

Niagara Group of the Sierra Club,
791 Parkside Ave.
Buffalo, NY
14216



September 22, 2001

Michael Kukla
791 Parkside Ave.
Buffalo, NY 14216
Days: (716) 645-3377
Eve.: (716) 833-3242

Submission for a **Guest View** Column
Word Count: 782

Bio: "Michael Kukla is the current chairman of the Western New York affiliate of the Sierra Club. He is employed at the University of Buffalo and lives in the city of Buffalo."

Some recent Gazette articles have raised questions about the Sierra Club's endorsement of the proposal to remove a six mile portion of the Robert Moses Parkway and return that portion of the Niagara Gorge to nature. As Chairman of the Western New York affiliate of the Sierra Club, I feel it necessary to address some of these questions.

The Sierra Club is one of the nation's oldest and largest environmental organizations. It was founded in 1892 and currently has over 700,000 members nationwide. The club has over 2000 members living in Western New York, with a few hundred of them living in Niagara County. Although the club now deals with a variety of environmental issues, one of its chief pursuits is the protection and enjoyment of public lands and waterways of outstanding and unique natural beauty.

That I think answers why the Sierra Club--more precisely, the local affiliate of the Sierra Club--supports the Niagara Heritage Partnership's proposal to replace that six mile portion of the Parkway with a restoration of the gorge top's to its native condition.

All would agree that the Niagara River, Falls and Gorge were at one time of unique and outstanding natural

Niagara Group of the Sierra Club,
791 Parkside Ave.
Buffalo, NY
14216



**SIERRA
CLUB**
FOUNDED 1892

beauty. Unfortunately, we have done just about everything we could not to preserve but to obliterate the unique natural character of the area.

We ought to remember that the original plan of the Niagara Falls State Reservation, which opened in 1885, was the brainchild of Fredrick Law Olmstead, one of the most talented landscape designers who ever lived. At the opening of the reservation, Olmstead observed that, "What is mainly important is that the one purpose for which New York State invites the reservation to be visited—namely the enjoyment of certain passages of natural scenery of distinctive character—shall plainly control all the arrangements it makes."

This original, guiding vision of natural preservation has instead been largely abandoned in the region's attempts to exploit the Falls. We've cluttered the Falls itself almost to the very brink with so-called attractions of the most common variety; and cut off access to the Gorge above the Rainbow Bridge with 4 lanes of concrete. We've thus degraded and withered the most vital part of Niagara's natural landscape, the one thing which makes Niagara unique in the entire world, the one thing which cannot be replicated, imitated, or improved upon.

In some sense the controversy over the parkway removal plan all boils down to conflicting tastes. The gazette recently quoted a member of the Convention and Visitors Bureau who jeered that "if they want to look at trees," environmentalists should go to a "real" national park. Yes, this may be a tussle between those who want to look at trees--and birds and sunlit skies and the waters of a mighty river--and those who like to drive fast and perpetually get where they're going ten minutes sooner.

But I do not understand why any businessman would jeer at any potential class of additional tourists. The parkway removal plan does not threaten to repulse any tourists already attracted to the region. Instead, it offers the possibility of augmenting current numbers with visitors seeking a stronger dose of Niagara's natural grandeur. What the Niagara Heritage Partnership proposes is to replace a

Niagara Group of the Sierra Club,
791 Parkside Ave.
Buffalo, NY
14216



SIERRA
CLUB
FOUNDED 1892

sterile, under-utilized six mile stretch of the Robert Moses with a restored natural environment of about 300 serene acres, adorned with native trees, grasslands, wildflowers, a hiking and a biking trail. Those who offer this proposal aren't wild eyed radicals. They are local residents who care deeply about the region in which they live; and they deserve a little more respect than some members of the Niagara business community and some Niagara politicians have shown them. Though their proposal may certainly be deemed somewhat visionary—which to my mind is a compliment, vision being something that often seems to be in short supply hereabouts in Western New York—they also have practical, workable plans for linking this restored natural area with Niagara's other tourism and development initiatives.

I want to get back to that comment that environmentalists should get themselves to a "real" national park. I counter that we ought to be more generous and less parochial with Niagara's incredible natural grandeur. For by being more generous with it we might paradoxically reap a greater reward. The falls, river and gorge are not merely the head, tail and belly of a regional cash cow to be milked by us for all they are worth. They are a natural wonder unmatched in the world—which is much more than can be said for that stretch of the Robert Moses, no different than six miles of concrete anywhere else.