movements are in fisheries in a little bit, but think it would be most instructive to begin with what aren't. For this I'll go back a couple of years to a supposed "grassroots" movement, this one aimed at saving the world's oceans from harvesting of forage fish. (Note that this movement, though definitely nothing resembling grassroots, is still ongoing – see my last FishNet on sea herring at <http://www.fishnet-usa.com/Herring%20Smoke.pdf>. Those millions of available foundation bucks are more than addicting to some of the ocean-oriented ENGOs.) From Fishing as a management tool, which I wrote in 2007:

The latest assault on the commercial fishing industry is by a recently formed organization called The Herring Alliance. This “alliance” is made up of the Conservation Law Foundation, Earthjustice, Environment Maine, Public Interest Research Group, Greenpeace, National Environmental Trust, Natural Resources Defense Council, National Coalition for Marine Conservation, Oceana and The Pew Charitable Trusts. It is described on its website as “a coalition of environmental and other public interest organizations dedicated to protecting and restoring marine wildlife populations and Northeastern U.S. marine ecosystems by reforming the Atlantic herring fishery.” However, there’s a bit more – or perhaps that should be a lot less – to this coalition than meets the eye.

All but two of the member organizations are funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. According to the Pew Trusts website, since 1998 The Conservation Law Foundation has received over 1,000,000 dollars, Earthjustice has received over 20,000,000 dollars, National Environmental Trust has received over 40,000,000 dollars, Natural Resources Defense Council has received almost 5,000,000 million dollars, Public Interest Research Group has received over 18,000,000 dollars, and Oceana has received over 38,000,000 dollars from Pew. Environment Maine acknowledges Pew support, but the Pew Trusts website doesn’t detail at what level that support is.

This embarrassment of riches is part and parcel of Pew’s strategy. In an article in the New York Times on June 28, 2001, Douglas Jehl wrote “unlike many philanthropies that give to conservationist groups, Pew has been anything but hands-off, serving as the behind-the-scenes architect of highly visible recent campaigns to preserve national forests and combat global warming. Though some of its money goes to long-established groups, Pew has also created its own organizations, with names like the National Environmental Trust and the Heritage Forest Campaign.” (Charity Is New Force in Environmental Fight). However, in the case of this “coalition,” the impression is that a group of organizations spontaneously came together because of a concern over the management of herring in New England waters. All those zeros in the preceding paragraph show how spontaneous that concern really was.

(Of the two groups apparently not Pew funded, Greenpeace is notoriously opposed to “big businesses” such as those engaged in the herring fisheries, and the National Coalition for Marine Conservation, in spite of its name, is an organization representing recreational fishing interests; interests who see any real form of commercial fishing as undesirable competition.)

Such seeming grassroots organizations might well be termed “Astroturf roots,” but they certainly don’t identify themselves as such. Since the mega-foundations involved in saving the oceans from fishermen whose style of fishing they don’t approve of have made it virtually impossible for the public to track their fisheries- and oceans-oriented activities it takes a prodigious amount of research and insight to identify particular organizations’ roots).

Real grass roots

Recently the West coast drift gillnet fishery was being threatened by legislation introduced in the California legislature. The legislation was identified as having originated with Pew Oceana (note that some of the people at Pew Oceana apparently bristle at the association of their organization with the Pew Trusts. Considering the largesse that the Pew Trusts have lavished on Oceana I can’t imagine identifying it as anything but that, but remember those exposed roots!) and would have effectively shut down the fishery.

A handful of fishermen and other folks involved in the fishery and one volunteer, a gentleman named Jonathan Gonzalez who started out firmly in favor of “protecting” the oceans from fisherman but after digging into the issues rightfully concluded that these fishermen were the ones who were wearing the white hats and shifted his allegiance, went to Sacramento to attend a hearing on the legislation. They and the facts they presented were so effective that the legislation died in the Committee – in spite of the attendance at the hearing of Pew Oceana representatives. (For more on Jonathan Gonzalez see **A must read blog** at <http://tinyurl.com/kkj4hag>.)

There was no formal organization, no outside (and undisclosed) financial support, and no “piling on” by other organizations with undisclosed relationships of an Astroturf nature; just threatened businessmen and an interested observer with the facts on their side and a roomful of California Legislators who were willing to listen to them.

On the other end of the grassroots spectrum is Fishermen’s Energy, a corporation envisioned and formed by members of the commercial fishing industry from the mid-Atlantic and New England. Fishermen’s Energy was originally conceived by Dan Cohen at Atlantic Capes Fisheries in Cape May, New Jersey as a way for the fishing industry to have substantive input into offshore energy development in our coastal waters. The partners in Fishermen’s Energy are all established and well-respected members of the commercial fishing industry.

Offshore wind energy development is still a controversial issue that concerns – and justifiably so – fishermen and those in fishing dependent businesses because of the possibility that their interests will be ignored in the rush to put wind turbines in place in our territorial waters. From the Fishermen’s Energy website (<http://www.fishermensenergy.com>): *“if the ocean environment is to be developed as a source of electricity, local fishermen and fishing industry companies bound for life to the community and to the sea are the best source of talent and resources to accomplish this.”*

Whether at the most informal level as with the West coast gillnetters coming together to keep their sustainable fishery operating or at the highly structured and well-financed corporate level (Fishermen’s Energy recently received a US Department of Energy grant for \$46.7 million - <http://www.fishermensenergy.com/press-releases/2014-08-07.pdf>) or anything in between, the important point is that these are bona fide grass roots initiatives, started and carried out primarily by people who are dependent on sustainably harvesting our rich coastal and offshore waters. That’s important, and they can rightfully claim that they represent working fishermen.

There’s a world of difference between them and fishermen in organizations which are dependent on ENGOs and/or huge foundations who claim to be representing fishermen but are in actuality pushing the agenda of the people who are supplying the dollars. The minority staff of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works made that obvious in their report. While it might take a bit of effort, when you are evaluating claims by anyone claiming to speak for commercial fishermen, remember Mark Felt’s advice to Woodward and Bernstein and “follow the money.”

(On the subject of following the money I will disclose here that several of the partners in Fishermen’s Energy support both FishNet USA and Garden State Seafood Association, for which I am the Communications director.)