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Tundi's Take: Marketing conservation: Ocean-serving, or self-serving?

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Marine conservationists have long bemoaned the lack of attention to the field. It is assumed that if only we could reach everyone and make them care, they would do the right thing and ocean health would get better. So the mantra and raison d'être of environmental NGOs that campaign for oceans – and where a lot of donor dollars end up – has become 'Get the message out, and all will be right.' But marketing conservation is not simple, and this tool requires careful consideration for a couple of reasons.

Messaging alone doesn't work

First of all, messaging through advertising alone does not necessarily achieve one of the principal aims of marketing, that is, getting people to change their behavior. I recently heard the Freakonomics Radio podcast "[Why You Should Bribe Your Kids](#)", citing a study about young people and what can be done to get them to make intelligent and rational choices, even if that meant foregoing immediate satisfaction for longer-term gains. The story was about food choices and healthy eating, not EBM, but the findings are broadly applicable. It turns out that messaging can work – but it takes a long time, sometimes generations, for the message to lead to a change in behavior. However if that behavior change is incentivized, good choices are made immediately.

Let's look at flagship species in this new light. The sea turtle is a favored flagship, and much of the recent news on sea turtles has been good. In the US, some green sea turtles populations have gone from Endangered to Threatened status, and elsewhere in the world, other sea turtle populations are also recovering (although not all are doing so). Did these population rebounds come about purely because NGOs sank a lot of money into telling the sea turtle story? Was it solely because showing images of female turtles coming ashore to nest, fighting all the odds, is a proven way to get people to protect them? Did the collective perception that turtles are wonderful animals that have been around for 60 million years and deserve to be around for many more put an end to the killing of turtles for meat, eggs, and tortoiseshell?

Well, no – not really. In addition to marketing the wonder of sea turtles (and the wonder of NGOs committed to saving sea turtles), conservationists and managers came up with incentives to get people to stop killing them and taking their eggs. These incentives reward people for protecting turtles or punish them for harming turtles (such as imposing fines when turtles are caught as by-catch in trawl fisheries).

I recently visited the tiny fishing village El Nuro in northern Peru where the benefits of incentivizing sea turtle conservation are readily apparent. In this town in the middle of nowhere, light years away from the cosmopolitan capital Lima, villagers have created Paraiso Natural de las Tortugas – a natural 'amusement park' made from a converted fishing pier frequented by sea turtles. The day I visited, throngs of visitors were there swimming with the turtles, having paid the entrance fee, gone through the information kiosk, and bought turtle bracelets (not of tortoiseshell) and t-shirts. Residents and fishers from a wide area have realized the worth of using by-catch reduction gear, keeping plastic bags out of local waters, and stopping the take of adult turtles and turtle eggs for food to protect local turtle populations. Messaging alone would probably not have changed townspeople's attitudes about turtles – but demonstrating how turtles could be more valuable alive than dead has led to their protection.

Target the right audiences

A separate issue with conservation marketing is whether messaging and marketing to promote EBM and ocean conservation reach the right audiences – the people who can effect change. If consumers drive ocean use, they can indeed make a difference in how they consume and are therefore the right audience. This is why consumer choice campaigns revolving around sustainable seafood can lead to good conservation outcomes.

But most environmental NGO marketing and messaging is aimed at donors and supporters, not social groups whose behavior needs to change. Take those charming flagship species. Groups like WWF peddle what they do in the currency of saving charismatic species such as pandas, tigers, and elephants. The people being barraged with direct mail are not the people whose behavior needs to change to save these species. Rather the NGOs use flagships to amass funds to do conservation work. And there is nothing wrong with that. But the marketing can get out of control when monster fundraising machines need to reach more and more people to generate the funds needed to adequately advertise the good qualities of the NGO – and smaller and smaller slices of the funding go to actually doing conservation.

And the desire to promote the institutions that do conservation may be why conservation marketing rarely brings up the thorniest issues in marine management. Protecting the habitat of marine invertebrates that support entire ecosystems gets little attention – because talking about what lives in the mud isn't sexy. Eutrophication and toxic pollution are two of the greatest threats to ocean health, but campaigning to clean up dirty coastal waters also isn't sexy. Marketing focused on these things could indeed reach a target audience who could make a difference – the tourists who drive coastal development that in turn drives habitat loss and coastal residents who could be convinced not to douse their lawns in fertilizers and pesticides. But these people are being spared the message.

Bad news does sell – as long as it is a story told by a charismatic species with big soulful eyes. But we need to take our marketing of the oceans message beyond that – we need to be courageous and creative and start marketing to the right people about the right issues. And part and parcel with telling our stories, we need to create incentives for people to use the oceans sustainably so that we're not just raising awareness about the right thing to do, we're getting people to do it.

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