

Nominee for the William Colby Award

Nominee:

Jonathan Ela
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Group: Four Lakes Group

Chapter: John Muir Chapter

Entity:

Chapter Chair: Jim Steffens

ExComm support: no (or unknown)

The nominee deserves this award because:

We consider it a privilege and an honor to submit the name of our friend, colleague and fellow Sierra Club leader, Jonathan Ela, for consideration as a recipient of the William E. Colby Award.

In his many years with the Sierra Club and in the many years we have known him, he has demonstrated outstanding leadership, dedication, and service to the Club. We especially want to point out that over the past decade Jonathan has helped build one of the most successful political programs in the non-profit arena, including the Club's successful role in the U. S. Presidential and Congressional 2008 elections. More generally, his service to the Club has included contributions within the organizational structure, as both staff member and volunteer leader, and also includes important conservation work in the Club and in his personal life outside the organization.

First and foremost Jonathan is a visionary and a strategic thinker. He is an innovator. He is passionate and constant in his concern for the Sierra Club and for the environmental values it promotes. He is an eloquent communicator and spokesperson. He is an effective consensus builder and team player who has demonstrated the ability to work cooperatively with his peers to reach sound decisions.

His first engagement with the Sierra Club was in 1969-1971 as Assistant Conservation Director to Michael McCloskey, Executive Director/Conservation Director of the Club. where his responsibility was to make sure that the Club was acting effectively with a clear and unified voice. In 1971-1983 he was the Midwest Representative in Madison, Wisconsin. He founded that Midwest Office, covering eleven Midwest states (later nine states), to bring the Club presence to the Midwest which had not been well represented as the Club tended to focus on the two coasts. Working with an office manager, he was a lobbyist, regional whip for federal issues, a press advocate, staff support and advisor to Midwest chapters, and in general a trouble shooter. While there working with a series of talented regional volunteer chairs, he pioneered the idea of using Regional Conservation Committees, staff, and outside resources to address regional problems that went beyond state and chapter boundaries, but did not rise to the level of national Club priorities. A significant conservation issue he worked on was the Upper Mississippi River where

continuing conflicts were occurring between navigation demands and conservation and recreational values.

In 1994-1999 Jonathan was an Upper Mississippi River specialist, first as a volunteer, and then as staff, working with volunteers and other staff to raise interest among the general public regarding the still continuing use conflicts on the Upper River.

Between 1999-2008, Jonathan became a member of the Sierra Club Political Committee. He was the Chair from 2005-2008. He was also Chair of the Environmental Voter Education Campaign Steering Committee, 1999-2005. During that time the Club's work in electoral politics went from being a secondary strategy, not always enthusiastically embraced by Club leadership, to an essential and pivotal component of our overall program. Jonathan was always a firm believer in that, and with others played a key leadership role in bringing about the change. As Volunteer Chair of the Political Committee he worked with many other units of the Club, including the Board of Directors, the Conservation Governance Committee, and Chapter Political and Executive Committees. In 2007 the Board of Directors recognizing the outstanding job Jonathan was doing as Chair of the Political Committee asked him to stay an additional year beyond the allowable term limits time in order to lead the Club's critically important 2008 Presidential and Congressional Campaigns. He and his Staff Co-Lead Cathy Duvall did an outstanding job engaging the Club, staff and volunteers, as never before and definitely contributed to the successful, groundbreaking conclusion of those campaigns. The Sierra Club did play an important role and Jonathan and Cathy provided outstanding leadership for that effort.

From 2005 to the present, Jonathan has been a member of INCA, (Integrated National Conservation Action). The INCA Committee was designed to administer budgetary allocations that could be quickly channeled into projects that could not be foreseen through the normal budgetary processes. Note: Under the Club's reorganization INCA may not continue.

In 2008 Jonathan was a member of the Project Renewal Programs and Campaigns Task Force. The group was charged with coming up with procedures and work plans for implementing the changes to national programs and campaigns dictated by Project Renewal.

From 2008 to the present he has been a member of the New Administration Task Force. This group has met regularly by conference call since before the November election. Its principal goal was to influence policy and personnel decisions made by the Obama team. Since the inauguration it has continued to make personnel recommendations to the new Administration's environmental agencies.

From 2005 to the present Jonathan has been a member of the Board of Directors of the Sierra Club State Action Fund. He serves as one of the "official" Club board members of this separate sister organization, which has the primary purpose of supporting the environmental point of view in state ballot measures. In addition, it secondarily engages

in voter education. Since its inception, the State Action Fund has been involved in efforts in Washington, Colorado, New Mexico, Virginia, Nevada, New Hampshire, Missouri, and Utah.

Though not an official Club post, from 2003-2005 Jonathan played a key role in a defensive strategy coordinated by Groundswell Sierra to prevent the takeover of the Club by individuals who would have harmed the integrity of the Board and the organizational identity of the Club. He was recruited by a handful of leaders who had started working on this effort and then took the lead in mobilizing and organizing grass roots Sierra Club support for it. The crisis was averted and a great deal of credit for that must go to Jonathan.

Jonathan observed the ability of government and politics to accomplish conservation/environmental goals while he served on the staff of U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson in 1967-68. In 1968 the Redwoods National Park, the North Cascades National Park, the National Trails System and the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System were passed. He had some involvement with all of them and that led him to seek employment with the Sierra Club the following year. Senator Nelson remained his mentor, colleague on legislative projects of interest to the Sierra Club, political role model, and friend until his death in 2005.

In the 1970s and 1980s Jonathan was founder and leader of a number of organizations and coalitions, including a Coalition for Sound Waterways Policy which fought mindless and environmentally destructive waterway transportation pork barrel projects in Congress. It was a unique coalition of environmentalists, large corporations and traditional labor unions. He later founded and chaired River Country Voices, a regional grass roots organization founded to defend the Upper Mississippi River.

Continuing that political conservation/environment work, Jonathan was appointed to serve on the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board in 2003. He was elected Vice-Chair in 2007, a position he still holds, and is Chair of the Air, Water, Waste and Law Enforcement Committee, 2007 to the present. This statutory body of seven citizens sets policy for, and oversees the operations of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. He has found this an interesting experience in converting a lifetime of outside advocacy into actually making the resource decisions that guide state policy.

Jonathan Ela has been a remarkable leader for the Sierra Club over a period of many years, bringing his passionate commitment to the organization, along with his many remarkable skills and talents, and his deep and abiding wish to generally promote the environmental cause.

We heartily recommend him for this honor.

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Previous recognition

no (or unknown) We don't think so

Local newspapers to notify:

Group Newsletter:

Chapter Newsletter:

Contact Shahla Werner-Chapter Director
Sierra Club John Muir Chapter Ofc.

Nominator:

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