

### **Introducing conservation marketing: why should the devil have all the best tunes?**

The choices we make every day have created lifestyles that are a key driver of all major threats to the environment. This makes influencing human behaviour the ultimate challenge for a conservationist.

This challenge is not unique to conservation science. In the commercial sector there have been decades of research on how to influence consumers. This knowledge has not gone unnoticed in the non-profit sector, and since the 1970s social marketing (i.e. the use of marketing principles for social good) has grown in popularity. The use of marketing principles has also expanded in areas such as public health but has remained relatively scarce in biodiversity and environmental conservation.

Conservationists have largely been uneasy about relying on the same dark arts used to sell products such as cigarettes and alcohol, leaving untapped the potential of using marketing to drive the adoption of environmentally friendly behaviours. But shouldn't the ethic behind the need to conserve nature be powerful enough to drive change? In August more than 2,000 conservationists from 90 countries gathered in Montpellier, France, for the 27th International Congress of Conservation Biology, organized by the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB). Amongst the 60 symposia there was a newcomer in the social sciences: the first session dedicated to the use of marketing tools in biodiversity conservation. This session built on the success of an event at the International Marine Conservation Congress in Glasgow in 2014.

The symposium brought together academics and practitioners from the commercial and non-profit sectors to discuss how marketing can best support conservation. The topics covered were diverse, from wildlife trade and marine conservation to the use of celebrity endorsements. Our goal was to reframe what marketing means in the context of conservation, away from the perception of being a dark art and towards its adoption as a new path for more effective behaviour change. The symposium was well attended, with those present exceeding the seating capacity of the room and revealing a yet untapped interest in conservation marketing.

To address this demand and interest the Conservation Marketing and Engagement Working Group (ConsMark), which will function within the SCB, has been formed. The group defines conservation marketing as 'the ethical application of marketing strategies, concepts and techniques to influence attitudes, perceptions and behaviours of individuals, and ultimately societies, with the objective of advancing conservation goals'. ConsMark has several objectives. One is to promote the use of marketing techniques and strategies to tackle environmental issues. Another is to improve access for conservation practitioners to marketing

tools and to build capacity for their effective use. With the support of the SCB, ConsMark now has a website and a mailing list open to non-SCB members, where you can find out more about the group and its work (<http://conbio.org/groups/working-groups/conservation-marketing-working-group>).

We urge all who see the adoption of more environmentally friendly behaviours as a key to address the challenge of conserving biodiversity to join our efforts to mainstream the use of marketing tools and principles.

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# Letter

## Why the devil does not have the best tunes: a response to Verissimo and McKinley

Verissimo & McKinley (2016) outlined a growing interest amongst practitioners and researchers in so-called conservation marketing. Here, the basic precepts of commercial marketing are adapted and deployed to influence human behaviour, encouraging positive social and environmental outcomes through the use of the well-established tools of social marketing. These tools include framing and targeting messages to pre-identified segments of the population in appeals to donate money to a conservation organization or to buy a more sustainable product. Such appeals are tailored to match the values of the target audience, thus allegedly making an altered behaviour more likely.

As Verissimo & McKinley (2016) point out, social marketing has been around for decades and has had positive impacts in fields such as public health. They suggest that conservationists' apparent unease at making use of social marketing tools is attributable to its origins in the 'dark arts' of commercial marketing: the very sector that has encouraged the unfettered growth and hyper-consumerism that underpin many environmental challenges. Whilst this may be true, I argue here that the unease of others—particularly many social scientists—comes rather from a strong empirical evidence base, as well as conceptual innovations, which together clearly outline the ineffectiveness of social marketing at altering behaviour towards more environmentally sustainable ends.

Since the 1980s there has been a lively policy and research debate around the issue of sustainable consumption; that is, the ways and means to enable people to meet their material needs in an environmentally and socially sustainable manner. As this agenda has gained momentum under the rubric of sustainable development, numerous charities, governments, researchers and activists have experimented with manifold forms of behavioural interventions, including those of social marketing. This has ranged from exhortations to 'do our bit' for the planet when, for example, heating our homes (i.e. use less energy), to structured programmes that aim to guide households and businesses through practical actions to save resources, such as in the work of the charity Global Action Plan. Although results have been complex and varied, the prevailing finding is that social marketing alone is an ineffective means to encourage sustained and sustainable behaviour change, and misreads and misrepresents the enormity of the challenges faced when trying to influence human behaviour.

Why is this the case? All of our consumption choices are mediated by a complex array of internal and external factors, which include personal habits and values, shared norms, prices, social trends, trust in institutions and corporations, as well as (mis)trust in others to also 'do their bit'. Given all of these factors, it should not be surprising that few changes in behaviour result from social marketing, and those that do are either part of a broader suite of more sustained interventions or are likely to break down if one of the above factors change, as they often do. Social marketing also aims to influence consumption behaviours one at a time, failing to account for the existence of rebound effects (I saved money on my gas bill to help the environment, now for a new pair of shoes!) and moral licensing (I have done my bit and am a good person, so I can splurge on a holiday overseas).

One response to such critiques could be to try conservation marketing anyway, as even if results are small they are at least results. However, evidence around the field of sustainable and environmental consumption (e.g. Corner & Randall, 2011; Hobson, 2003; Young & Middlemiss, 2012) suggests this may not only be an inefficient use of precious time and resources but also oversimplifies the socially, culturally and politically complex challenges of changing all of our behaviours. This is why current social science research on this topic is more interested in questions of how to alter the production–consumption systems in which behaviours—or rather practices—are embedded, having realized that utilizing the tools for marketing jeans or coffee does not have the same impact when used for marketing environmental and social goods.

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# Letter

## Understanding conservation marketing and focusing on the best available evidence: a reply to Hobson

We thank Hobson (2016) for raising important questions about evidence for the impact of social and conservation marketing initiatives. There is a clear need for more rigorous evaluation of all behaviour change initiatives that focus on biodiversity and the environment. Yet we feel it is vital to dispel any misunderstandings around the different ways marketing is used to support environmental sustainability and to ensure a clear emphasis on the best available evidence.

It is often assumed that because commercial marketing is focused on consumption and monetary transactions, the use of marketing in a social or conservation context must have the same emphasis. This is not the case. As with the now well established use of social marketing in public health, the focus of conservation marketing is social change. This has included, amongst others, driving the adoption of fuel-efficient cooking stoves to reduce deforestation, establishing reciprocal water agreements to improve watershed management, and reinforcing local customary laws around sustainable fishing (see references in Veríssimo, 2013). Matters such as donations have been the remit of another marketing field, non-profit marketing.

The confusion around the scope of conservation marketing is understandable, given the myriad of often fuzzily defined terms, such as social media marketing and green marketing, which have spread through the literature. The community of social marketing practitioners has addressed this challenge through its Declaration of Social Marketing's Unique Principles and Distinctions, which sets out social marketing's unique value proposition (Lee & Kotler, 2011). It is perhaps time for the community of practice around conservation marketing to follow a similar path, after the recent proposition of a definition for the field (Wright et al., 2015).

Regarding the impact of conservation marketing, we are interested by the reference to a 'strong empirical evidence base' for the notion that marketing has been ineffective in an environmental context. We regret that Hobson (2016) does not cite any empirical studies to support this assertion. In fields such as public health the best available evidence, in the form of systematic reviews (e.g. Stead et al., 2007), shows that marketing interventions can lead to positive outcomes in a diversity of contexts and target groups. Conservation marketing interventions have suffered historically from a lack of robust evaluation and so the available evidence is not as strong, yet to the best of our knowledge the best

available evidence supports the view that marketing can be an important tool for biodiversity management (see references in Veríssimo, 2013).

It is therefore not surprising that there is a growing interest in conservation marketing amongst conservationists, many of whom are social scientists. This is showcased by the creation and growing membership of the Society for Conservation Biology's Conservation Marketing and Engagement Working Group (Wright et al., 2015), which since December 2014 has gathered more than 250 members. Simultaneously, conservation marketing is increasingly becoming established and being recognized as part of the social science fields of conservation science (Bennett et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, we acknowledge that, as with any approach, there are contexts where a marketing-based approach may not succeed. This realization is in line with marketing principles: a basic tenet of the field is that there are no one size fits all solutions. Conservation marketing is one field of many seeking to achieve positive change for biodiversity conservation.

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