

Sebastopol environmental organization wins prize for global efforts

By **BOB NORBERG THE PRESS DEMOCRAT** on February 15, 2012, 6:00 AM

A Sebastopol conservation group that is little-known locally but has an international reputation for shaping Latin American environmental issues has received a prestigious MacArthur Foundation award.

Conservation Strategy Fund, founded in Mendocino County 14 years ago and headquartered in Sebastopol since 2006, was awarded \$750,000, it was announced today. thursday

The group's goal is to teach economics to environmentalists and government officials in developing countries so they can make informed decisions on such things as building roads through the rain forest, establishing national parks and regulating mining.

The course offerings are concentrated in Peru, Bolivia and Chile but are also offered in Micronesia and Uganda. That is where large areas of virgin land remain and where decisions being made today reflect those made in the United States 100 years ago.

“It is a way of acknowledging the realism of what is happening,” said John Reid, founder and president. “The demand for commodities and a demand for energy will be met. How can it be met in the least damaging way possible and leverage funds for conservation?”

Such economic fluency was sorely missing in the environmental debate and has yielded results, said Steve Cornelius, a MacArthur Foundation program officer who has been working with the Conservation Strategy Fund for several years.

“We are recognizing organizations that are doing phenomenal work, and often under the local radar screen,” Cornelius said. “They have identified a niche. They have simply been the main organization working in getting these economic principles out.”

“Their training and research has clearly resulted in prevention of destructive water diversion projects in Brazil, had an impact on new plans to expand the Panama Canal, stopped roads in national parks in the Andes and Central America and Mexico,” Cornelius said.

The Sebastopol group was one of 15 organizations to receive a total of \$15 million in MacArthur Foundation Awards for Creative and Effective Institutions. The group also received a MacArthur Foundation award of \$400,000 in 2008.

The Chicago-based foundation, one of the nation's largest private philanthropic organizations, is best known for its annual MacArthur Fellowship awards, often described as “genius grants.”

Conservation Strategy Fund was founded by Reid, 47, a Harvard-educated economist. While only Reid and a program coordinator work in the Sebastopol headquarters, the fund has a full-time staff of 18, including a dozen university and government economists, largely in foreign countries, who teach the programs.

Reid said they teach a program of six to 10 courses from 15 to 20 times a year. An annual session at Stanford University is the only session offered in the United States. Conservation Strategy now has about

1,500 graduates.

Last year, it had a budget of \$2.7 million and is projected to have a 2012 budget of \$2.5 million.

Miguel Ruelas, director of philanthropic services for the Sonoma County Community Foundation, said the Sebastopol fund has a reputation in international environmental circles.

“They are small organization and they have a very small board, and because all of their work is done somewhere other than in the United States, they are not as well known here,” Ruelas said.

The Sonoma County foundation has given the Conservation Strategy Fund \$81,000 over the past five years through private donors.

The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation in Palo Alto has contributed an additional \$2.4 million to the Sebastopol group since 2004.

Dan Smith of Sebastopol, owner of French Garden restaurant and farms, has given the fund about \$30,000.

“The thing I always look for is the leverage they create with the money they have,” said Smith. “Unlike other agencies who are trying to preserve rain forests and other things in the Third World by buying it, they use their expertise as economists to help develop local people, giving them the ability to change the decision-making process on projects. For a small amount of money they can save a lot of real estate.”

Reid said the MacArthur award will be used to expand the program over the next five years.

“The award will allow us to take what has worked very well in Latin America and multiply it in other parts of the world, such as Africa, Asia and marine ecosystems in the Pacific,” Reid said.

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