

The past, present and future of using social marketing to conserve biodiversity

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Since the establishment of social marketing as a discipline, it was clear that environmental sustainability would be part of its scope (Kotler & Zaltman 1971). Yet, whereas the academic scope of the field was broadly defined, the origins of social marketing practice, which were heavily linked to the promotion of family planning, meant that the development of this practice-led field have been historically focused on public health. Since the beginning of the century, there have been important developments at the intersection of social marketing and environmental sustainability, particularly considering issues such as waste management, energy efficiency or water conservation. One area that has had very limited attention in the social marketing literature has been biodiversity conservation, defined as the management of diversity of life on Earth with the aim of protecting species, ecosystems and their interactions from excessive rates of extinction (Hunter Jr & Gibbs 2007).

While this has often been constructed to be a topic that relates to wildlife as opposed to people, it is clear that all key threats to biodiversity are a result of human behavior and as such successful conservation strategies have to also be able to influence human decision making (Schultz 2011). It is thus unsurprising that conservationists are increasingly interested in social marketing (Veríssimo 2013), and this issue of Social Marketing Quarterly aims to bring together these two fields to cross pollinate ideas and promote social marketing research in biodiversity conservation.

The past

The first social marketing campaign focused on biodiversity conservation was likely the Forest Fire Prevention campaign, launched in 1944 and run in partnership by the Ad Council, the U.S. Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters (Butler et al. 2007) (Figure 1). Best known by its mascot, Smokey Bear, and its tagline “Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires” this campaign is still ongoing today. Outside of the United States, social marketing principles were first used to tackle biodiversity conservation issues in the Caribbean, through the work of Paul Butler for the St. Lucia Department Forestry Department (Butler 2017). While neither of these efforts were labelled social marketing at the time, conceptually they follow key social marketing principles (Butler et al. 2007; Butler 2017). Butler’s work in the Caribbean would be the foundation of Rare’s *Pride* campaigns, which would go global in the decades to come. These would later form a cornerstone of *Fish Forever*, an initiative focused on improving the sustainability of small scale fisheries in the tropics, and perhaps the first program to use social marketing at the global scale with a clear biodiversity conservation aim.

Beyond *Pride*, the interest in social marketing and biodiversity conservation found new impetus around 2010, both in the USA and South Africa, at the intersection of stakeholder engagement and land use planning (Butler et al. 2007; Wilhelm-Rechmann 2011). Yet, true to its image of a practice-led field, social marketing has not left much of a footprint in the conservation science academic literature thus far. This situation started to change with the growth of a literature around the focus on specific species, often called flagship species (Veríssimo et al. 2011), to promote conservation of biodiversity as whole to both downstream local communities living with the wildlife and to upstream politicians and others decision-makers. Conservationists soon realized that the use of flagship species could be informed by social marketing principles, and this realization helped bring many marketing concepts into the conservation science literature for the first time (Veríssimo et al. 2011). This development was followed by the publication of a special issue of the journal *Conservation Evidence* that focused on behavior change and specially on social marketing (Veríssimo 2013).

A pivotal development would take place in 2014 with the first conference symposium dedicated to the use of social marketing in conservation science, also called conservation marketing (Wright et al. 2015). This event would ultimately lead to the formation of the Conservation Marketing & Engagement Working Group (ConsMark), dedicated to furthering the use of social marketing to conserve biodiversity, within the Society for Conservation Biology (Veríssimo & McKinley 2016). ConsMark would take center stage at pushing forward this connection between social marketing and biodiversity, instituting the Brandy (Building Nature's Brand) Award and organizing the 1st International Conservation Marketing and Engagement Congress in Washington D.C. This event, held in 2018, had nearly 200 participants and demonstrated that there was considerable interest in the intersection of social marketing and biodiversity conservation.



Figure 1 – Timeline of key events in the history of the use of social marketing to conserve biodiversity

The present

While there is a growing interest in the intersection of social marketing and biodiversity conservation (Robinson et al. 2019), this growth has been rather timid (Figure 2). Looking at articles published in *Social Marketing Quarterly*, the longest running social marketing journal, it is clear that while articles around environmental sustainability and biodiversity conservation have started to consistently feature in the journal in the last decade, they remain a rarity (Figure 2). I hope that this special issue, which will by itself represent the largest number of environmentally-focused articles ever published by *Social Marketing Quarterly* in a year, can be a catalyst for future publications in this area.

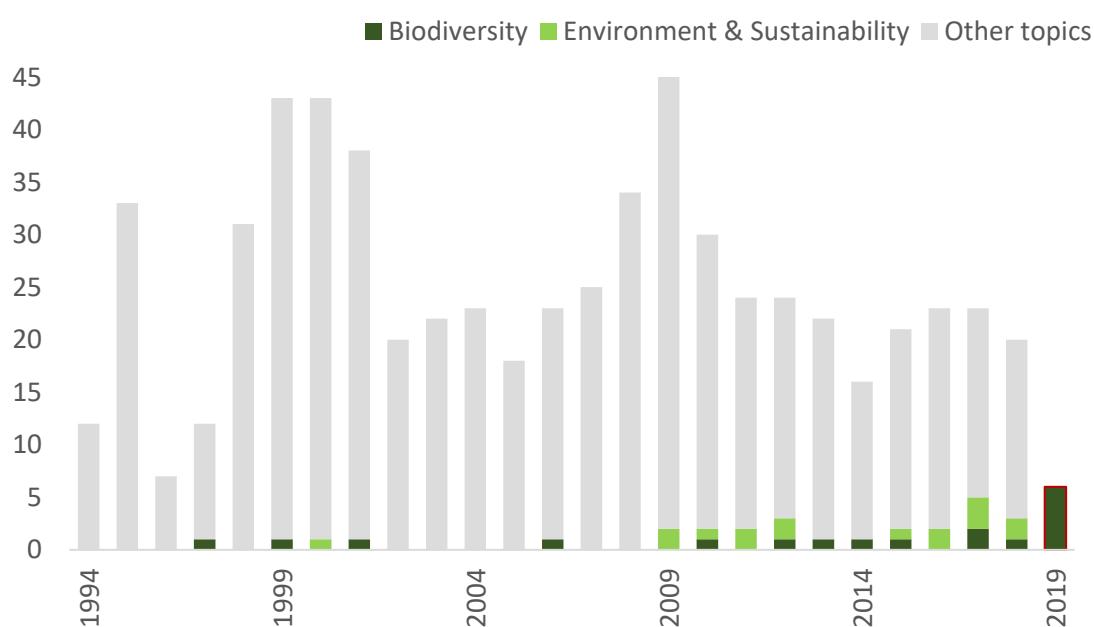


Figure 2 - Number of articles published in *Social Marketing Quarterly* focusing on environment and sustainability more broadly, and more specifically on biodiversity conservation. We include in the environment and sustainability category issues such as energy efficiency, water conservation and waste management. Total article count excludes non-technical article types such as *Publisher's Notes*, *Book Review*, *Federal Round-Up*, *Social Marketing Resource List* or *Looking Ahead*. Data for 2019 refers only to the special issue.

It is nonetheless important to acknowledge that there are important challenges to the use of social marketing to conserve biodiversity, especially those specific to the intersection between human behavior and the natural world. One major obstacle is that the benefits to society of conserving biodiversity are not accrued directly but are instead realized through what are often long causal pathways, making them less clear and therefore less persuasive. Another challenge of focusing on

biodiversity, which includes millions of species and the landscapes they live in, is that it greatly increases the complexity of intervention design and implementation, creating potential dilemmas steaming from trade-offs between the different needs for conserving different species or ecosystems. For example, Douglas and Winkel (2014) showcase how the focus of a social marketing effort on one species may have led to the development of negative perceptions and ultimately conflict with a similar species which came to be perceived as less worthy.

This contrasts with much of the work done in public health, which centers the benefit exchange on the benefits that directly accrue to the individual in the short or medium term. In much of the work focused on biodiversity, the gains are often communal, benefiting the entire community, and long term, only accruing several years or even decades after the change is enacted. This means that social marketers focusing on biodiversity often face added challenges in designing attractive benefit exchanges. One possible way forward may be to capitalize on intangible benefits that are not linked to biological indicators that are by nature slow to respond. Example of these are establishing or reinforcing links between wildlife and pride of place (e.g., nation or region) and group membership (e.g., profession), which can substantially increase the value given to wildlife (Butler 2017; Salazar et al. 2018).

At the same time, social marketing efforts in the context of biodiversity conservation often differ substantially from that carried out around broader environmental issues, such as waste management. Biodiversity conservation efforts tend to focus on the developing world, in particular in tropical countries where most of the world's biodiversity can be found. This brings with it challenges linked to the lack of infrastructure and weak governance that may compromise campaign implementation, in addition to target audiences that are likely to be juggling many pressing and competing needs, making success more elusive. Furthermore, much of the work on environmental sustainability has taken place in urban contexts, largely removed from the landscapes and species that conservationists try to conserve, this contrasts with rural contexts where conservationists work directly with the communities sharing the landscape with the wildlife.

The future

As a field that is practitioner-driven, social marketing is bound to be dynamic. This means not only responding to societal trends, but also to developments in the research space. Some of these trends will impact social marketing as a field while others will be restricted to their applications in specific contexts, such as biodiversity conservation.

One broad trend that will likely shape social marketing for the next few decades is the mainstreaming of the behavioral sciences in both the policy and business realms, as exemplified by the increased visibility of fields such as behavioral economics and design thinking. This fact has not go unnoticed in the social marketing literature but which has yet to be fully explored (Lefebvre & Kotler 2011). Both these fields have much to offer to social marketers. From behavioral economics for example, social marketers may gain from drawing on its use of widespread human cognitive biases to generate often small but meaningful gains at scale, an approach that contrasts with the targeted approach used in social marketing (Metcalfe et al. 2019). From design thinking, social marketers may wish to draw on the abductive thinking paradigm, which in contrast with the evidence-based approach that social marketing strives for, does not rely on tried and tested solutions but instead strives to use deep immersion in

audience insights to create new and untested approaches to addressing societal challenges. The inclusion of these new fields in the social marketing toolbox will continue to broaden the scope of the conservation social sciences and humanities, which have only recently recognized marketing itself as being within its purview, and reinforce the need for an interdisciplinary training for those working in biodiversity conservation (Bennett et al. 2017).

Ethics will be another area where social marketing practices in biodiversity conservation will see change. This change will be fueled by increasing awareness of the ethical challenges faced by both social marketers and conservationists (Eagle 2009; Veríssimo et al. 2019). This will be increasingly key as the field of social marketing works to overcome the historical baggage the term “marketing” often brings and as conservationists work to overcome their colonial legacy, the beginnings of the current nature conservation movement are inextricably linked with practices by European and North American governments to dispossess indigenous groups and local communities and bar them from accessing natural resources that they had relied on for generations (Garland 2008; Smith et al. 2010). Another reason to place ethics at the heart of this intersection between social marketing and biodiversity conservation is the likely expansion of social marketing to contentious issues such as human-wildlife conflict and the wildlife trade (David et al. 2019; Greenfield & Veríssimo 2019) which will likely lead social marketers to face a wider range of serious ethical challenges. They will include, for example, dealing with uncertainty over the effectiveness of different benefit exchanges when designing interventions that can influence the risk of fatal attack by wildlife or deciding whether to reduce demand for a wildlife product that, while unsustainable, may be a key economic resource for a local community.

Increasing activity in areas such as the wildlife trade will also likely to lead to an increase in interest in areas such as demarketing, which focuses on decreasing the demand for unsustainable products or services. Given how critical consumption patterns are as drivers of threats to biodiversity, this is a key aspect of any marketing intervention focused around sustainability and the environment, as can already be seen in the work being done on recycling as well as energy and water conservation (Peattie & Peattie 2009).

Lastly, social marketing can only become established in the context of biodiversity conservation if a robust evidence-base is established to showcase what the field can offer. This is currently severely lacking, with the work by Green et al. (2019) being the first meta-analysis of social marketing interventions focused on biodiversity. Broadening these synthesis exercises to the work of other institutions, together with more structured capacity building (Robinson et al. 2019) will prevent social marketing from becoming a short-lived fad.

The challenges described above make the creation of a strong community of practitioners and researchers working in this area a crucial step to fulfill the promise of social marketing in the context of biodiversity conservation, of a replicable and evidence-based pathway to influencing societal behaviour for good. I hope that this issue of *Social Marketing Quarterly*—with topics as broad as covering impact evaluation, capacity building and audience segmentation and issues as topical as wildlife trade and human-wildlife conflict, and bringing together academics and practitioners from three continents—can serve as a catalyst to further collaborative work and the mainstreaming of this interdisciplinary area across both social marketing and conservation science.

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