

# NEW MEXICO GROWS PERMACULTURAL POLITICS

by Nate Downey

**P**ermaculture and green politics in New Mexico share an undeniable philosophical connection. In order to see this, let's explore the Green Party of New Mexico's history and vision for the future. Since Greens and permaculturalists face the same Goliath, we have much to learn from each other's work – especially when we find concrete examples of our ethics, principles, and patterns working effectively in unfamiliar arenas.

## ROOTS OF A PIONEER

About ten years ago, a seed sprouted on a desolate political landscape. The Green Party of New Mexico started small with just a couple of folks taking responsibility for the actions of their leaders. They decided that they had had enough of the old, hierarchical political parties that seemed to care more for corporations and consumers than for people and the earth.

## STACKING FUNCTIONS

This pioneering party understood the power both of diversifying connections and of cooperating. They branched out where they would be both appreciated and useful: activist meetings, community events, protests and rallies for good causes. They stacked functions by taking petitions to these places. Soon they had enough signatures to be recognized by New Mexico as a Minor Party. They also organized non-electoral, community projects such as the Santa Fe HOURS barter currency; the Living Wage Campaign; health-care forums; property-tax justice rallies; tree plantings; compost-bin sales; and fund-raisers with literature, speakers, fun and music.

In addition to making tangible social, economic and ecological progress, this web of diverse projects served several functions. It served to get Green literature into the hands of voters, while showing people that the Green agenda is both diverse and cohesive. A mushrooming supporter list created an effective way to spread information about upcoming committee hearings, letter-writing campaigns, rallies, and other activities. The projects also generated goodwill by using the law of return. Before asking for votes from people, these projects built trust for the Greens within the local activist community.

Perhaps the most important function that these projects served was that the young party's active members gained valuable experience. Soon the group had become a dedicated guild of dependable workers. There were public speakers, artists, telephoners, canvassers, writers, strategists, fund-raisers, computer people, press handlers, well known endorsers, many other supportive folks – and someone willing to run for office. In March of 1994, Cris Moore became the first registered Green elected in the state. Running Moore without the support of this guild would have been like planting a lonely hosta on a rocky, windy, south-facing slope with no shade, no mulch, no supplemental water, and no fixed nitrogen.

## BRANCHING AND BLOOMING

The next wave of Green growth came from the 1994 campaigns for Governor, Lieutenant Governor, State Treasurer, and State Land Commissioner. In each race, Greens received more than the 10% necessary to attain Major Party status. This made the Green Party legally equal to the dominant parties. It also empowered a team of Greens to organize as a positive force during the following legislative session.

After this branching out, it was again time to blossom electorally. Against tough odds, Fran Gallegos became the second Green to win office in the state. Gallegos, a former Republican and crusader against domestic violence and repeat drunk driving offenders, beat the good old boy incumbent in a race for Santa Fe Municipal Judge. Since she won by only 60 votes, anyone who did something for the campaign could know that his or her efforts made a pivotal impact. In addition to giving Greens confidence, this election continued to show people that the Greens were not only concerned about trees and rivers. Greens could now point to their support for the men and women in blue.

Having now held office for some time, both Moore and Gallegos are widely respected for their hard work for positive change. The most relevant examples for readers of this journal are: Moore led a successful effort to prevent development on steep slopes near town; and Gallegos provided a large public space, over 100 community service workers, and much vocal support for the Healing Garden, a

permacultural project for the Santa Fe Rape Crisis Center.

## EXPLOITING PROBLEMS

Last May, Green Party candidate Carol Miller garnered 17% of the vote in a special election for the Congress of the United States. Miller spent only \$1 for every \$50 spent by the other candidates. How could an unknown candidate from an upstart party convince one in five voters to pull her lever?

The biggest problem Miller faced was a lack of money, but the campaign used this situation to great benefit. By challenging her opponents at her first news conference to a \$100,000 spending cap, she stacked several opportune functions. She grabbed headlines, which increased her name recognition. She became instantly perceived as a candidate of the people, which infused much more volunteer energy into her campaign. In addition, she took the opportunity to force the press to listen to her Green vision. Within weeks, she received the support of almost every major newspaper in the district: the *Albuquerque Journal*, the *Albuquerque Tribune*, the *Santa Fe Reporter*, the *Taos News*, *Crosswinds*, and the *Santa Fe Sun*.

This lack of money also paid off when it came to yard signs. The other major parties had slick, expensive signs. These were out of the question for the Greens. Instead, voters were presented with good looking, hand made signs that pointed to a huge volunteer effort. They spoke not of slickness, but of truth, not of money, but of human creativity and passion.

A local environmental club's endorsement of one of Miller's opponents was also a great opportunity. As a direct result, Miller was endorsed by the organization's most well known member, its former national-executive director, David Brower. Brower's endorsement was also used to stack functions. Niches in time spread the story out so that newspapers first ran Brower's endorsement. A week later, Brower's letter to the editor, which rebuked the local club, was widely published and circulated.

Another opportunity arose for Miller out of a different endorsement. When a wellknown pro-choice activist endorsed another candidate, Greens were able to point out that their candidate was the only

100% pro-choice candidate. On the first abortion bill that was to come before Congress, both of the other major party candidates had promised to vote against a woman's right to choose, while Miller promised pro-choice.

## PINDING NICHES

Just as in nature, politics abhors a vacuum. Perhaps the most effective way to jump-start a powerful third party is to fill a niche in an unhealthy political landscape. As elected officials become increasingly corrupted by big money, the dominant parties increasingly ignore the needs of real people. Sooner or later it is not sustainable to sneak behind the backs of people for whom you work. Voters, who are sick of the scandals, lies, and blatant overtures from politicians to their corporate sponsors, are looking for some new place to put their political conscience.

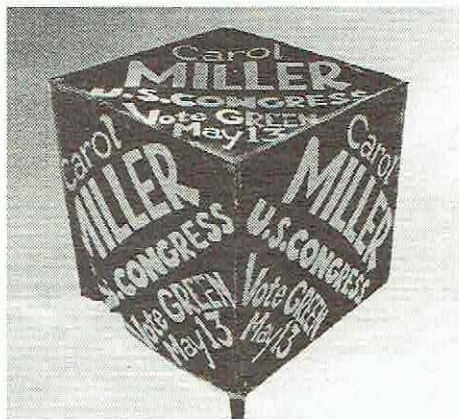
Another niche – that of the *unregistered voter* – is theoretically unlimited, because everyday more people become old enough to vote. Every third party that has ever gotten national recognition has done so by means of registering large numbers of previously unregistered voters. The Greens are already on their way to gaining ground in this niche. Polls show that Miller won in the under-30 age group, and since 1995, the number of registered Greens has increased sevenfold.

Perhaps the most necessary niche for a third party to fill is in the realm of ideas. Without a plan for evolving toward a permanent culture, we can never expect to get there.

## CANOPY OF IDEAS

The Green Party of New Mexico has grown so steadily largely because it brings a detailed and comprehensive set of proposals to any discussion concerning the future. The dominant parties do not. The Green vision is most clearly put forth in the *Platform of the New Mexico Green Party*, which was accepted by consensus at the party's 1994 convention. The document has not only provided excellent protection from those who would criticize the Greens on the basis of its ideas, it has also attracted many beneficial people to the growing movement.

The four main sections that form the body of the document are Democracy, Social Justice and Equal Opportunity, Environmental Sustainability, and Economic Sustainability. With respect to the first of the permaculture ethics, namely,



care for the earth, we will analyze the third section, Environmental Sustainability. Please do not think, however, that the Green Party is just an environmental party. Throughout the *Platform* and the party's history, one can find excellent proposals and actions intended to move us toward a more just and economically sustainable society.

## THIRD ETHIC APPLIED

"Energy Policy" is the first section of the Environmental Sustainability chapter. Here, we see a connection between the Green statement "investing in energy efficiency and renewable energy is key to sustainability" and permaculture's third ethic concerning the reinvestment of surplus. Research funding, according to the *Platform*, should be spent on solar, wind, hydrogen, biomass, and other renewable energy sources. In the sections "Land Use" and "Water," we find references to bioregionalism, ecological land trusts, sustainable forestry and grazing practices, constructed wetlands, as well as a call for extensive erosion-control programs.

## DIVERSITY AS PERMANENCE

The next section, "Agriculture," brings the cause for positive change down to its most readily understandable roots. According to the Green understanding, "we should work to protect our environment and the diversity of our region's and planet's rich life forms," because it is a matter of "our own preservation." In Chapter One of Mollison's *Permaculture*, he uses almost the same words.

But this is just the beginning of Green thoughts concerning agriculture:

*"We call for the establishment of an ecologically based sustainable agriculture that moves as rapidly as possible towards regional/bioregional self reliance...."*

In addition to going on to support organic certification standards and to criticize the "corporate takeover, and resulting monopolization of intellectual property," the section closes with a very strong statement for a regionalized food system and the decentralization of "agricultural lands, production and distribution."

## MONOCULTURE CONFRONTED

One never hears dominant party politicians step up to the plate against big business in such a detailed and poignant way, but the "Biological Diversity" section addresses the dangerous practices of ADM, Nestle, Dow, etc. "Monocultures have ... led to a massive loss in biodiversity," which is "nature's survival strategy." Referring to the post-WWII evolution of chemical agriculture, the document speaks of an Alternative Green Revolution including "backyard biodiversity gardening, ... crop diversity, community empowerment, cooperative marketing, recycling, seed saving, local (and fresh) production," and much more.

## ROLE OF A PIONEER

Although the word "permaculture" never appears in the *Platform*, and although there has never been a permaculture design for this political pioneer, there can be little doubt: the Green Party of New Mexico is an "invisible structure," an example of permaculture ethics and principles at work in society. But how permanent can a third party be in a two-party system?

Sometimes third parties give effective wake up calls to dominant parties. Other times a new party replaces an old one, but the basic system remains. With our impending problems of over-population and resource depletion, one of two things can happen. Either an unlikely breed of dominant party will replace its exploitative agenda with one that grows out of permaculture's ethics and principles, or a multi-party system that supports diverse political affiliations will replace the unsustainable system we have today.

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