

'Splatter-casting' the Sierra Club's message

Venerable group gets the Warhol touch

BY JOSH CHETWYND

Adam Werbach, the 24-year-old president of the 105-year-old Sierra Club, likes to stare at the walls for inspiration. On one wall of his San Francisco office is a painting of his organization's sage founder, the bearded John Muir. On the other is a fluorescent Andy Warhol print of Marilyn Monroe. "John Muir is all substance," says Werbach. "Warhol was never substance, but he learned how to communicate." Werbach says his goal is to combine the two.

For the nation's oldest environmental organization to choose as its president a kid from Southern California nearly straight out of college may seem risky. But with nonprofit groups constantly looking for ways to appeal to an affluent younger generation, Werbach's ascension has a certain logic. And thanks in part to the young president's knack for attract-

ing press attention, the Sierra

Club's membership and donations are rising. What Muir would have had cause to wonder about is whether, after the fluorescent glow fades, the Sierra Club will still be taken as seriously as it was before.

Werbach first attracted the notice of club leaders in 1991, when he created the organization's 30,000-member high school and college arm. After heated debate, the Sierra Club board decided last year that he would help raise the profile of the group. As president, Werbach leads board meetings, acts as general spokesperson, and oversees the paid staff (Werbach is a "volunteer," with an estimated "stipend" of \$30,000 a year). A former member of a funk band, he has been especially successful in appealing to his own generation. When Werbach spoke last

year at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pa., environmental studies professor Michael Heiman found his message "quick and somewhat shallow" but was impressed that "he spoke to students in ways they understand." Lately, Werbach has been



Adam Werbach speaks the language of young environmentalists.

jetting to Los Angeles to put together an alternative-rock benefit album for the Sierra Club called *Rock the Planet*. "To succeed with my generation, one must bind the message to music, fashion, and television," he says. "We don't learn from fire-side chats with the president; we learn from 'splatter cast' advertising."

Werbach's 20-something self-consciousness doesn't work for all audiences. Early in his tenure, he quipped that he didn't want the Sierra Club to be thought of as an organization of aging hippies. That didn't go over well with the substantial ex-hippie membership. Werbach has worked hard to improve his relationship with baby boom members, to limited effect. "It is hard for me to say there is an increased level of comfort," observes board member Tony Ruckel.

Irritating the group's members is one

problem. A bigger issue for Werbach is trying not to alienate too much of the public. In January, the Werbach-led board proposed that Lake Powell, the second-largest artificial lake in America and a popular tourist destination on the Utah-Arizona border, be drained to reveal the submerged canyon, a natural wonder. But it took 17 years to fill the reservoir. And the dam provides electricity to more than half a million homes in seven states. The proposal sparked such negative media reaction that many board members have since distanced themselves from the idea. Werbach argues that the reservoir wastes more water through seepage into canyon walls and evaporation than if the water were left to run naturally. He remains enthusiastic about the idea—further evidence, say critics, of his political naiveté.

Maroon skyline. The democratically run Sierra Club has seen its membership grow larger and more radical in recent years. Its rank and file voted nearly 2 to 1 last year to support a ban on logging in national forests, a reversal of the organization's previous position. Leading the anti-logging campaign were board members such as David Foreman, cofounder of the militant group Earth First! and a Werbach ally.

Werbach is up for re-election this spring, and right now his chances look good. "I think Adam has demonstrated a capacity for quick study and strong leadership," says former president and current

board member Robert Cox. In addition to presiding over the continued increase in fund-raising and membership, Werbach helped lead an effective campaign to defeat "anti-environmental" members of Congress, most of them freshman Republicans. Fourteen of the 18 congressional incumbents the Sierra Club targeted lost. The club spent \$7.5 million on TV ads and grass-roots activity, but Werbach's personal campaigning helped considerably.

Werbach remains focused on altering the club's image more than its reality. "What is important to us right now is that we need to communicate that our positions are not strange and on the fringe," he says. "We are talking about protecting America—[things like] the Statue of Liberty sitting in a maroon skyline." Andy Warhol would have been impressed. ■

