



## **Speech to the California Audubon Assembly: Tuesday, March 21, 2006**

Thank you. I'm honored to be with you today as a speaker at the Audubon Assembly, and to be in front of the finest conservation organization in the world. Truth be told I'm not a birder, so today I want to tell you a few stories, about how I came to be standing in front of you as Chairman of Audubon California.

The first story is about "*What a long strange trip it has been.*"

My parents were both immigrants. And like millions who made that trip before, their ships passed under the Statue of Liberty as they landed on Ellis Island. They both struggled and worked hard in their new country to make a better life for their children.

I grew up in a 600 square foot apartment in New York City surrounded by a sea of asphalt and concrete. When I was 11, I got my first view of animals larger than a squirrel, and birds other than pigeons, in Boy Scout camp. There I thought I had died and gone to heaven; there were rivers and streams, forests, and I spent my time catching frogs, fishing and hiking.

They say the experiences of the boy make the man, and for me the joy of seeing nature first hand has never gone away.

I grew up and went to college in a foreign country; at the University of Michigan (at least it was for me); but then during the Vietnam War I got to see some real foreign countries in Southeast Asia; courtesy the US Air Force. In that time I got to appreciate how little of the world is like New York City. And how much of it was still unspoiled and beautiful.

Coming home in the mid 1970's I got my first job near San Jose (and had to explain to my family in New York that it wasn't in Puerto Rico) and was astonished about everything in California. The work ethic, the job opportunities but most importantly for me, how much of California was still unspoiled and untouched.

Yet the Santa Clara Valley, which had been one of the agricultural centers of the state, and known as the "Valley of the Hearts Delight" was rapidly turning into "Silicon Valley," turning open fields and pristine views into office parks, housing developments and malls. Ironically while I was part of the influx transforming the valley, the changes occurring around me also transformed me. I had grown up in a city paved end-to-end. I had traveled enough to see what unconstrained development would look like. Yet I realized that we didn't have to build housing up the sides of all the hills in the valley, and the San Francisco bay didn't have to be all landfill. I became a passionate member of the Sierra Club and the Committee for Green Foothills. I wrote checks, wrote letters, went on hikes, but at the time it didn't appear that any of those activities would ever have any practical effect on my life.

Fast-forward 25 years. I retired and decided that after getting so much from California it was time to give some of it back. My second career has become teaching; today at Berkeley and in the fall Stanford as well. But my real passion and love was still conservation. And as serendipity would have it, just as I was wondering how to get directly involved in conservation, Robert Stephens came to visit and we went on a hike.



And so here's *the long strange trip*. Walking through the woods and fields made me remember my first time at Boy Scout camp and the wonder of nature. Talking to Robert about the 100-year history of Audubon and its successes and challenges made me remember my passion about conservation. And at the end of the hike when he asked me to join the Audubon California board I felt that this was an organization I would be honored to be part of. And I joined the board.

So... "*What a long strange trip it has been.*"

My second story is about "*Be careful what you ask for.*" When I joined the state board I was proud to tell all my friends and family that I was now on the Audubon California board. But when they asked, "what is it that the state board does?" I realized I couldn't answer in 25 words or less or 2500 for that matter. I never could understand its role. And I realized I wasn't alone.

What is it we are supposed to do? At the time, the word coming down from national headquarters seemed to be saying "build more Audubon centers like Debs Park in LA." But I didn't get it. As the new guy on the board finance committee I saw we were going broke building just one. I certainly couldn't imagine building ten or more in California. And what exactly were these chapters all about? How come we don't meet with them? And why are they so angry about this dues stuff anyway?

This wasn't a problem with our board or our chairman; these directions were coming from the mysterious and inscrutable national organization "back in New York."

When Glenn Olson joined as Audubon California's new executive director he patiently listened to the litany of my questions and complaints and in a brilliant Machiavellian management stroke decided that since John Flicker had sent Glenn to California, I would be Glenn's gift back to John Flicker and Audubon National. Glenn nominated me to the Audubon National board.

Once on the national board I realized that Audubon was an organization in transition; my personal guess is that years' ago Plan A had been to build Audubon Centers as the focus for a donor-driven national organization like the Nature Conservancy. Chapters, membership and the grassroots were this costly expense center, which just didn't fit into the plan.

Over the last three years it's clear to everyone on the national board that Plan A hasn't worked. It's cost us money and membership and alienated the one group that has been our consistent base since day one – you the chapters.

And today I'm here to tell you that Audubon National gets it. The chapters are the foundation of the organization. You've known that all along I know, but take some small measure of satisfaction in knowing New York now knows it as well.

Part of my time on the state and national boards has been advocating that we need to reinvent Audubon. That we need to take embrace and build our grassroots organization not run away from it; that the combination of national, state and chapters together can transform National Audubon into a highly effective, grassroots conservation organization.



And to lead the way Robert Stephens, our California board chairman did two spectacular things. First, under his watch he has grown our board; ten of them who are at the Assembly, into a group of committed conservationists with a wide variety of skills, backgrounds, talents and experience helping us take Audubon California to the next level.

Second, Robert, along Glenn Olson, Graham Chisholm and the state staff, drove the effort to put together our strategic plan for the California state organization. This is our document that helps the 40 state staff members answer the question, "How should we spend our time and money in California?" In the end this 16-page plan boils down to the state organization spending its time doing three things: **Conservation, Policy and Education**. The strategic plan keeps staff and the board focused and allows us to explain to others what we do and why we do it. If you haven't read it, or gotten a copy please ask Claudia.

So what about the "*be careful what you ask for*" part? After 8 years as chairman Robert Stephens decided to step down (but not off the board, he's now the chair of our development committee.) The Audubon California board in its infinite wisdom decided that they guy making all the noise about change ought to be the next chair of the organization. So here I am three years after complaining about the role of the state board, now chairing it.

So... "*Be careful what you ask for*"

The third and final story is actually about all of you. The title of this one is "*think strategically, act locally.*"

I've been chairman for all of about a month, so please take all of this as coming from someone who's still trying to figure it all out. But let me make a few comments about our direction.

All the political surveys in California show that Audubon is the best respected and best trusted brand in the conservation community, Audubon stands in the center of conservation and stewardship. *We are going to build upon that legacy.*

Over the next few years we hope to grow Audubon California – substantially. We also hope to address the state's changing demographics and to reach out to new constituencies.

But it's not the state organization that's going to do the growing. I believe we need to push most of the growth into the grassroots- *into you the chapters.*

If we are to succeed as an organization with another 100 years we – National and State - has got to stop telling chapters and start asking them. We have to stop talking and start listening. And most importantly we need to stop taking and start giving.

For example, what our state organization needs to become is the communication hub of what are the best programs and practices are in the chapters. What are the best



practices in local conservation, best programs in activism and local organizing, in member communications and local public relations.

And when these best programs and practices don't exist in the chapters, see if we can provide incentives to the chapters to start them. Only when we can't find any of you to step up, we will provide them from the state organization.

Our state organization needs to offer the tools, dollars, incentives and resources to make the chapters, strong, influential and successful. And for state-wide issues, such as policy in Sacramento, that are common to all the chapters the state staff may take the lead.

Why are we proposing to do all of this? Most of you understood way before I did that birds and their habitats are harbingers of all our fate, and that if we are here on this earth as stewards for what is around us, then our role is clear. We need to do direct conservation of critical bird habitat, we need to affect state and local policy that degrades or endangers birds and their homes, and we need to educate young and old on why preserving birds and their habitats is important.

This is a big agenda. None of this will happen in the next 100 days. And all of it won't be done in the next 1000, but we are going to start today.

As you know we have just distributed \$25,000 to the chapters for a series of projects state-wide. Today I want to announce that we are going to fund the development of *Audubon-At-Home* at the chapter level. We will put out a Request for a Proposal and fund the chapters to develop and roll out this program state wide.

Here's your call to action. *Talk to us.* Let us know what you are doing, how we can help and what would make this a better, bigger and more effective Audubon. Claudia Eyzaguirre is your conduit to the state staff. Chapters have four board seats on the California state board. Garry George representing Southern California, Steve Ferry for the Central Coast, Sid England for the Central Valley, and Jerry Karr for the San Francisco Bay Area. Raise your voice and make your opinion known to them and to us. Think you're not being heard? Glenn Olson, Graham Chisholm and I would be happy to hear from you as well.

When we meet again at the next assembly I hope to see 500 Chapter Members in a much larger, more diverse and more powerful Audubon California.

Together we can do anything.

So... "*Think strategically, act locally.*"