



## Transcript of Video Interview with Don May re David Brower, recorded 2009.

This interview is part of Earth Alert's Heroes of the Coast video archive, featuring interviews with leading California coastal activists, past and present California Coastal Commissioners and Coastal Commission staff. For more information, visit [www.earthalert.org](http://www.earthalert.org).

Janet Bridgers interviews Don May re David Brower

JB: Hello and welcome to *Heroes of the Coast*. I'm Janet Bridgers with Earth Alert. And I'm delighted to have another true action hero as my guest today, Don May.

DM: Delighted to be here, Janet.

JB: Thanks for driving in.

DM: Of course.

JB: Don, we are going to talk today about someone that you had the pleasure and advantage of knowing personally—one of the greatest environmental heroes we've ever known, David Brower.

DM: The arch-druid, absolutely, was a mentor to many, many, many folks, so I was very privileged to be amongst them.

JB: For people who are not familiar, let's do a brief rundown of David Brower's career.

DM: He was a climber. I knew him first as a rock climber, and I believed the only worthwhile part of the Sierra Club was the rock climbing section. And if you look through the book of first ascents in the Sierra, you'll see at least half of them have David Brower and Herman Clyde [sp?], the two of the most prominent climbers. David was active in the 14<sup>th</sup> Mountain Troops...

JB: In World War II.

DM: World War II. Taught the military how to move safely across mountains on ski mountaineering. Came back and became a long-term, quarter-century executive director of the Sierra Club, which is where I first knew him. In fact, besides being a hero because of his mountaineering exploits, he...a lot of us that went around in the Sierras, bagging peaks and that sort of thing, developed a sense of territoriality, believed that those all belonged to us personally. And David started bringing large quantities of people back there and they became famous for these outings and campfire singing. Like ants, they'd come over the mountains. And so I went down to complain about that. And David explained, as he did to many other folks, that if people don't know a place, they will never love it. And if they don't love it, they'll never fight for it.

And anytime that you want to save one of the Earth's wild places, you'd best start taking tours out there and introducing it to a large number of people, or when it comes to the political showdown that eventually happens, you're going to be there by yourself.

JB: And he developed, which is something now very common to all of us, techniques for bringing a lot of people to beautiful places and tell us about that. And tell us about that. I'm talking about photography and film.

DM: Well, photography, yes. As a matter of fact, depending on which side you're on, what David did...I think it all comes into context with the fight over Glen Canyon, which taught us all a lot, and more particularly David, I think, because up until that time, the Sierra Club had really been a lot of an insider organization, particularly back in the days with my father-in-law. There weren't a lot of others. It was a small group. And you had to be invited to join. And any member who objected got blackballed out of the organization. So it was a very small tight group who believed in consensus. They had a large number of very famous heads of the Department of the Interior, heads, secretaries of the Department of the Interior came out of the Sierra Club. And they always worked behind the scenes very quietly and all of that.

David changed that and built a large membership, built a very democratic one that anyone who's dealt with the club knows their ponderous processes and all this consensus. And I think, while that's extremely important, that was the undoing. And it started with Glen Canyon Dam and the drowning of the river. And after a long and difficult fight, there was a compromise made to save the Rainbow Bridge, and inundate Glen Canyon. And David realized that was an error and the popular reason for doing this being for recreation, to get people to be able to see this back country.

Anyway, he had a series of national ads that said, "Shall we flood the Sistine Chapel to get the tourists near the ceiling?" And it just brought people together across the country. And support was disappearing and it was rushed to the floor and passed by a couple votes. And all of us, but particularly David, learned from that that compromise is not a virtue. Or as they said, "extremism in defense of the Earth is not vice." And that was the beginning of a sharp division.

The next day, the IRS pulled the Sierra Club's tax status. A lot of folks said, "David, you've done it now," and fired him over that. And a lot of the rest of us...I was chair of the Angeles Chapter Water Committee, and it was involved in the water wars, and was having difficulty with things like the California Aqueduct and peripheral canals and that kind of thing, but particularly nuclear power plants that some of us had come to find were devoid of any redeeming features. The old guard, of course, still looked at nuclear power as the opportunity to save our wild rivers, and clean up the air, and make energy too cheap to meter and all of that. And as one of my friends said, "and the books, Don, don't forget the books."

JB: What did he mean?

DM: Well, David introduced, after Glen Canyon...He did a book with Elliott Porter called *The Place Nobody Knew*. And that's what happened. We had a gorgeous place on the face of the Earth that nobody was aware of and so we lost it. And he introduced what has become known as "coffee table" books, exhibit-format books, that I found out were a wonderful way of opening the door to legislators...giving them, bringing in, giving one of these beautiful books, giving them to influential people, was a wonderful way to open the door to conversations about conservation.

Well, a lot of people felt that he had virtually bankrupted the club over his book policy. Eventually, of course, the club not only got all its money back, but a good return on it. But it took a long time. Most importantly, he had convinced a lot of people that there were a lot of places on this Earth that are worth fighting for. It also gave folks like Elliott Porter a great venue for his magnificent photographs. And, of course, Ansel Adams, he was involved for a long time.

JB: There were a lot of national parks that he helped form, including...here's a list: King's Canyon, the North Cascades, the Redwoods, Great Basin Alaska, Cape Cod, Fire Island, the Golden Gate, and Point Reyes. And Point Reyes alone would qualify him for a spot as a Hero of the Coast, here in California. But you had the opportunity not just to work with him, but to know him more personally. Tell us some of the stories about how did you happen to spend time with David Brower.

DM: Well, it started, of course, after he was summarily thrown out of the Sierra Club. And a lot of his followers, myself amongst them, had a meeting in the meadow in Yosemite Valley to talk about what we would do, and decided that the successor organization, Friends of the Earth, would not seek tax status and would openly advocate and push for things and be an advocate for environmental causes...things that 501c3s, nonprofits, can't do. A c4 is a nonprofit, but is not tax deductible.

So we did, we formed Friends of the Earth, and David handed out little mementos. I should have brought that one in. He gave each of us a stone from the bottom of Glen Canyon and made us promise that one day we'd put it back when the river was running free. And a seed that came from Wiwona [sp?], redwood seed, with the admonition that we should take it back to our homes and plant it and build an organization that would grow as the wiwona grew, and we did that. And that redwood, to my ex-wife's dismay, that grows in her backyard now, is a good-size tree, overwhelming a small backyard.

But, indeed, that thought of building organizations...And also there were other things that came out of that meeting in terms of looking at different types of...You know, every organization is like a tool. And if there was one thing that David was good at, it's giving people a tool box of those things they would need to be effective environmentalists, not conservationists, I should say, because up until that time, we were all conservationists, seeking to preserve—husbandry of natural resources—and it was those who felt that...were active preservationists, if you would, active environmentalists had gone way beyond conservation. And the old guard at the Sierra Club, still, because a lot of those fights...One in particular, I think, gives you the idea of that. California condors were disappearing. They were in decline. They were down to the last 86 condors. And the Sierra Club and Audubon and a lot of the big green organizations decided that the thing to do was go catch them all and put them into cages and breed them in captive breeding so they could save the species. And virtually everyone associated with David's new organization, Friends of the Earth, said, “no, that's not the way. Condors should fly free. What you should do is save the land that they need, save their habitat, remove the stress that's wiping them out, because it's man's footprint on the mountain is what's causing the condor to disappear.” And we lost, of course, but we were right, because in catching those condors, they lost 50 of them. I think there were 30 of them that survived, something like that, in cages and it's taken them all these

many years...what's it been, a quarter century or so, to finally build it back to numbers of the ones that have been released and the ones that are still in cages, there is now almost the same number, a few less, condors alive as at the very inception of the captive breeding program, not to say that they would have survived. But had we saved the Sespe and a lot of range, they sure had a lot better chance at it. And that's basically one of the thoughts imbued in people was "let nature take its course, but if you can stay the hand of unwise development and human incursion that was destroying the environment, that's what you need to concentrate on."

JB: Now you brought this rather interesting relic (a LARGE old, rusty wrench) with you as one of your souvenirs. Tell us about this.

DM: Well, it was often said that if the Sierra Club was really a 2X4, about four feet long, it would be a whole lot more effective than the organization that it is. One of the wonderful things about David is that he introduced us all to a lot of very colorful folks—Aldo Leopold, David Foreman, and a guy named Edward Abbey. And Abbey, at...this is just after the founding...when they founded Friends of the Earth, there was a p.r. firm by the name of Gosick and Mander Gosick and Mander, and they were nice enough to give us an old firehouse up in San Francisco free as a...this is not only the first historic building in San Francisco, and one of the few things that survived the big earthquake and fire, and it's Historic Building Number One. Still had the old fire pole and all of that. And at our inauguration, there were people who signed their signature all the way up the pole, a number of Nobel laureates and wonderful people. Amongst them was Ed Abbey, and several of us that were there (can I say that?) were...have been known to take direct action to do things. And Ed Abbey gave us a monkey wrench and encouraged us to follow in David's advice that "extremism in defense of the Earth is no vice," that we should set about using this wrench where it...

JB: Well, that's a very controversial topic, but I love this quote from David that "the only mark that polite environmentalists/conservationists make is the scars on the Earth that..."

DM: "...scars upon the Earth that are left behind." That and another one I'm not sure was originally his, but that "at the end of our time, you'll look back not upon the things that you have done, but the things that you did not, and should have." That was his biggest remorse, places like Glen Canyon, and a few others where the club should have taken strong action and instead went for the compromise, for the consensus, for...saved half of it at the expense really of the whole.

Interesting in Abbey's book, *The Money Wrench Gang*, there was a number of us became staffers for the Friends of the Earth that showed up in that book. You can recognize some of us.

JB: I'll have to go back and read it.

DM: Well, one of them was...One of the irritating things on the highway from L.A. to Phoenix was nonstop billboards. Some of the folks—I won't mention who all they were—got some chainsaws and started off the other side of the San Gabriels and sawed down every billboard all the way to Phoenix.

JB: Part of Lady Bird Johnson's beautification program?

DM: Exactly. Exactly. Some of the things were a little more permanent than that. And we were in... It's always been one of David's teachings that... we look around, often we win these battles not through our own overt efforts, but because our enemies, our adversaries, tend to shoot themselves in the foot. And David pointed out that there were other people waving artillery around, and something that they could use against you, sometimes it's appropriate to reach over and pull the trigger when it's pointed at something other than you. And I think that all of us have found, over the years, when it's been those occasions when we've managed to pull the trigger on the adversaries' artillery, it has been much more effective than what we've been able to do through persuasion.

JB: Give us a couple more examples of that. What exactly do you mean by that?

DM: I don't know... Used to be that the corporations depended on their computers, this big growling monster that was down in their basement that the managers didn't understand. And of course, things that you don't understand are quite powerful. We tend to deify. And in those days, these were card-read systems, where you had a big long stack...

JB: Oh yeah, I learned key-punching.

DM: And it turns out that there was one particular company who utilized the residue from high sulfur oil was refined in the El Segundo Refinery and across the street was Allied Chemicals Sulfur Closs (sp?) Recovery Unit that was responsible for about 90% of the sulf-oxide emissions in the South Coast Air Basin. And somebody managed to have some cards slipped into deck that print out for Fron Riggs, the director, every morning of performance stuff for a highly protected managerial status reports. And all of a sudden popped up on his desk a little thing that said, "if you don't stop selling your sulfur to Allied Chemicals across the way, we're going to wipe out the disks."

Well, it turns out that Chevron Oil was, at that time, running eight- to 10-days of overlap in their cash flow and if you erased their credit records, it would take... they'd have to go back, they wouldn't recover. It would have bankrupted them. And the thought that they were vulnerable to somebody wiping out their credit records caused them to, indeed, stop selling sulfur and for the cost of a quarter inch of cards that some character slipped into a stack, the 90% of the chocking sulfur in the South Coast Air Basin went away.

JB: Damned good use of resources, Don.

DM: I don't know who did that.

JB: Tell us... you said that you learned a lot about tools in the larger sense from David Brower. Anything else you'd like to share with us?

DM: Well, there's... Sure. That's that there are lots of different types of organizations around. Some of them look at building memberships to the point that they can sustain cash flow and be able to have scientists that can take part in this big complex process that grinds on. Then there's

the community-based groups that are more nimble on their feet and more prone to direct action. There is a place in this world for all of those. And one of my favorites of David's quotes is, "I love splinter groups. They can't capture us all." And, in fact, that's what happens get founded to solve a particular problem and as they get into that, they become compromised, but they also become effective in a very narrow sense. So you need a lot of different organizations. And, in fact, there is a place, as there was with Friends of the Earth Foundation. They set up a foundation that took tax-deductible funds to fund the growth of new organizations. I happened to be one of the pushers for that. The Sierra Club was also very much afraid of direct political action. And I'd always been...felt that if you don't get your hands dirty, if you get directly involved walking precincts and setting up phone banks and directly raising funds for good candidates, that you couldn't hope to really have any influence when it came time for legislation. So we set up a political action committee, the League of Conservation Voters.

JB: Oh, and it's been so effective.

DM: It has.

JB: Tremendous legacy there.

DM: Part of it was another one of David's ...Marion Eddy (sp?) that we had the good fortune to run across and put in charge of League of Conservation Voters, and that and Clean Water Action built a lot of the effects of the Dirty Dozen Campaigns, and of course, the state and local leagues that have brought that action down to the local level.

JB: Don...See I knew, we could talk about David Brower for hours. Unfortunately, we're in the last minute of this program. Thank you again for bringing these stories to us.

DM: Of course.

JB: Viewers, thank you for watching. And remember, extremism in the defense of the Earth is no vice.

[end of interview]