



A “Rare” Approach to Local Conservation

HOW SOCIAL MARKETING HELPS PROTECT BIODIVERSITY

By Divya Abhat

On Great Abaco Island in the Bahamas, a race is on to save the Caribbean spiny lobster (*Panulirus argus*)—a creature whose numbers have plunged by about 55 percent in the past decade because of illegal fishing and destructive tourism. Spearheading the campaign is d’Shan Maycock, an education officer with Friends of the Environment, a local conservation group. Her mission is to convince fishermen, residents, businesses, and visitors not to harvest, sell, or eat juvenile lobsters. In essence, “size matters” when it comes to the lobster’s ability to reproduce and survive as a species.

“This species is very much a part of our culture,” says Maycock, who taps that cultural connection to convince local people to protect the lobsters. She learned this approach by training with an international organization called **Rare** (originally an acronym for Rare Animal Relief Effort, but now simply a descriptor of their approach). Based in the U.S., Rare trains conservationists around the world to work with their local communities on grassroots campaigns to protect biodiversity.

As part of its mission the group helps coordinate **Rare Pride campaigns**, two-year efforts led by Rare trainees and generally focused on one iconic species. Taught to use “social marketing”—such as meetings, fliers, and special events—the trainees build conservation awareness and foster pride in protecting natural resources.

Recognizing the success of this approach, Rare recently partnered with the University of Texas–El Paso (UTEP) to create a first-of-its-kind **master’s program** in Communication for conservation practitioners. Launched in 2008, the program involves 17 weeks of classroom training and requires a commitment to a two-year Rare Pride campaign. Mentors and online forums provide support. According to program materials, students “do not graduate until they’ve made a difference in the way people think about and practice conservation in their corner of the world.”

Maycock is well on her way toward that goal. Now in her second year of the master’s program, she dedicates herself to reducing illegal fishing of juvenile spiny lobsters. “At the dock, at home, or at your favorite restaurant, always insist on lobster tails that measure 5 ½ inches or longer,” she urges in fliers posted across Abaco. “Let’s do our part to support responsible fishing.”

Changing Human Behavior

Rare got its start in the 1970s when David Hill—a former “Flying Tigers” pilot and avid birder—conceived of a conservation organization that would protect a region’s vulnerable fauna. He founded the group in 1973. Since then, working in partnership with organizations such as The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Rare has trained 165 leaders in the developing world to work with more than 2,400 remote communities in over 50 countries. “It’s a beautiful blend of respecting local cultures and local history,” says Katherine McElhinny, manager for Global Programs at Rare, “and having communities make the connection between their day-to-day behaviors and the long-term protection of their livelihoods and natural heritage.”



Credit: Jason Houston

Working in the Belize Audubon Society office, Olivia Carballo-Aviles reviews her Rare Pride campaign materials with Derick Hendy, warden of Belize’s Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary. Carballo-Aviles, an environmental education manager with Belize Audubon, trains local farmers to employ sustainable farming methods instead of more environmentally destructive livestock grazing.



Rare’s master’s program is administered in four languages—Mandarin, Bahasa Indonesia, Spanish, and English—at four regional universities: Southwest Forestry University in China, Bogor Agricultural University in Indonesia, the Jesuit University of Guadalajara in Mexico, and Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

To apply to the master’s program, individuals must be nominated by someone affiliated with a Rare partner organization, such as TNC, a national environmental ministry, or a local in-country non-governmental organization— all of which must propose a Pride campaign project. Rare staff will judge the applicant’s proposal based on the biodiversity value of the site, evidence that the environmental threat is caused, and potentially solved, by local communities, and the opportunity to develop a solution that can be replicated on a larger scale. “The higher the biodiversity value, the higher we score the applications,” says Shiyang Li, a representative for Rare’s China program. Applicants are also told to brace themselves for hard work. “We tell them that this project is going to be one of the most difficult projects you will do in life,” Li says.

Rare not only interviews the applicants—called “campaign managers”—but also the nominating organizations. “We recognize that to really see the success on the ground we need strong agency partners,” says McElhinny. Once the organization shows that it can provide funds for the campaign manager’s salary, benefits, and local transportation, Rare will attempt to match those funds to support the entire campaign.

After the [application process](#) is complete, student campaign managers receive program material to start preparing for the two-year course. Rare’s curriculum centers on five key areas:

- **Social Marketing.** This covers techniques such as the use of media tools and community outreach to change behavior. Campaign managers learn to identify potential challenges, such as a community’s lack of awareness of a certain problem or widespread indifference that could keep it from embracing change.
- **Conservation Science.** Students get an introduction to biodiversity and learn to assess the importance of conservation and define critical conservation goals and objectives at their individual campaign sites.



Credit: Jason Houston

- **Research Methods.** Campaign managers learn how to manage a complex project and consider critical logistical details such as timelines, budgets, and communication strategies to recruit partners, volunteers, and key stakeholders.
- **Project Management.** Campaign managers learn to identify tools that will help manage a complex project, and consider critical logistical details such as timelines, budgets, and communication strategies to recruit partners, volunteers, and key stakeholders.
- **Leadership and Communication.** Instructors discuss obstacles to change and explain why understanding change is critical to professional development. Students also learn skills essential to becoming effective project and community leaders.

One of the most vital components of the curriculum is an equation referred to as the theory of change, through which students map out key objectives of their campaigns. Explaining the equation, McElhinny says, “Knowledge plus attitude plus interpersonal communication plus barrier removal will lead to behavior change, which will lead to threat reduction, which will achieve conservation results.” Throughout the program campaign managers constantly revise their strategies to make sure their campaign aligns with this theory of change. “The theory of change is the cornerstone of their campaigns,” McElhinny says.

Master’s students split their time between the classroom and the field, where “they will interact with local communities to learn more on what social marketing tools will be useful and what kind of barrier [to change] they need to remove,” says

Albino Parra Herrera meets with school children from the small town of Janos, Mexico, during a recently completed Pride campaign. Janos borders the Great American Grassland high desert and is home to the largest black-tailed prairie dog colony in the world. Parra Herrera’s campaign helped turn local resistance into local support for a new national grasslands protected area in and around Janos, which has now been formally approved.



Kenneth C. C. Yang, professor at UTEP and China representative for Rare. Even after they've graduated, alumni are supported through Rare grants, mentoring opportunities, and regional workshops. "We also identify additional campaign managers who have long-term sustainability and the capacity to run a second Pride campaign," McElhinny says. A recent [Rare survey](#) showed that 52 percent of Rare's alumni have run second campaigns and 73 percent have done follow-up work in their regions.

Agents of Change

The backgrounds of Rare's students and the campaigns they undertake reflect the world's diversity. Angkana Makvilai from Thailand, Santi Saypanya from Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Lang Jianmin from China, for example, are all working to protect tiger populations in their respective countries. This can be a tough sell. Because "the tiger means nothing to the people," Saypanya says, "we're going to focus on the prey species."

Makvilai, a native of Thailand and WCS employee, is following the same strategy. Now in her second year of the master's program, Makvilai collaborates with other local people to protect the tiger population in the Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary—the largest conservation area in the country and a Natural World Heritage Site. The worst threat to the tiger population in the region is the poaching of tiger prey, which is then sold to local restaurants outside the protected area. Through informational sessions on the health risks of consuming wild meat, Makvilai has been persuading the community not only to avoid buying the meat, but also to protect the tiger's food supply by reporting poaching of wild animals within the sanctuary.

Further north, Lang Jianmin, head of the education department in China's Hunchun National Nature Reserve, is working with WCS, China to eliminate the use of illegal snares set for the Siberian tiger (*Panthera tigris altaica*) within the Hunchun Siberian Tiger Nature Reserve—one of the largest Siberian tiger habitats in the country. Two years into his master's program, Jianmin had successfully recruited locals to patrol the area and clamp down on illegal activities. In November 2008, he and his team at the Hunchun Nature Reserve partnered with WCS, China and the Hunchun government to host a two-day "First Siberian Tiger Festival," which opened with the city's governor urging people to refrain from eating wild animal meat. Since he began working on the project, Jianmin and his team haven't found a single snare—a sign of the community's growing awareness of the issue.

HongLian Duan, forestry engineer with the Gaoligong Mountain Nature Reserve Management Bureau, is also a campaign manager with Rare's China program. Her campaign is centered on protecting the Hoolock gibbon (genus *hoolock*) in the Gaoligong Mountain Nature Reserve in Yunnan Province by convincing communities to reduce wood harvesting and over-logging for fuel by using energy-efficient stoves and electric cookers. Communities have been using traditional stoves for centuries, so Duan will need to work hard to change behaviors and teach villagers to use the energy-efficient stoves. To earn her master's, Duan hopes to convince locals to reduce firewood use by 50 percent by the end of this year.

Training the Leaders

Heavily rooting for the success of these campaign managers are Rare's instructors, also called Pride Program Managers. Most have degrees in conservation, social marketing, or education. Campaign managers also receive support from UTEP professors, such as Arvind Singhal who is considered a top researcher in social marketing. He focuses on combining academic theory and hands-on field work, defining Rare's Pride program and the Rare-UTEP partnership as a "model of how social change should happen."

All of Rare's campaign managers are native to the regions where they teach because it's critical to have people who understand the social dynamics of a local community. Throughout the program, these instructors communicate with students conducting Pride Campaigns. For example, Frank Pérez, Rare Pride's Latin America representative based at UTEP, will fly to Guadalajara periodically to observe the teaching and review program documentation. "If people have any questions or concerns regarding the course or a program manager, I'll address that," says Pérez, who has a Ph.D. in intercultural communication.

Now in its second year, Rare's master's program appears destined for success in training professionals to achieve conservation goals. "We try to fill campaign managers' backpacks with the right tools and skills to get to the top of the mountain wherever they need to go," McElhinny says. Even as the curriculum evolves, campaign managers continue to facilitate effective conservation on the ground. At the end of the day, as McElhinny says, "They're amazing local super heroes. They are the world's conservation leaders." ■

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