Where have all the joiners gone?
WHERE HAVE ALL THE JOINERS GONE?
Advocacy organizations have taken over American political and civic life. Is it a good thing?

ORGANIZING MANNERS
Vicious language is commonplace in South Carolina’s environmental debates.

SOCIAL MUSCLE
The United States exports its civic sensibility.

CONSERVATION ALLIES
An odd group of bedfellows supports conservation banking in South Carolina.

EBBS AND FLOWS

ON THE COVER
Many of the old-line volunteer groups, which once formed the glue of American civic life, have fallen on hard times.

PHOTO/COURTESY OF KWANIS INTERNATIONAL

HARD SELL. “Legislative lobbying efforts have gotten more intense, more fully researched, with greater financial backing,” says state Sen. Robert L. Waldrep, Jr. (R-Anderson), chairman of the Agriculture and Natural Resource Committee. “Lobbyists are more sophisticated people now, with credentials, some with Ph.Ds., and they are more skilled and persuasive.”

PHOTO/WADE SPEES
In the mid-twentieth century, mainstream volunteer groups dominated American civic life. But professionally staffed adversary groups have flourished in recent decades, with unprecedented political influence. How are they changing our civic culture and public policy?

By John H. Tibbetts

Each year, more Americans retreat to their TVs and computers and climate-controlled homes. We stare glassy-eyed at Survivor instead of attending the local PTA meeting. We visit Internet chat rooms instead of joining political parties. Rather than play church-league softball on mild June evenings, we cheer flickering images of exceedingly tall men wearing short pants who run up and down hardwood courts. That's the view, anyway, of some political scientists who argue that Americans are increasingly dropping out of community life and political activity, while tuning in to popular culture via remote control and mouse.

Baby boomers and Gen-Xers, it seems clear, have abandoned many of the civic patterns of the World War II generation. Fifty years ago, adult Americans were more likely to belong to political parties, fraternal organizations, and local service groups under national umbrellas such as the Parents and Teachers Association, Elks Club, and Kiwanis Club. But these old-line civic groups have fallen on lean times, political parties inspire declining loyalty, and fewer of us vote in national elections.

In 1995, Robert D. Putnam, a Harvard University political scientist, published a now-famous essay, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” bemoaning the public’s declining loyalty to traditional membership groups. These organizations, he argued, once formed the glue of American civic culture. In the PTA and other membership associations, citizens of differing backgrounds and occupations worked together toward common goals. They gained expertise in civic skills such as how to run meetings, organize groups, develop arguments, debate issues—in short, how to function in a democratic society. As national associations fade in importance, civic skills are disappearing from the body politic.

That’s overstating it, other experts say. Americans aren’t dropping out at all. Instead, we are participating in public life in a new way. In the environmental arena, national organizations have prospered dramatically over the past 40 years. Memberships in major national environmental groups exploded from 125,000 in 1960 to 6.5 million in 1990, though growth slowed slightly in the 1990s. The Sierra Club, for instance, included 15,000...
members in 1960. By 1990, it had 550,000 members; and by 2000 it had gained another 10,000.

The nation’s largest environmental groups have become policy powerhouses, employing sophisticated professionals who influence lawmakers, media, and public opinion. Washington-based conservation organizations began to emerge in the 1970s after Congress passed landmark legislation such as the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Endangered Species Act.

“We vote with our dollars” when we send money to a national environmental group, says Robert H. Becker, director of Clemson University’s Strom Thurmond Institute of Government & Public Affairs. “Sending in a check is a valid form of civic participation.” But Americans also give their time to community groups at home. “We may send dollars to the National Wildlife Federation while we may volunteer for a local land trust.”

“The traditional establishment venues no longer have the dominant role,” says Edward McMullen, Jr., former president of the S.C. Policy Council, a conservative think tank. “In the past, small groups of people held all the information and basi-

Theda Skocpol

“The incentive for advocacy groups is to influence people through the media and to take stark positions on issues that can be made emotional in some way.”

The S.C. Coastal Conservation League (SCCCL), founded in 1989, has 4,000 members and a $1.5 million annual operating budget. After just 12 years, the SCCCL is probably the most influential environmental organization in the lowcountry.

Other important players in South Carolina’s environmental debates include hunting and fishing groups, land trusts, trade and professional organizations, industry groups, neighborhood associations, and watchdog groups that protect particular geographic areas or ecosystems.

Local affiliates of the Sierra Club and Audubon Society are thriving. Regional offices of the Nature Conservancy and Ducks Unlimited have helped growing numbers of South Carolina landowners protect property from development through conservation easements and other techniques.

More than ever, tiny grassroots groups and neighborhood associations collaborate with professionally staffed nonprofit organizations. For example, coalitions have formed to fight a proposed expansion of the Charleston port terminal on Daniel Island, to establish the Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge, to promote county comprehensive planning issues along the coast, and to combat urban sprawl, among other issues.

“The need to stay organized so that larger nonprofits can call and activate us,” says Genevieve Peterkin, president of Lowcountry Guardians, a grassroots organization of 150 members based in Murrells Inlet, a fishing village in Georgetown County.

On the other side of the political front, wise-use and property-rights groups have formed new groups and intricate coalitions to combat what they consider onerous environmental and land-use regulations.

“People more often used to belong to the Rotary Club, the Elks Club, but they’ve shifted their energies to political-interest groups,” says John Templeton, co-founder of the S.C. Landowners Association (SCLA), a property-rights advocacy organization established in 2000 to fight against Charleston County’s zoning efforts. The group, claiming a membership of 5,000, lobbies for property-rights protection in communities around the state. “There is greater fragmentation now, but groups are also more focused—they are organizing for particular goals.”

Civic America has splintered, experts agree, from the social consensus of 50 years ago. Now, as Becker points out, “we are finding more and often smaller groups formed around single points of view” than in the past.
HOLDING BACK THE TIDE. Fred Lincoln, a grassroots leader in the Cainhoy area north of Daniel Island, says many of his rural neighbors feel threatened by rapid development. Chairman of the Wando Concerned Citizens Committee, Lincoln says that small volunteer groups must collaborate with larger professionally staffed organizations to influence the thinking of political leaders. “Jobs have been the major concern of politicians. Politicians have not been held accountable enough for quality-of-life issues. You’re fighting a big giant out there. You can’t fight him yourself. You have to cooperate with other groups, to join forces with other folks locally, regionally, and nationally.”

PHOTO/WADE SPEES
COASTAL HERITAGE

HOT TOPIC. The atmosphere in the South Carolina legislature has become exceptionally charged in regard to conservation issues, says Edward McMullen, Jr., former president of the S.C. Policy Council, a conservative think tank. “It’s constantly contentious in environmental policy, but I’ve never seen it quite like this.” He attributes the harsh rhetoric to the influence of some “environmental and marginal right-wing groups that are not factually accurate. We deal a lot with misinformation and emotion.”

But interest groups, Templeton argues, must use emotional appeals to rouse constituents to action. New environmental and land-use regulations, he says, are trampling on rural landowners’ property rights, yet government agencies don’t give adequate notice about proposed rules that would affect private land. “The public is not informed and aware of what’s happening. People are so busy working to pay taxes and trying to get the kids educated.”

Organizing manners

During recent environmental disputes, some South Carolina activists have used vicious language against their opponents. But nasty personal attacks against adversaries are becoming less effective.

“People are too educated to put up with fear tactics much longer,” says Edward McMullen, Jr., former president of the S.C. Policy Council, a conservative think tank. “They want to know the data and where you’re coming from. The new activism is going to be extremely well informed.”

Chip Smith, a Georgetown County environmental activist, says that people who are cynical about government are most likely to lose their heads and their manners during policy disputes. “Over the past few decades, people have been completely inculcated with the idea that everybody in government is a crook and a liar.” This is a self-defeating notion, he says.

Local elected officials, Smith has found, are responsive to carefully presented reasoning by citizen groups. “We have become pretty savvy about how to do things. Our arguments have to be cogent, logical, well-written, and we need to show evidence that a lot of people support our position. We need letters to the editor, columns in the newspaper, and a lot of bodies at public meetings. If people pursue their goals with a sense of rage, they’re not going to get very far. The battle has to be fought in a civilized manner.”

Activists who use slash-and-burn attacks will be ineffective over the long term because they lose touch with their opponents. “You must look at every problem from (your adversary’s) perspective,” says Elizabeth Santigati, executive director of the S.C. Coastal Community Development Corporation, based on St. Helena Island. “You need to know what the other side is thinking.”

Even so, there is a place for loud, extreme voices in environmental debates, says Trish Jerman, former executive director of the S.C. Wildlife Federation. “If a group is far out on the political spectrum and raises a ruckus, even if they’re dismissed as lunatics they move the playing field slightly, making it easier for the voices of sweet reason to come together in the middle.”

cally dominated where we were going and how issues would progress through the General Assembly or the policy process.” Now with the Internet and other technologies, “people are craving new information. I’ve seen amazing changes, a creation of a genuine free market of ideas.”

Yet there’s a dark side to this new civic landscape, some experts say. The advocacy explosion has often distorted public debate and civic affairs, says Theda Skocpol, Harvard University political scientist. Some single-issue organizations promote controversies and exaggerate dangers for their own selfish ends. “The incentive for advocacy groups is to influence people through the media and to take stark positions on issues that can be made emotional in some way,” says Skocpol. “This is pretty important in building public-opinion support and donations. Dramatizing an issue and taking a strong stand on an issue is how these groups flourish, especially if they can portray a threat.”

Natural-resource managers notice an increasingly provocative approach by some South Carolina nonprofits. “These groups provide a real service, and it’s healthy to have effective groups on all sides of the argument, but I’m concerned about their accountability,” says Chris Brooks, deputy commissioner of the S.C. Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management. “I see a lot of statements made (by nonprofit leaders) that are not factual. We deal a lot with misinformation and emotion.”
After arguing that “environmentalists use fear tactics,” Templeton admits that he has pushed the fear button himself. “Fear is the only thing that motivates people. You have to tell them the truth, but you need to be emphatic about it.”

Groups on both the right and the left, says Skocpol, have learned and refined “techniques for computerized mailings, lobbying, legal research, and aggressive public relations. Groups imitate one another’s organizational tactics even if their messages or their constituencies are at odds. Groups keep a close eye on one another. These techniques are imitated back and forth even among groups who hate each other.”

INDEPENDENT BUT WEAK

Since the republic’s beginnings, Americans have been famously enthusiastic about volunteer organizations. The country, in fact, built a vigorous nonprofit sector long before anybody called it that. On the frontier, settlers formed volunteer associations when government wasn’t strong enough to provide protection from enemy attack.

America’s early nonprofit sector flowered partly because many colonialists were suspicious of government interference in religious matters. In this political and cultural climate, churches were relatively independent of government but they were forceful nonetheless, creating powerful volunteer societies. The nation’s Founders established constitutional principles that separate church and state. And soon after the Revolution, statewide religious associations emerged to lobby for the abolition of slavery. The Missionary Society of Connecticut and the General Association of Congregational Ministers in Massachusetts established political agendas against slavery. By 1837, more than a thousand abolitionist societies were formed in northern states.

Alexis de Tocqueville, a French writer who visited the United States in 1831, noticed that Americans constantly gathered in volunteer associations. “Not only do [Americans] have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small.” If you see any important undertaking in America, he wrote, you know that a volunteer organization was behind it.

Tocqueville called the United States “the most democratic country on earth” and speculated that there is a connection between democracy and volunteer groups. “There are other democracies that do things differently,” he says. “Democracy doesn’t have to be so open to so many different forms of influence and lobbying.”

Social Muscle

The number of citizen organizations has exploded in the United States and around the world during the past 30 years.

More than two-thirds of U.S.-registered nonprofit organizations, aside from religious groups and private foundations, are less than 30 years old. In many developing countries, the recent growth of nonprofit activity is astonishing. In 1970, there was only one independent group in Indonesia working to protect the environment; now there are more than 2,000.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have driven political and social changes around the world: the overthrow of Communism in Central Europe; the end of apartheid in South Africa; and numerous international treaties to protect the global environment.

What’s behind this civic revolution? A growing middle class has demanded more influence on public policy in many developing countries. Sophisticated, educated citizens show less tolerance with unresponsive or backward governments. With technologies such as e-mail and the Internet, activists can quickly gather and disseminate information from around the world.

Money from U.S.-based foundations helped new organizations too. “American funding has created a lot of NGOs in other countries,” says Thomas Carothers, a vice president at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

For generations, nonprofit organizations have wielded influence in American political and social life because we have decided that we want a relatively small government. In the United States, NGOs contribute to many functions that elsewhere are considered government’s role, such as education, charity, health care, and social services. Government, by contrast, is far more powerful and provides more social services in France, Japan, and some other wealthy democracies that lack such vast networks of nonprofit associations.

Some have even argued that a thriving democracy depends on strong, American-style citizen and lobbying groups. But Carothers disagrees. “There are other democracies that do things differently,” he says. “Democracy doesn’t have to be so open to so many different forms of influence and lobbying.”

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Tocqueville called the United States “the most democratic country on earth” and speculated that there is a connection between democracy and volunteer groups. In aristocratic societies, a powerful lord with an army of peasants at his command can “execute great undertakings by himself.” But in America, individual citizens “are
During the Republican presidential primary in 2000, voters lined up just as powerful as the members who vote,” says John Templeton, a founder of the S. C. independent but weak; they can do almost nothing by themselves.” To get anything done, Americans must gather in associations.

Since then, U.S. nonprofits have built an extraordinary record of accomplishment. Many of the important social and political achievements of the past 150 years originated in civic groups. Environmental protection, civil rights, the consumer movement, the women’s movement—all were brought to fruition by private, nonprofit organizations.

But in recent years some scholars have questioned whether “public-interest” organizations actually serve the public, arguing that powerful advocacy groups distort government policy in favor of the prosperous, well connected, and better organized.

It does seem clear that nonjoiners—especially the poor and those with “moderate” political beliefs—have become increasingly left out of American civic life since the Vietnam War era. Political participation by those at the bottom of the economic ladder has declined sharply in recent decades. And low-income people have become less likely to join organized groups that work on their behalf. Meanwhile, Americans on the political far left and far right have sustained involvement in civic affairs, while selfdescribed moderates have increasingly withdrawn.

In a recent book, Robert D. Putnam analyzed the Roper Social and Political Trends surveys, which include interviews of more than 410,000 voting-age Americans conducted between 1973 and 1994. Controlling for various demographic factors such as income, education, region, age, and sex, Americans who called themselves “very” liberal or “very” conservative were likelier to attend public meetings, participate in political parties, and write letters to Congress than people who considered themselves more moderate.

This correlation between passionate political views and activism accelerated during the survey period, notes Putnam. By the 1990s, people who considered themselves “middle-of-the-road” were about one-half as likely to become involved in local civic groups, public meetings, and political parties as in the mid-1970s.

Compared to self-described moderates today, President Richard Nixon’s “Silent Majority” of the Vietnam War era was not particularly silent. In recent decades, Putnam argues, “more extreme views are gradually becoming more dominant in grassroots American civic life.”

ROLE OF NONPROFITS

Americans are still joiners to some degree, though they may not join the same groups as they once did or participate in the same ways.

A Harvard University study in the early 1990s showed that almost 80 percent of Americans reported an affiliation with at least one nonprofit association. Modern nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) include labor unions, professional associations, political parties, religious organizations, sports clubs, student groups, chambers of commerce, and cultural associations.

Some of the most visible and influential NGOs are advocacy groups passionately devoted to single issues—from the National Rifle Association to the National Organization of Women to Greenpeace.

Nonprofit groups shape government policy by exerting pressure on lawmakers. For better or worse, NGOs employ teams of scientists, researchers, lawyers, and policy analysts who provide technical expertise to government agencies and lawmakers. NGOs, moreover, publish educational materials for the public and influence the news media. Many NGOs provide leadership training in organizing, fundraising, and lobbying for younger activists.

In 1998, there were more than 140,000 501(c)4 groups in the United States, according to a recent report by the Independent Sector, an organization that tracks nonprofit activity. These “members-serving” tax-exempt groups can engage in legislative activity, lobbying, and election campaigns. The same year, there were 734,000 501(c)3 “public-interest” tax-exempt groups, excluding churches. These groups hold a special advantage: membership dues and gifts are tax-deductible. That is,
donors can deduct contributions from their income when figuring tax liabilities. But, to maintain their tax status, these groups must strictly limit lobbying for legislation.

All told, that's 874,000 nonprofit groups in just two categories—double the number of such organizations in 1982.

The distinctions between member-serving and public-interest groups can be blurry, however. For tax purposes, some organizations split themselves in two. One wing is a c(4) group that engages overt political activity; another wing is a (c)3 public-interest group, allowing members to offer tax-deductible dues and gifts.

Perhaps more than any other country, the United States asks nonprofit groups to provide public services. Half of the hospital care, a large share of low-income housing, a significant portion of higher education, and most of the nation's charity care are delivered by nonprofit organizations.

Where governments are weak or ineffective, nonprofit groups are asked to fill the vacuum. Nonprofit organizations are influential in U.S. land-use policy and protection because many Americans vehemently object to regulatory interference in their property rights. In countries such as Great Britain and Germany, government planners have established tough regulations to manage natural resources and development. But in the United States, property rights is king, the federal government has extremely limited land-use authority, and local governments are often threatened with lawsuits if they attempt to establish strict land-use rules.

Some conservationists have increasingly turned away from government regulation as a method of protecting wildlife habitat and sensitive landscapes. Instead, they support nonprofit groups and land trusts that preserve land by purchasing it outright or by acquiring voluntary conservation easements, which strictly control development on particular tracts. Even so, many conservationists still ask advocacy groups to lobby vigorously for tougher land-use and environmental regulations.

Conservation nonprofits "exist largely because government has failed at every level to protect the environment and to deal with growth," says Dana Beach, executive director of the SCCCL. "Nonprofit organizations push for solutions because government often lacks the regulatory structures to protect the environment."

But it's not accurate to say that government has failed in the environmental arena, says John Miglarese, S.C. Department of Natural Resources deputy director of marine resources. Before setting new rules, state agencies must usually demonstrate that they are fairly balancing differing perspectives on how natural resources should be managed. Agencies must usually prove that they are paying attention to all kinds of stakeholders, many of whom
have fiercely competing interests. “Government is working to make sure that every special-interest group has an opportunity to have a say,” says Miglarese. “We’re meshing the views of all the stakeholders involved in the resource. In recent years, the decision-making process has become more inclusive, and there’s a lot more compromise.”

We should remember, moreover, that NGOs have different roles from governments, says Thomas Carothers, a vice-president at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who has studied NGOs and democratic institutions in the United States and internationally. “The job of these groups is often to take one issue and push it as far as they can go within the system.”

Nonprofit organizations are not designed to balance differing visions of the public good; that is government’s role. Indeed, some environmental groups sustain an intense focus on their own agendas, though that’s not necessarily a bad thing, says Carothers. Still, it’s a mistake to view NGOs as more trustworthy than representative government. “Most Americans agree that our method of selecting government, which although in some ways is flawed, is democratic and good. NGOs, by contrast, are self-appointed groups that act on behalf of constituencies, but no one elected them to do so.”

**GRASSROOTS AMERICA**

Some NGOs have created enduring networks with dozens of tiny community groups and neighborhood associations. Grassroots groups act as local watchdogs for professionally staffed nonprofit groups, which in turn provide organizational and technical guidance.

“Environmentalists are out-manned, out-spent, outgunned,” particularly on the local level, says Keith Schneider, program director for the Michigan Land Use Institute, a regional conservation group in Beulah, Mich., with 2,000 members. “So our side needs to have the professional approach and the funding to help ordinary folks have a say in the process.”

Business interests can easily crush disorganized local opposition in development disputes, says Schneider. A big-box retailer, for example, commonly sends a phalanx of professionals—a lawyer, planner, lobbyist, and wetland specialist—to a local zoning meeting where it has a pending proposal to build a new store. “All these people will show up at every meeting because the project has a direct economic connection to their pocketbook.” Opposing a particular project, says Schneider, are “local people who believe in the value of open space or the quality of their communities. For them to attend meetings, they have to sacrifice their time, which is unpaid.”

Along the South Carolina coast, dozens of rural communities have disappeared under the onslaught of resort and suburban development. Local folks have sold their property and moved away. Other landowners have been forced to sell their land, unable to afford rising taxes. The problem is that government is usually on the side of developers and industry, rural people say. “When it comes to development, government is not that friendly to communities,” notes Fred Lincoln, a grassroots leader in the rural Cainhoy area north of Daniel Island. “Governments and politicians are talking about jobs. Communities are talking about quality of life. The powers-that-be say that growth is coming and there’s not much you can do to stop it.”

Even experienced activists get worn down. “With people working two or three jobs just to survive, we don’t have extra time to work for our own benefit,” says Mary Dawson, a community leader on St. Helena Island.

These days, volunteers alone cannot sustain long battles against a better-organized opposition, says Schneider. “No environmental debate lasts six months.

**Web sites**

Johns Hopkins University Institute for Policy Studies: www.jhu.edu/~ccss
The Foundation Center: fdncenter.org
S.C. Policy Council: www.scpolicycouncil.com
Strom Thurmond Institute: www.strom.clemson.edu
Nonprofit organizations frequently perform conservation services that under-funded government agencies are not equipped to handle. With 50 volunteers and a tiny paid staff, the S.C. Center for Birds of Prey, located in Awendaw, has treated 2,000 injured birds over the past 10 years. At the center’s intensive-care ward, Grace Gasper, clinic director (left), and Dr. Kelly Moore, a volunteer veterinarian, provide intravenous fluids to a red-tailed hawk, which had been struck by a car.

PHOTO/WADE SPEES
They last years. You must have professionally staffed organizations that have the staying power, that are persistent, that have the technical expertise and nimbleness to adapt as new conditions arise.” Without well-staffed nonprofit groups, Schneider asks, who will defend rural interests in environment debates?

**SOCIAL CONTRACT**

Pressed for time, working longer hours, Americans have found a new way to participate in civic life. Memberships in advocacy groups fit the bill.

“Ther’s a new social contract,” says Jane Lareau of the SCCCL. “People are busier, more involved in making a living. It’s harder to get people to run for offices in environmental groups anymore. They don’t have time to be vice-chair of the local Audubon Society. So now nurses, doctors, lawyers, teachers send in money to nonprofit organizations and have people like me do activism for them.”

But this social contract is flawed, critics say. Today fewer Americans “volunteer” in national advocacy groups in any real sense of the word. After people send in money, that’s usually the end of their participation, says Skocpol. The national groups’ professionals—researchers, lobbyists, and lawyers—have scant interaction with the vast majority of their members, she adds. There are exceptions, however. The Sierra Club and the Audubon Society have strong local affiliates, with active volunteers, across the country.

National environmental groups constantly have to replenish their members who drop out. To retain existing members and gain new ones, some national organizations exaggerate environmental threats and problems, particularly through emotion-laden telemarketing, direct mail and e-mail campaigns, and other solicitations. Some groups basically purchase their members through expensive and aggressive solicitations, critics say.

The environmental movement has also gained strength with cash infusions from foundation grants and individual donors. In 1999, foundation grants to nonprofit conservation organizations reached $732 million, a record 6.3 percent of overall charitable giving, according to The Founda-
tion Center, a New York-based organization that collects information on foundations and corporate giving.

In 2000, federal government agencies gave $137 million to 20 major environmental groups, according to the Sacramento Bee. More than half of this federal money helps groups purchase, restore, or protect land and rare species. The rest is channeled to hundreds of various projects.

In total, environmental organizations receive more than $850 million annually in foundation and government support. These numbers do not include individual membership dues and donor gifts.

Property-rights advocates often complain about the power of environmental groups backed by wealthy landowners. “If you’re poorly funded, you don’t have a chance to form public opinion,” says Tres Hyman, a forestry consultant in Marion, S.C., who helped organize a 30-member group called Conserving America’s Resources Through Environmental Realism (CARTER). In 1997, CARTER fought the creation of a federal wildlife refuge between the Great Pee Dee and Waccamaw rivers, covering parts of Georgetown, Horry, and Marion counties. CARTER members said that a federal agency controlling a wildlife refuge would reduce tax rolls, road expansion, local economic development, and property rights of adjacent landowners. A coalition of national, regional, and local environmental groups strongly supported the refuge, which was established in 1998. “Some of these groups have very deep pockets backing them up,” says Hyman.

Talk of conservationists’ “deep pockets” is silly, says John Echeverria, executive director of the Environmental Policy Project, a research and education program in Washington, D.C. National environmental groups’ funding can never keep up with the vast wealth of individual corporations, political-action committees (PACs), trade organizations, and nonprofit organizations that champion industry’s views.

The reality, Echeverria points out, is that lawmakers and government agencies pay attention when interest groups mount effective campaigns to advance or defend a particular position, especially when those groups have a track record of voter support. That’s how politics is done today, and no one should expect environmentalists to withdraw from the political arena, even though tickets to that arena don’t come cheap. “If you’re going to organize hundreds of thousands of people into a national organization, it costs a lot of money,” says Echeverria. “It costs much more to organize a cross-section of the public than it does to organize an industry lobby.”

Anyway, what’s so wrong about nonprofit groups raising money to advance their causes? “In order to have a legitimate voice, you must have a substantial budget,” says McMullen. “To have a substantial budget, you must have a substantial base of support, and it has to come from many sources. Legislators will not listen to you if they believe you’re just a special-interest group representing one business or one industry. They will listen to you, however, if you have a grassroots base. And generally legislators know if you have a grassroots base because they hear from your membership in their home districts.”

Not true, says state Senator Phil Leventis (D-Sumter). “Some companies and industries are effective (in lobbying lawmakers) simply because they have dollars. Environmental groups are effective not because they have a lot of dollars but because they have knowledgeable people.”

Nonprofit associations, at their best, perform invaluable functions in our society. That said, people should study any nonprofit group before joining it and sending in a check—or even listening to its message. Examine a group’s membership, major donors, and employees. As Dana Beach points out: “It is important to have a transparent corporate entity that allows the general public to understand what the organization is promoting and where its support is coming from. We’re out here doing work for humanity, but that doesn’t mean there’s not potential for abuse. Disclosure is an important part of the nonprofit field.”

After you’ve studied a nonprofit, there might be surprises. Says Carothers: “You might look at a group and think, ‘This NGO doesn’t just represent a group of citizens; it can also represent a business interest or something else.’ It’s not necessarily acting in the broad public interest. That’s why you have to be careful about any group claiming a high moral ground.”
Beach Sweep/River Sweep 2002
Statewide, South Carolina
Sept. 21, 2002

Each year thousands of people become part of the “Solution to Pollution” during Beach Sweep/River Sweep, South Carolina’s largest one-day cleanup of beaches and waterways. The event is part of the International Coastal Cleanup and anyone can participate—individuals, families, schools, civic clubs, or businesses.

To volunteer call Susan Ferris, coastal coordinator, at (843) 727-2078 or Bobbie Adams, inland coordinator, at (803) 734-9108. For more information, visit http://scseagrant.org/education/education_bsrs.htm

6th International Conference on Shellfish Restoration
Charleston, S.C.
Nov. 20-24, 2002

This conference will provide an opportunity for government officials, resource managers, and users to discuss approaches to restore coastal ecosystems through habitat quality assessment and restoration; stock enhancement, management, restoration; and habitat remediation through watershed management. Those interested in participating should contact Elaine Knight (843) 727-2078 or Elaine.Knight@scseagrant.org For information about submitting an abstract, contact Rick DeVoe (843) 727-2078 or Rick.DeVoe@scseagrant.org

The Coastal Society 2002
Galveston, Texas
May 19-22, 2002

The Coastal Society’s 2002 conference will explore interrelationships among the physical, ecological, cultural, and political currents that converge at our nation’s coast. The conference will have three sub-themes: Coastal Watershed and Estuaries; Ecosystem Perspectives at the Regional Scale; and National Treasures and the International Commons. For general information about the conference, contact Judy Tucker (703) 768-1599 or coastsoc@aol.com

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Nov. 20-24, 2002

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The Coastal Society 2002
Galveston, Texas
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