

FIVE WAYS TO ADDRESS THE CONSERVATION FUNDING SHORTFALL

beyond™
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INTRODUCTION

It's a recognised assumption that conservation is a long and complicated game, with diverse, diffuse and specific aims and requirements for each individual project. However, regardless of the unique challenges faced across the conservation sector, one particular struggle unites all its players: the shortfall in conservation funding and the corresponding need to innovate and discover new ways of raising the income required to achieve our desired goals.

The core ambition of the Conservation Lab is to instigate conversations around how conservationists, travel industry experts and other interested parties (such as government, private finance and philanthropists) can collaborate to overcome such obstacles. However, with just 3% of all charitable contributions in the US in 2015 going to the environment and wildlife (compared with 33% to religion and 16% to education, according to Giving USA 2016: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2015), it's clear that there is a lot more debate to be had in order to spark new ways of thinking around raising the necessary capital.

Consequently, in May 2017 we gathered a panel of several leading thinkers in the African conservation sector to discuss the difficulties and opportunities surrounding the topic of confronting the funding shortfall in conservation, focusing on reaching the following groups:

CONSERVATIONISTS: those on the ground who are dedicated, passionate, knowledgeable and know the practical realities of their projects, but don't necessarily have the budget, tools or skills to find the necessary funding.

DONOR ORGANISATIONS: private finance and donor organisations that are committed to providing assistance but need to understand where and how their investment is being used.

CONSUMERS: ranging from philanthropists to travellers who are not directly involved in conservation, but present an opportunity for wider engagement.

To an extent, conservationists are working in the long-term when thinking about their impact, whereas donor organisations and consumers sit more in the short-term mindsets of business and emotional appeal. There is also a difference between internal markets, such as governments, where any funding appeal must be tied to economic and community growth; and external markets, where ethics and emotions are more in play.

Funding is therefore intrinsically linked to questions of quantitative versus qualitative value, and any strategy must be a delicate and considered combination of practical, business-minded processes (for example benchmarking, the use of data, placing financial value on land or wildlife) and storytelling (for example transformational experiences, marketing campaigns and education). With this in mind, our panel outlined five areas worthy of exploration for conservationists, travel brands and the two working in tandem, when considering how to tackle a lack of funding for conservation initiatives and related tourism projects.



1: THROUGH MEASUREMENT

A recurrent frustration amongst our panel was the lack of coherent, up-to-date data and rigorous targets and benchmarks set within conservation projects. Commenting on the IUCN Red List, journalist Adam Welz remarks, “the information on rare species is years out of date – even the estimates don’t have proper references. I wonder if it would take that much money to have somebody updating and thinking of a more intuitive way of getting this data across, because at the moment it is almost worthless.”

There may be several reasons for this, dependent across different types of conservation project and organisation. According to Tusk Trust’s Charlie Mayhew, “a lot of the projects we support aren’t necessarily highly sophisticated. They are not run by academics with scientific experience. Across the spectrum of conservation in Africa, there are some very sophisticated practitioners with the resources, manpower and skills to provide the sort of data you’re thinking of; then you’ve got others who are less sophisticated, but nevertheless do great work.”

Another difficulty in providing tangible measurement is due to the fact that conservation is a long-term game subject to many unpredictable variables (such as natural disasters or population growth), taking part in an interconnected system that makes risk management a slippery, nebulous process. This issue is particularly acute when trying to match long-term conservation aims with short-term political cycles and deadlines. Helga Rainer, of the donor organisation Arcus Foundation, elaborates: “one of the challenges we have is attribution. What investments are actually having a decisive impact and how do you attribute that to changes you might be seeing in the ecosystems you’re investing in? For example: if we see an increase in chimpanzee populations in West Africa, is that because the Ebola outbreak meant people stopped hunting them? Or is it due to conservation investments made in those forests?” There is also a difference between tangible measurements – such as the slowing of a decline



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in a species – and more intangible returns – such as a change in attitudes.

When confronted with the necessity to provide reports and data to donor organisations and government in order to justify and secure future funding, these difficulties can lead to results being fudged or misreported out of fear, distrust and an unwillingness to disappoint donors – as Mayhew explains, “there is a danger that we are being driven to create metrics that are there to satisfy the donor and don’t necessarily work from a practical point of view.”

In spite of this feasible danger Rainer continues, “we’d like to think we have a good understanding

of the fact that it takes a long time, even with our own internal monitoring and evaluation processes... We will be as supportive as possible to allow [conservationists] to make the changes they need to make”, whilst Gautam Shah agrees “I think we have a little bit more luxury here than in typical business.”

Instead, according to Greg Reis, “bringing business principles into conservation is a wonderful opportunity to create some significant shifts in how we measure things.” In reality, this means establishing generic, flexible targets that can be monitored and adapted, and working closely with on-the-ground teams to ensure that they are all working to these goals and – crucially

– unafraid to embrace failure and the learnings that can be gained from experimentation and honest documentation. Reis continues, “in order to break habits and create new ones, you have to have a really good trust foundation. You’ve got to be able to fight and conflict – because if we’re all passionate and care about the results, it’s not personal.” The idea of feedback is also inherent within this framework, with Welz adding, “wouldn’t it be valuable for a journalist type of approach to conservation, where a donor might hire somebody to document process and develop

a narrative?”, and Mayhew explaining, “we act as an interface between the donor community and those working on the ground. Part of our role is to try and communicate what is possible and managing expectations.”

Another potential bonus to be gained from instilling a framework of trust and collaboration alongside documenting processes, targets and failures, is the opportunity to leverage solutions across similar conservation projects. Shah elucidates, “the problem is that technology is used in one place only, so there’s a thousand solutions being implemented in a thousand different places, making it really expensive. I never see any evidence of the same solutions being used in different regions... [For example,] producing elephant collars, I could bring the cost down to \$300 each if ordering in bulk, but that’s not how it works: I get a request for five here and then months later, another seven somewhere else, so the price remains static.” Mayhew mentions another example of how Big Cat organisation Panthera has “figured out a way to bulk-buy trail cameras and bring down the cost by 60-70%, and are now running a fundraising campaign where they’re getting people to buy them.” The establishment of focus groups, data platforms and information sharing groups could enable such innovations.



Adam Welz
Adam Welz Media

2: THROUGH FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

Whilst measuring processes and setting flexible targets is a positive step towards managing relationships with donor organisations, it may not provide an economic incentive for private finance and governments to invest in conservation – and, as previously discussed, proving that conservation will aid the economic growth of a country is particularly relevant to African governments, a key stakeholder in the fundraising process. In Mayhew's words, "how do we put preserving habitat wildlife in terms of the economic development of a country? African governments are wrestling with healthcare, infrastructure, education: how do we push ourselves higher up the agenda?"

However, the idea of putting a price tag on the environment and wildlife is a deeply controversial and often flawed notion, throwing up several ethical questions – does it trivialise the survival of a species to try and put it in a table and present to investors? Does it detract from the core ethos of what conservationists are trying to do? Is the value of conservation essentially intangible and often emotional, and therefore donors at all ends of the scale need to buy in on this level and not for economic goals? As Mayhew attests, perhaps "we need to be very careful not to get so hard-nosed and so fixated on the financial values that we lose the true value of nature to mankind and to the planet."

The concept of 'natural capital' (a way of defining the benefits humans derive from nature) is riven with many of these contradictions, with Welz explaining, "when ecologists get hold of economic terminology, it's a disaster – they take all kinds of things literally that weren't meant to be literal." When applying natural capital theory, other than timber most natural resources are worth very little and rare species in particular generate very little value to ecosystems, even when it comes to wildlife tourism. Welz continues, "the whole idea of natural capital is written with



internal contradictions and conceptual failings... It immediately sends the message that nature is fungible, exchangeable for other things. We start sending the subconscious message that nature is not irreplaceable; we can do what we like with it."

If the direct valuation of nature is more damaging than helpful to long-term conservation aims, however, is there a way that we can apply economic thinking to support the environment? Colin Bell certainly thinks so, commenting, "we need a much more sustainable form of funding than donors. To me, the only way is creating markets for carbon: there are companies out there that are buying carbon credits, so if we want to get sustainable funding and governments' buy-in, they need to know that money is going to be coming in every single year."

Bell is tackling the reality that corporates respond in different ways to individuals by developing new incentives for them to donate a percentage of their revenue to a tourism and conservation fund. Working with the South African Treasury and national tax collection authority SARS (South African Revenue Service), any money donated

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CHARLIE MAYHEW, Tusk Trust

will come off their tax bill – by participating, companies will also receive BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) points. As Bell explains, “in South Africa there’s a huge move to bring black people into the tourism world and the general economy, so it’s absolutely essential as a company to have BEE points to be able to trade with government. So the BEE component plus the tax is what’s making this process work.” The fund will be monitored by government, private sector and NGOs, with Bell

estimating that “within three-to-four years we’ll be able to raise well over R100million and go into R1.5billion a year... if you’ve got real cash coming in every single year, you can do amazing things.”

*The tourism and conservation fund was a concept first floated around amongst participants at the inaugural Conservation Lab in 2014 and after much discourse and consideration the initiative is now ready to launch.



3: THROUGH ON-THE-GROUND EXPERIENCES

Although there is arguably a lot to be gained by adapting principles from the business world when it comes to raising funds, the fact remains that conservation is rarely a profit-making investment promising impressive financial returns, but instead an emotionally-driven decision. However, with 50% of the world's population now living in urban areas, we are arguably losing our connection to the natural world; consequently, where communities and individuals cannot see the immediate benefits of conservation investment to their lives, it is an uphill struggle to generate interest (and therefore capital). Neil Midlane explains, "anyone working in the conservation field understands that there's an intrinsic value to wildlife and nature, but we're in this desperate situation where unless there is an economic value attached to things, they don't get attention." Rainer continues, "the issue of biodiversity conservation is a marginalised one. It has not been mainstreamed in any meaningful way."

One way to cut through this inertia is by creating ways for individuals, particularly HNIs and corporations, to get hands-on with conservation efforts and thus inspire philanthropic action. As Paul Swart remarks, "I think that tourism is going to be the saviour of wildlife in Africa. Both from

the point of view of bringing in revenue, but also in terms of exposing people around the world to our problems: when you have them on the ground it's an emotion." The recent successes experienced through the Rhinos Without Borders rhino-notching initiative, a collaboration between Great Plains Conservation and andBeyond, bolster this point of view – despite the experience costing a huge amount of money in the first place, guests often end up donating far more to anti-poaching charities after taking part.

Whilst it may be costly for operators to facilitate such experiences, Dex Kotze believes that they present a huge opportunity to educate and engage not only wealthy individuals, but also their children – the gatekeepers of future conservation funding. In recent months his organisation has taken several CEOs and, crucially, their families into the bush next to Kruger to collar elephants and tag rhinos, "bringing in a million rand for tourism and a million rand for conservation." In Kotze's opinion, these kinds of experiences are more effective than remote conservation education, stating, "education as a driver of caring and action doesn't work... what makes people into conservation-aware adults are open-ended experiences in nature: those deeply emotional experiences as children."

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Paul Swart
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Arcus Foundation

4: THROUGH EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY

Despite Kotze's concerns that remote conservation education is of limited efficacy in driving action amongst foreign donors, for many of our participants the subject of community conservation education is of paramount importance in terms of proving its economic worth to local communities – as Mayhew comments, "community conservation provides us with a tool to demonstrate that it can be a driver for poverty alleviation." Effective community conservation cannot take place without the buy-in of the communities themselves, so as Bell argues, "it is absolutely fundamental to invest in the youth of Africa and deliver conservation messaging through schools."

Again, the need to connect with young people is at the forefront of this idea, which may require rethinking the ways in which conservationists communicate their aims to the community. Kotze cites an example of using technology in novel ways to engage rural villagers, explaining, "we arrived by helicopter and the kids were totally ecstatic... they all took selfies with the helicopter in the background, so I asked 'Who's on social media?' and most of them put their hands up. Smartphones are not something we're using as a tool in terms of community projects, but to get buy-in from the community, they should be – giving second-hand phones to young girls to help them provide anonymous tip-offs for poachers, for example."

Getting communities to understand the economic benefits of conservation through education, particularly by focusing on local youth, is a key way to get them to comply with projects; however, the

power of poverty alleviation to engage external markets also cannot be overstated. On a base level, where donors may not be moved by wildlife or environmental conservation, they may be more willing to invest where there is a human impact – Reis agrees, saying "maybe the community angle is the way to thread it through. It comes down to what the market is willing to buy." Rainer confirms this viewpoint from a donor perspective, explaining of her experience, "when I first got a job working in ape conservation, one of the questions I asked before I agreed to do the work was 'how is this interfacing with humanity?'"

In addition to engaging consumers and donor organisations, this human or community element can also help gain the support of corporations and government, who need more than emotion to secure funding. Mayhew elaborates: "the human dimension of conservation is the aspect that allows us to sell conservation into an audience who otherwise might not necessarily put their money behind you. It also allows us to go into the corporate donor market, because unless it's a company owned by an individual who happens to be passionate about conservation, you can't sell it as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility: it's got to have the human dimension." Bell mirrors this in his experience getting a conservation fund supported by tourism and government off the ground, remembering "what got this thing over the line from the government's point of view was the community... the reason it took so long is because it had a big wildlife component. As soon as there was a community element: bang, sign-off."



Adam Welz
Adam Welz Media



Graham Boynton
Travel Editor of Newsweek
Colin Bell
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5: THROUGH MARKETING CAMPAIGNS

As the above demonstrates, regardless of who your audience is, understanding how to present your offering in relation to their specific needs and behaviours is crucial. When it comes to consumers rather than communities, who are not directly vested in the outcomes of conservation efforts and are more susceptible to making donation decisions with the irrational, limbic part of the brain, the challenge is to become adept storytellers who can change the way that people feel about conservation.

As Welz explains, “qualitative values are often more powerful than quantitative values. People often respond better to emotional narrative than they do to numbers; it requires being a storyteller.” This means finding ways to make conservation inspiring, audacious and compelling, and presents a powerful opportunity for travel brands in particular, given that originality in travel can be hard to find and that impact is an exciting space to be in, particularly in relation to younger generations who are interested in giving back.

In order to achieve this, it may be necessary to take a step back and re-evaluate how we present conservation and related tourism projects. Shah argues that we should be looking at conservation as a consumer product: “If our product is nature, every single successful company that’s out there looks at their product from their customer’s point of view. How are we either solving a pain or creating a gain for that particular customer? What does the customer want from nature? How can we in some way rebrand or repack nature? Because nature is nature – we’re not going to change it. You can’t change the formula of Coke, you can’t change the formula of nature – but you can completely shift

the way you brand it. It might be a need for social status, for entertainment, for feeling good... it might not necessarily be something of economic value, but I’d love to see the conservation sector turn around and ask itself, ‘How do I look at conservation from a customer’s point of view as opposed to a conservationist’s point of view?’”

As technological platforms become more sophisticated and more popular, the ways in which we can rebrand and assimilate conservation objectives in this way are increasing. Anton Crone sees the success of serious documentaries on digital platforms like Netflix and YouTube – Virunga, Before The Flood and Blackfish, to name a few examples – as a relatively unexplored opportunity, stating, “there are stories being told that people had no comprehension of before; they’re suddenly coming to the fore, and it makes me realise that there’s a wonderful, wonderful medium here.” Kotze has had direct experience of the power of online storytelling, commenting, “when there’s a good story, let it go viral on the internet... we had one rescue where a rhino calf had a bullet wound on its leg and we couldn’t find it for eight days. The whole procedure of finding it was filmed into a four-minute documentary; National Geographic posted it twice and it had seven million views.”

Coupled with a strategic distribution method, such material can be a powerful tool for awareness (and action, in the form of donations and beyond). Kotze plans to combine future storytelling with Google’s non-profits programme, which allocates \$10,000 of AdWords a month to NGOs in order to bump recipients further up the search listing for relevant terms.

The discussion and views featured in this report were expressed at a closed-door roundtable at the 2017 Conservation Lab, following two days of immersive idea-sharing between these 10 participants and 108 other attendees. If you'd like to take part in debates like this (and many more), apply to take part in the 2018 Conservation Lab, where the leaders in conservation, travel, technology, behavioural sciences, philanthropy and government will gather under optimal conditions for creative thinking and collaborative innovation, with the aim of advancing conservation efforts.



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