

Project seeks to raise green for environment

Goal is to collect \$1 million for local groups by year's end

By Mike Lee

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Former Microsoft executive Aaron Contorer settled in San Diego two years ago, aiming to start a software company. He found that his heart just wasn't in it.

Contorer, 39, soon discovered what he really wanted to do: Jumpstart the region's mostly cash-strapped environmental movement. He and others say it largely lacks the sophisticated management and well-heeled backers befitting a county of some 3 million people, many of whom enjoy nature as they swim, hike and surf.

So, along with other philanthropists, Contorer aims to raise \$1 million by year's end for groups that do things like fight for clean water and better beaches. They will announce their campaign today – to take advantage of year-end giving by companies and major donors – after having provided \$400,000 in seed money.

Their project, known as the Environment Accelerator Fund, is the latest in a string of recent efforts to boost the profile of conservation causes in San Diego County. For example, a leading foundation is trying to build a \$25 million endowment for environmental work. Elsewhere, new alliances have been formed for canyons, sustainable development and global warming.

“San Diego's environmental nonprofits are poised to grow to the next level to help bring vision, science, and intelligence” to regional issues, said Paul Eichen, chairman of the Rokenbok Toy Co. in Solana Beach and a charter donor for the new fund.

The region is widely recognized as a biological gem and it's home to one of the nation's largest collections of threatened and endangered species. But the county's environmental corps still hasn't reached the big leagues.

“Historically in San Diego, the environment has been woefully undersupported and underfunded,” said Bruce Reznik, executive director of San Diego Coastkeeper. “It's sort of an odd dynamic considering that people come to San Diego for the coast, for the environment, for the water.”

Reznik joined what was then called Baykeeper seven years ago. Despite having only two employees at



SCOTT LINNETT / Union-Tribune
Trevor Callan (left) and Aaron Contorer hope to raise \$1 million for local environmental groups through the Environment Accelerator Fund.

the time, it was the region's largest nonprofit group dealing with coastal issues, he said. Today, the regionally prominent organization has seven staff members but often struggles to meet budget.

“I have a little bigger vision than my ability to raise funds,” Reznik said.

Scrappy movement

The reputation of a small and scrappy environmental movement in the county is largely supported by a new report from the University of San Diego.

Researchers there counted 257 locally based groups dealing with animals and the environment. Because of how the IRS keeps its data, the category goes far beyond what generally is considered environmental activism. For instance, it includes dozens of pet welfare and garden groups.

The organizations reported combined revenues of nearly \$240 million in 2004. The total is far larger than in Orange County or the Silicon Valley but far smaller than the Bay Area, which is home to the Sierra Club's national headquarters and about 750 other environmental and animal outfits.

Much of the local income is raised by one organization – the Zoological Society of San Diego, which runs the San Diego Zoo, the Wild Animal Park and a research center. Tax records from 2004 show that its revenues topped \$160 million, about two-thirds of the regional total.

More than 60 percent of the county's environmental groups collect less than \$25,000 per year. That means they can't support a professional staff, a typical prerequisite for generating more income and improving the quality of their programs.

Nonetheless, thousands of volunteers, new alliances and a few major court victories have helped environmentalists gain influence beyond what their balance sheets might suggest.

“(Environmentalists) seem to be doing a lot with a little,” said Laura Deitrick, co-author of the USD report.

She does see a potential problem.

“They have been busy doing their daily work and have not spent as much time thinking forward in terms of growing their assets,” Deitrick said.

Less 'old money'

San Diego County's environmental sector remains modest because of several reasons, nonprofit experts say. One is that the region's growth spurt is relatively recent, so there's less “old money” than in places such as San Francisco and Boston.

The limited number of major corporate headquarters also plays a role. Such offices often employ big donors who become board members for nonprofit groups.

“We are just now starting to see the generational continuity and the embracing of place” that long has been common in Northern California and other parts of the country, said Bill Kuni, a local entrepreneur and philanthropist.

When Kuni arrived in San Diego 24 years ago, he looked for groups helping to protect the landscape

that he found so attractive.

“It was almost totally individual champions who did not have a major organization behind them,” Kuni said.

In 2000, he helped start the Environment Working Group at The San Diego Foundation in an effort to buoy conservationists trying to contain fast-growing development.

The Environment Working Group proved to be an important mechanism for spreading cash and convening experts in ecology. It has distributed about \$3.35 million since its inception. The money often is awarded in chunks of \$15,000 to \$50,000.

Last year, the foundation kicked off a \$25 million endowment campaign to support environmental work. There is \$1 million in the pot.

Many of the county's well-known environmental groups owe part of their growth to the foundation. They include the San Diego River Park Foundation, the Environmental Health Coalition, the local Sierra Club chapter and the Escondido Creek Conservancy.

The Escondido conservancy started in 1991, but didn't have the money for an executive director until last year. Unlike most environmental leaders in the region, the conservancy's executive director, Geoffrey Smith, has a master's degree in nonprofit leadership.

“A lot of . . . (environmental groups) really lack the business skills of understanding what their mission is and how to build a program around their mission and stick to it,” Smith said.

A 2003 study of land conservancies in the county found they were twice as likely to have done a formal planning process for on-the-ground work as they were to have a strategy for the organization.

The lack of management expertise is especially apparent at the board level, Smith and others said. Currently, the boards commonly consist of friends and activists without much regard for specific skills such as public relations and fundraising.

That's where Contorer and Eichen come in. They are seeding the new fund with \$200,000 each as they court other contributors.

They also expect to get donors involved on boards and demand measurable results from groups receiving money from them. Their fund is managed by San Diego Social Venture Partners, a grant-making group that donates its services.

“We're trying to grow the (environment) sector. That means supporting the research to understand the problems and what it takes to fix them and then impact a society,” said Contorer, a full-time philanthropist.

The effort comes as national environmental groups are struggling to connect with the American public. Contorer thinks there is a large and untapped segment of donors who don't consider themselves traditional environmentalists but want San Diego to not become “a second-rate Los Angeles” because of overdevelopment.

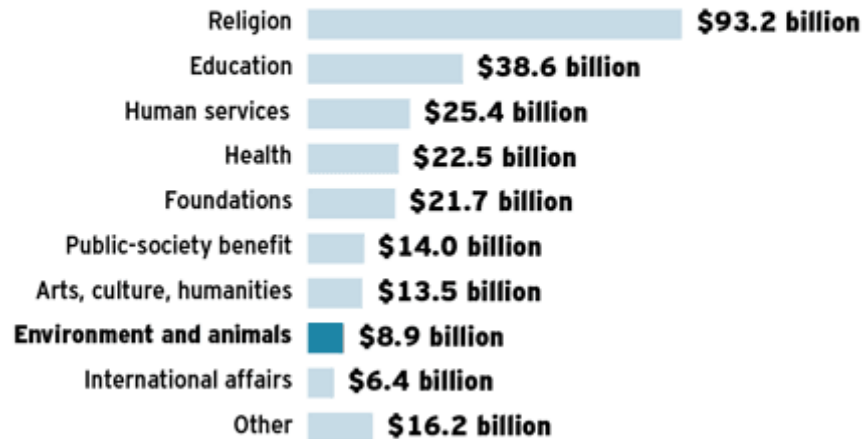
“It's not about banning cars and hugging trees. It's about having a wonderful way of life now and not

ruining it” for future generations, Contorer said.

■For more information about the Environment Accelerator Fund, visit www.sdsvp.org or call Peggy Kidd at (858) 720-0256.

The environment's modest slice

Americans gave more than \$260 billion to charitable organizations in 2005, up 6.1 percent from the year before. The environment ranks well down on the list of top causes.



SOURCE: Giving USA Foundation

SHAFFER GRUBB / Union-Tribune

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