

Saving the Sierra: A Case Study

1. Introduction

As we study online social interaction, we find it necessary to address a problem with online communities. The idea of communities existing online, though once difficult to imagine, is now a somewhat commonplace assumption. Martin Lister, Jon Dovey, Seth Giddings, Iain Grant and Keiran Kelly define “community” as a “sense of belonging to social groups which often extend beyond the boundaries of specific place to include taste, consumption, shared interests and shared discursive codes” (420). Why shouldn't this sense of belonging extend to individuals who interact online? As Lister, et al. discuss, online communities provide a sense of belonging to participants, and can often differ only slightly from more traditional “meatspace” communities that interact offline (209-215). However, many questions about online communities remain. One of these, and one with great importance to social activists, is: can these communities be mobilized toward social action? Can a community be identified or constructed and lead toward beneficial action? Online communities can only emerge when participants interact with each other and share their personalities with each other – can these personal, human interactions be directed toward concrete, physical changes?

To examine this question of community mobilization, I have performed a case study on the *Saving the Sierra* project, and its website *Saving the Sierra: Voices of Conservation in Action*. The project, led by co-directors Catherine Stifter and jesikah maria ross, engages with the problem of community mobilization by emphasizing collaboration with the community. As the case study will demonstrate, Stifter and ross set out to construct a community that is built around the need to conserve the natural environment of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, and then attempted to direct that community toward social action by arguing for new initiatives and reinforcing the need for existing efforts. Stifter and

ross, with this project, test the theory that communities can be identified, constructed, reinforced, and mobilized for social action through participatory media and collaboration.

2. Project and Organizational History

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) is a California state agency which was created in 2004 with “the understanding that the environmental, economic and social well-being of the Sierra Nevada and its communities are closely linked.” (“About Us”, Sierra Nevada Conservancy) The SNC provides strategic direction for the over-25 million acre region for the benefit of the State of California, the nation, and the world. The *Saving the Sierra* project explores the region under the SNC's jurisdiction, and provides a platform for stories from the people who share that land. The *Saving the Sierra* project was created to bring attention to the problems facing the residents of the Sierra Nevada and the range itself, and to combat these problems by getting people in California and elsewhere involved in conservation efforts that would slow or reverse environmental damage to the region.

3. Identify and present the mission or statement of purpose

STS argues for the environmental, economic, and social importance of the Sierra Nevada region. According to the website, *Saving the Sierra* aims to :

- ^ Build an engaged, informed constituency that cares about conservation of the Sierra Nevada and has the tools to develop, understand and implement creative solutions that meet a wide range of community needs
- ^ Increase understanding of Sierra conservation issues and expand opportunities for diverse stakeholders to hear each other's perspectives, struggles, and concerns around these issues.
- ^ Create forums for residents of California and the U.S. to discover how community members come together to find local solutions to regional conservation issues.
- ^ Generate public radio programming, multimedia Web content, and traveling exhibitions that honor the history, traditions and views of Sierra residents frequently ignored or stereotyped in the media.
- ^ Strengthen a sense of connection to the Sierra Nevada among project participants and radio listeners, helping them to understand that the issues facing the range affect the health of the entire state of California and that everyone, rural and urban alike, has a reason to care about conservation of the Sierra. (“About Us,” *Saving the Sierras*)

3a. Project Leaders

Saving the Sierra's creators are Co-Director Catherine Stifter and Co-Director jesikah maria ross. Stifter is a “freelance editor and independent training/production consultant for community media projects and public radio stations around the US” (“About Us,” *Saving the Sierra*). She has worked on many projects in radio and film regarding environmental concerns, and been recognized with a Peabody award for her efforts. Her partner in this work, ross, is an “educator, media maker and community development practitioner” and an active documentarian for over 15 years. She is now the Director for the Art of Regional Change at the University of California – Davis.

4. Partners

- ⤴ **The Sierra Fund:** The foundation – that is dedicated to protecting the environment of the Sierra Nevada – acted as the project's fiscal sponsor and fundraising coordinator.
- ⤴ **Sierra Nevada Alliance:** Aided with outreach by linking the project to the 69 conservation groups that make up its membership, as well as providing forums to discuss the project.
- ⤴ **Center for Sierra Nevada Studies at Sierra College:** Developed and hosted the *Saving the Sierra* website.
- ⤴ **Sierra Business Council:** Provided the “Sustaining Rural Places Toolkit,” offering visitors a way to get involved with the project on their own.

5. Funders and Resources

- ⤴ The California Council for the Humanities (as part of the California Stories Initiative)
- ⤴ The Morgan Family Foundation
- ⤴ Sorensen's Fund of the Sierra Fund
- ⤴ Sierra College Friends of the Library

▲ Associated Students of Sierra College

6. Participatory Model

Saving the Sierra fits very well into the theme of “Collaboration” that we explored in Week 7. The project is based on two components – radio documentaries produced by Stiffler and ross, and personal stories told by residents and visitors of the Sierra Nevada about the range's meaning to the participants. These personal stories, referred to on the site as “Storybooth” stories, are mapped onto the Sierra and each is given its own page on the larger site. Within the individual Storybooth pages, visitors to the site can leave comments – often responding to the story in some way, or commenting on their own experiences at those locations, or interacting with other commentors and contributors. The site itself, then, is a product of collaborative efforts between Stiffler and ross and the residents of the region, and also between the residents of the region and themselves. As jesikah maria ross wrote on our class blog, the goal was “to build bridges across divides through collaborative storytelling, with an emphasis on the collaboration” (“7.1 Collaboration and Mapping,” *Participatory Media and Social Action*). Without both of these collaborations, the site could not produce the level of community involvement and engagement that it does, nor could it reach the granularity that it does as it examines local conservation. By so empowering local residents in these collaborations, *Saving the Sierra* ensures ground-level insights into conservation efforts that would be otherwise impossible.

The project also collaborates with established organizations – most importantly, the Sierra Business Council, who provide the site with a “Sustaining Rural Places Toolkit,” which provides visitors with a “next step” they can take to get involved in the Sierra conservation cause. This represents a collaboration between the ground-level work highlighted in the Storybooth and larger, more systematic and organized efforts toward conservation. Collaboration of this type is often ignored in participatory social media, which tend to be focused on democratic, grass-roots style action. By partnering with the Sierra Business Council and other conservation organizations, *Saving the Sierra*

combines these actions with larger, ongoing efforts. This third collaboration provides the site with a sense of forward motion and activism. Each collaboration complements and influences the others, making the site itself a mixture of and a platform for each.

7. Overall Significance and Uniqueness to the Community

The project is special in its ability to bring together many disparate elements that, while all focused on the importance of the Sierra Nevada, are not necessarily speaking to each other or even aware of each others' existence. Specifically, the project allows individuals to connect with each other to share their thoughts, memories, and conservation stories through the Storybooth component. The *Saving the Sierra* website provides the means for individuals to tell their stories, and then provides a site for others to share their experiences with the storytellers and others through the comment pages and through Storybooths of their own. Further, the site provides interested users with a means to act by sending them to the Sierra Business Council's "Sustaining Rural Places Toolkit." In this way the site identifies a community, allows that community to find and speak to itself with greater ease than ever before, and mobilizes that community toward a common goal.

8. The Project in the Landscape of Participatory Media Programs and Projects

The project is unique in its use of visual mapping to demonstrate the interconnectedness of its collaborators, and its ties to the geographical area it is dedicated towards. The project is one of very few that focuses specifically on a geographical area in the generally non-geographical internet. The project is specifically focused on the members of a localized community, and uses tools which, at the time of their implementation, were quite technologically advanced. Co-director jesikah maria ross describes the "cutting edge" map (by 2007 standards) as both "technologically function[al]" and "aesthetically compelling" (comment on Schwartz, 11/15/11). The map feature, which acts as a central organizing function for the sites web of stories, serves to ground the stories and the storytellers within the physical terrain that the site hopes to conserve. Thus, the visual metaphor for the terrain that is the

map also becomes a visual metaphor for the website devoted to that same terrain. Through this visual and organizational doubling, the map function not only provides a useful and intuitive layout for the site, it also provides the site and the project with a powerful rhetorical tool that helps to convince users that the project works for, and on behalf of, the Sierra Nevada.

9. The Project in the Economic Crisis

The project has been impacted quite hard by the current economic crisis. Due to a decline in funding, the project no longer has the funds to continue regular updating and maintenance. The last blog post, written by Catherine Stifter, appeared on January 5, 2010, though a blog hiatus was announced on August 26th, 2009. While the site does continue to receive 50 to 100 discrete hits a day, and users can post comments whenever they like, there is no longer any official presence on the site from the co-directors (ross, comment on “7.1 Collaborations and Mapping”). The email address listed on the website's contact page replies automatically with a message assuring the sender that “a real person” is checking the site, but does not indicate how often the emails are read or by who. The project is, from a maintenance standpoint, defunct. However, the numerous stories and radio documentaries live on, and the Sustaining Rural Places Toolkit is still offered as a viable means of enacting conservation efforts in the Sierra.

In the absence of this project, the co-directors have moved on to other projects – jesikah maria ross is the Director for the Art of Regional Change at UC-Davis, and Catherine Stifter has continued working with communities and documentaries as Web and Media Co-director of an organization dedicated to improving immigrant health through local media. According to the Nonprofit Technology Network, Stifter lives “off-grid” in the Sierra Nevada mountains. While I was unable to contact Ms. Stifter, from this evidence it seems that her commitment to community, media and the mountains remains strong as ever during the economic troubles.

10. Building Communities, Offline and On

The project's emphasis on collaboration naturally leads it to an interaction with the concept of community, as well. The project initially identifies a community of people who live in and around the Sierra Nevada. The project itself works toward strengthening this community by providing people with a platform for meeting and conversing with each other that they had not previously enjoyed. Participants can interact with each other online, leading to communication that helps build community. Participants can also share their thoughts and memories about the physical places that they share, providing community members with tangible evidence of their interconnectedness. Furthermore, the site uses a “blogroll” to direct visitors to other Sierra-focused blogs, which helps to create a virtual community among bloggers and their readers.

While the site strongly aids the growth of the community centered around the Sierra Nevada, it does not do so in the most effective manner. The principle areas of interaction are the comment sections for the Storybooth nodes and the blog. Beyond the fact that the blog is no longer updated, this is not the widest array of interactivity possible. *Saving the Sierra* has no social media presence that I was able to detect – no Facebook page, no Twitter account, or anything to allow users to communicate outside the site itself. Any communication in the community would perforce occur on the one site, which narrows the possibility for the types of communication. Internet etiquette (such as it is) demands that blog posts be germane to the original post, and the *Saving the Sierra* blog never garnered many comments on its posts. As for the Storybooth nodes, their strength was at the same time their weakness – the scattered, disparate nature of the map meant that participants could not easily see what was being said on other nodes, even ones that were adjacent. So, while the project theoretically pushed strongly for an active, strong community, its layout and activity in social media did not achieve that end effectively.

11. Cross-sector Interactions

Saving the Sierra had quite a bit of interaction with entities in several sectors. The funding for the project came from a number of non-profit organizations and foundations. The project's advisers were also from the non-profit world, as well as from the academic world in the form of the History Department of Sierra College. The project also worked with local businesses, as represented by the Sierra Business Council.

The project also had very fundamental relations with the governmental sector. The project came into being as a reflection of the state of California's Sierra Nevada Conservancy (created in 2004), the state agency responsible for conservation initiatives in the region. The project explicitly calls out these ties in its “About” page, in which it states its intent to explore “the geographic, political, and philosophical boundaries of the new Sierra Nevada Conservancy.” The blog also calls out the political nature of the project in its posts about the Obama Administration's environmental agenda and the state of California's initiatives and actions in the region.

The integral support received the project received from the non-profit and non-governmental sectors can certainly be seen as a “success.” Without the advice and assistance from the academic world, the site would be fundamentally different – the Center for Sierra Nevada Studies at Sierra College was responsible for developing and hosting the site. In addition, without funding and fundraising by the project's supporters and partners, the project would be impossible. However, the same reliance can also represent one of the projects failures: when money dried up (largely as a result of the economic downturn, which hit non-profit and charity organizations fairly hard across the nation) the project was no longer able to continue functioning and was forced to discontinue updating and maintenance. The project can be seen as existing at the whim of its cross-sector interactions, which for a time granted it strength – but in the end doomed the project to suspend activity.

12. Unique Vision of the Online Participatory Experience

As discussed above, the online participatory experience is focused strongly on the (at the time) cutting-edge map feature and on the Storybooth nodes that allow community members to share their personal stories and experiences. The map feature, as an organizational and rhetorical tool, allows the project to connect itself with the people it serves and the land it protects. The Storybooth nodes create the collaborative theme that makes the site unique in terms of participation and community.

The uniqueness of the site can be emphasized by comparing it to a site that bears a superficial similarity. The site *Blood Sugar*, created by Sharon Daniel, features interviews with current and former injection drug users. The interviews are presented visually as selectable waveforms, which allows users to pick their access into the site, much as the map nodes allow users of *Saving the Sierra* to choose their access points into Storybooth tales. However, unlike *Saving the Sierra*, *Blood Sugar's* interviews are presented as floating on a black background (perhaps to emphasize the site's existential viewpoint and socially out-of-bounds subject matter) rather than tied to a physical location. The result keeps the interviews separated, literally adrift in a void and isolated from each other by impenetrable darkness – nearly a mirror image of the community-focused, collaborative nature of *Saving the Sierra's* encompassing map and Storybooth nodes that come equipped with pictures of their contributors. Both sites consist largely of selectable audio files (interviews on *Blood Sugar*, stories and documentaries on *Saving the Sierra*). Additionally, as jesikah maria ross points out, both sites feature documentary self-reflexivity – the creators insert themselves into the projects to “signal to audiences that [they] realize that [they] too are part of the problem and the solution; that [they] are exploring and trying to figure it out as [they] invite others to do the same” (comment on *Participatory Media and Social Action*). However, the participatory experiences are very different: where *Blood Sugar* creates the illusion of exploring a deep and mysterious culture of disparate individuals, *Saving the Sierra* allows the community in question to introduce itself to the user and to itself in a welcoming, open environment.

Where *Blood Sugar* presents a void to be penetrated, *Saving the Sierra* introduces a community with stories to share.

13. Interactions and Incubation for Social Change

The site, as a collaboration, relies on its interactions – mostly through the Storybooth portion, and to a lesser extent the blog and commentary. Without these interactions and collaborations, the site could not exist in any meaningful way. The interactions also aid in making the case for the social change the site advocates. By creating a place where collaborators can discuss their conservation efforts and the importance of the land, the site creates an archive or aggregation of reasons why the Sierra Nevada are important socially, environmentally and economically. The aggregation of interactions makes the case for social action and provides support and feedback for ongoing conservation projects. Additionally, the site provides instruction (in the form of the Sustaining Rural Places Toolkit) for visitors who want to begin working towards conservation after engaging with the site. Thus, the site uses the interactions that it presents and facilitates to make a case for social action, provide reinforcement and feedback for existing action, and encourage new action.

14. Style and Mission

The style of the site is, understandably, evocative of the land it serves and features prominently the community it highlights. The site uses muted earth tones in its backgrounds and texts to evoke a sense of the mountains in California and trees in the sunlight. The larger effect is to emphasize the natural beauty of the region. Photographs are used heavily, both of natural landscapes and of the people involved in the site. Each Storybooth node contains a picture of the storyteller, which serves to further personalize the story and the site – when viewers can attach a face to the experience, it reinforces the idea of community and demonstrates in a very real sense that the Sierra Nevada is important to real people (rather than an abstracted “them” or dry statistics). Furthermore, in keeping with the site's emphasis on collaboration, the importance of the region is narrated by the community

that shares it. The site does not merely tell readers why the region is important – it introduces the people who share the region and allows them to speak for themselves. Putting a human face on the cause of conservation helps to personalize the mission, and may help to convince others of its importance.

Again, the map goes a long way in aiding the site's mission. As discussed above, the map ties the site to the region it serves, and allows visitors an understanding of the physical location at stake. The map – rendered in varying shades of green and brown – gives visitors a birds-eye view of the region that they can explore as they choose, with areas of importance and people's shared memories picked out by nodes. The map provides an easy and effective way to demonstrate what the importance of the Sierra Nevada, while also reinforcing the site's importance in the cause of conservation.

15. Phases of Completion

The site launched in the summer of 2006. Cathrine Stifter wrote the first blog post on August 15th, 2006, announcing the Sierra Nevada Conservancy's strategic plan for operations through 2011 (which had been announced on July 20th of the same year). In 2008, the project concluded, following the national broadcast of its radio documentary “Saving the Sierra: Grassroots Solutions for Sustaining Rural Communities”, produced by Stifter and ross. The blog continued for another two years, receiving its last update on January 5th, 2010. As Stifter writes in her blog post announcing the blog's hiatus (on August 29th, 2009), the website now “serves as an interactive archive of [the] 3-year exploration of conservation in action.” The searchable archive contains numerous blog posts and essays about the Sierra's ecology, economy and culture, as well as “100 stories of people who care about the Sierra Nevada” contained in the Storybooth. Though the project is concluded and the site is no longer maintained, the site is still available as a tool for education, and the site's email address is checked (though infrequently).

16. Project Assets

As the project is concluded, it no longer has any assets.

17. Project Goals

As indicated above, the project intended to illuminate the conservation efforts underway in the rural Sierra Nevada range. To serve this purpose (according to the *Saving the Sierra* website), the project aimed to:

- ⤴ Construct and identify an engaged constituency devoted to conservation of the Sierra Nevada
- ⤴ Ensure that constituency has the tools to develop and implement solutions to community needs
- ⤴ Educate the public about conservation issues in the Sierra Nevada
- ⤴ Provide opportunities for Sierra stakeholders to communicate each others' experiences and concerns
- ⤴ Showcase and demonstrate local, grassroots solutions to problems of regional conservation
- ⤴ Create “public radio programming, multimedia Web content, and traveling exhibitions”
- ⤴ Combat negative stereotypes of Sierra residents
- ⤴ Strengthen the bonds of community among residents of the Sierra, visitors to the site, and the radio documentary's audience

19. Project Outcomes

- ⤴ 100 Storybooth stories
- ⤴ Three years worth of blog posts on the economy, ecology, community, and politics of the Sierra Nevada
- ⤴ Six radio stories, including the 52-minute documentary “Saving the Sierra: Grassroots Solutions for Sustaining Rural Communities” which aired on 182 radio stations in the United States, Canada and Australia. The documentary is estimated to have reached 4 million listeners.
- ⤴ An interactive map describing important people, places, and conservation actions in the Sierra
- ⤴ Participation in the *Sierra Solutions* conference (October 3-4, 2008), held by the project's partners the Sierra Business Council and the Sierra Nevada Conservancy

20. Participation and Engagement Assessment

In terms of reaching out to new communities to participate, the project achieves strong results. *Saving the Sierra* does an admirable job of spreading its word – the radio documentary alone is estimated to have reached 4 million listeners in three countries. Furthermore, strategic partnerships

with other Sierra-focused organizations in California, such as the 69 conservation groups that make up the Sierra Nevada Alliance and the local businesses of the Sierra Business Council ensure that the region's stakeholders are aware of the project and on-board with its mission. In addition, the project helps to strengthen the existing community of Sierra residents and stakeholders by allowing the community to speak about itself – and by using the Storybooth format, the community can literally tell itself to itself, reinforcing the bonds of community. The Storybooth format also allows the community to retell the narrative of community continuity through conservation success, linking the future of the community to the success of the conservation action the project advocates.

Through the Storybooth, the blog, and the radio documentaries, *Saving the Sierra* builds an audience and convinces that audience of the need for action. The hope, then, is that the audience will take the next steps themselves – the audience is guided to the Sustaining Rural Places Toolkit, and encouraged to participate in the community to reinforce and encourage existing projects. This aspect of participation is less successful – very few blog posts actually have comments on them, and only a handful of the 100 Storybooth nodes have comments or follow-up discussion.

21. Overall Assessment

The project achieves varying levels of success. It is very good at identifying and encouraging community, and it makes a very strong case for action. As described above, the rhetorical actions performed by the Storybooth nodes, the map they are presented on, and the site's layout provide a strong sense of community and make the case that the community must be mobilized toward action in conservation. Furthermore, the project achieves all of the goals laid out in section 18 – by its own measures, then, the site can be said to be a solid success. The project's focus on collaboration is a strong asset in this success, giving the site the grassroots, community-centered focus that it requires to make its case. Also, as a platform for the documentaries, the Storybooth, and the Sustaining Rural Places Toolkit, the site is able to draw in an audience, construct and strengthen a collaborative

community, and direct that community towards social action for the good of the region. By incorporating these elements, the project directs its participants through a process of becoming active in its cause.

Though the project is complete and the site is not currently maintained, it still has use as a tool for education and method of sharing the experiences of the Sierra from a distance. However, its use as a tool for inspiring social action is greatly diminished. Without further updates or activity, there is little reason for possible visitors to continue engaging with the site, and a community that does not grow or change cannot hope to continue for long. Of course, the real-world community of Sierra residents may be as strong as ever, or stronger – but without the site's updates and interactions, it will not draw in strangers from across the country and the world as it once did. This lack of new recruits to the cause, as well as the difficulties presented by the current economic situation in California and the United States at large (just one aspect of which is the site's discontinuation), create a formidable challenge to the goal of conservation in the Sierra Nevada. While the site is weakened by its current inactive status, it is not, however, unhelpful. The archive of collaboration, conservation, and education it has become is a wealth of information for current and future activists in the cause of conservancy, as well as a testament to the strength of the Sierra-based community. Though the *Saving the Sierra* project is no longer active, the site remains a powerful resource for the cause and the people it serves.

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