

The Horny Celebrity Dilemma

The satirical British paper *Private Eye* recently reported the following collection of headlines from Yahoo: 'Suicide bomb attack in Afghanistan'; 'Clinton wants Lockerbie bomber to stay in jail'; 'Ransom demand made for missing ship'; 'George Michael whams trucker in rear.' There will be three common responses to this collection. Some will find it funny. Others will be annoyed that serious news should be rendered trivial by celebrity gossip. And some will ask 'Who is George Michael?' They will feel uneasy that they are expected to know who George Michael is (he is a musician). They (I should say we) may begin to regret our neglect of *Hello!* magazine.

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Conservation these days seems impossible without celebrity. This very publication demonstrates its importance for rhino conservation, probably provoking the three reactions described above. Celebrity endorsement of conservation is as old as the movement itself, but conservationists, rightly, sometimes wonder where it takes them. It's a good idea to take a quick look at how celebrity works.

Celebrities are industrial products. Their images, appearances or presence make money not just for themselves but other people, principally entertainment and media companies. Celebrity as we know it began

celebrity conservation stories simply document the generosity of great people. The politics gets erased. This is unsatisfactory because we know that conservation is simply a maze of difficult problems. Conservation policies require poor rural groups to make way for rich tourists (the evictions from Mkomazi in Tanzania are one of the classic examples of conservation injustice). They require both fighting, and collaborating, with powerful industries (hunters can be both friends and enemies of conservation). All these difficulties tend to be obscured in the shadow of celebrity, indeed it is precisely through the wealth and power that celebrity can provide that unjust conservation can be sustained.

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a century ago in
Hollywood in order to sell films.

Celebrities need conservation

The famous need good causes to be seen to support. When Elle Macpherson (an Australian model) was caught saying that eating rhino horn 'worked for me' she later seized the opportunity to proclaim her support for the WWF as concrete evidence that she was a conservationist.

Celebrities prefer uncomplicated good causes because supporting them makes for good publicity releases. Conservation causes overseas are handy because their complexities are often harder to see. Unfortunately they can surface. Save the Rhino (SRI) recently featured in a newspaper article highlighting its support for trophy hunting of black rhinoceros in Namibia. The piece was made more sensational with a picture of a model, Laura Bailey, who had been a Patron of SRI (and thought that she had resigned a while ago) and was said to be surprised by the charity's position.

However, what was most unusual about this article was that it made the news at all. Most

So does conservation really need celebrity?

This one's a no-brainer for some people – just look at the money and publicity. Celebrities may back the wrong cause every now and again but their public support of charities really does bring dividends. However if the rich and famous can provide all the funds and news coverage, then what role does that leave for the rest of us? It does not really bode well for a populist conservation movement.

Conservationists and celebrities face different dilemmas over the next decade

For celebrities, conservation pretty much guarantees good publicity, but I wonder if they are satisfied from knowing that their image is unlikely to suffer from conservation's complexities. For conservationists, the challenge is to use celebrity such that it serves, not dominates, their causes. Connecting conservation with communities is rarely going to make headlines or bring in large amounts of money. But in its victories will be the real causes for celebration.

Dan Brockington's book *Celebrity and the Environment. Fame, Wealth and Power in Conservation* is published by Zed and available on Amazon: www.amazon.co.uk/Celebrity-Environment-Dan-Brockington/dp/1842779745

The views of the author do not necessarily reflect those of Save the Rhino International