

## **Merging Environmental Advocacy Organizations: The Smiling Elephant in the Room**

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In these difficult financial and political times, many environmental groups teeter at the edge of organizational and program viability. This diminished capacity comes at a time when the environment is being assaulted at levels unimaginable a decade ago. Can organizational mergers help build a more effective movement?

Mention the topic of non-profit mergers to environmental activists or funders and you'll usually get heavy groans and eye rolling. Mention the possibility of an actual merger to an environmental executive director and they are likely to break out in a cold sweat. Mergers (and acquisitions) are a common occurrence within the business world; many nonprofits in other sectors are merging. But mergers between environmental advocacy organizations are few and far between.

### **What is the problem?**

In the 1990s, many environmental foundations, especially in the western United States, spread grant dollars over a large number of nonprofits. This "let a thousand flowers bloom" grantmaking strategy was a result of the temporary increase in total environmental grantmaking dollars, as well as a number of strategic assumptions, including:

- Increased local capacity results in long-term policy and political change. Examples include the many years of support for groups working on local timber sales or watershed issues.
- National environmental groups are more effective when they have regional offices in the West.
- Supporting new environmental leaders in creating new organizations will further progressive interests.

These funding strategies resulted in a significant increase in the number of environmental and conservation organizations. This growth coincided with, over the past three years, the abrupt demise of key grantmaking foundations along with a significant drop in overall environmental foundation grant dollars.

### **Mergers: Situational solutions or worse nightmares?**

Recently, some funders and environmental leaders have been exploring the possibility of mergers between advocacy organizations. These conversations have been tentative at best for a number of reasons, including a negative perception of mergers as a last ditch effort when groups are failing or as something that will be forced on them by funders. It is also hard to know where to begin – while there is good information on the nuts and bolts of mergers, there

are few positive models as to how advocacy-based groups can effectively combine mission, goals, objectives and policy work.

### **What could mergers do?**

While saving money through consolidation of backroom operations is one benefit, mergers can be a significant tool in helping build healthy organizations and a stronger environmental advocacy movement:

- The merger process focuses strategic questions about the shared mission and goals of the individual groups and provides impetus for developing more effective ways to do the work.
- Many executive directors of environmental advocacy organizations valiantly pound their 'round' organizing and political skills into a 'square' administrative hole. Their forte is not executive management – they know how to organize a lobby week but struggle to read a balance sheet. Mergers would more effectively take advantage of talents.
- Properly communicated, mergers send a signal to supporters that the organizations involved are thinking critically about good business practices.

### **What is possible and how do we get there?**

How do we create and implement mergers that support the overall environmental advocacy movement? Funders won't make this happen by forcing mergers on organizations; advocacy organizations need funder partners to both to invest and for "dutch uncle" assistance navigating the merger process.

Over the past few months, a group of foundation and activist leaders have been developing *The Merger Project*. The purpose of the project is to reframe mergers as a way for environmental work, and the people who do that work, to thrive. The project would develop and field-test key models, codify results and share lessons learned with the larger community.

Our hope is that through this project, mergers will become a useful tool for advocacy organizations, strengthening the overall environmental movement in a time of great need.

Kimery Wiltshire is founder and director of Exloco, a non-profit that innovates, tests and develops new models, strategies and campaigns to create sustainable ecoregional health in the western United States.

For more information on *The Merger Project*, please contact Exloco at 415.332.2112 or [info@exloco.org](mailto:info@exloco.org) or go to [www.exloco.org](http://www.exloco.org).