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Case Study

The Cultural Touch

Environmental nonprofit Rare tailors its program to local cultures and needs.

By Suzie Boss

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A kudu mascot greets a local woman in the Samburu District of Kenya, where a recent Rare Pride campaign helped reduce forest fires.

The Cultural Touch

By tailoring its methods to local values and needs, Rare has slowly seeded conservation programs in 40 countries. Yet as more and more species teeter on the brink of extinction, the organization must expand quickly. Here's how the boutique nonprofit is delivering customized **Rare Pride** social marketing campaigns to millions of people in the planet's most fragile ecosystems. **By SUZIE BOSS**

THE WATERS SURROUNDING Indonesia's Togean Islands are among the richest on Earth. For generations, fishermen have depended on these teeming reefs to support their families. One fish species, the electric-blue Napoleon wrasse, commands especially high prices from Asian diners. But practices like blast fishing—using dynamite to bring these big fish to the surface—destroy the coral reefs that sustain not only the Napoleon wrasse, but also the people who fish for them.

Sarilani Wirawan came to the Togean Islands in 2001 to teach villagers how to take better care of their marine environment. At

first, families who were barely eking out an existence didn't want to hear about conservation, even from a fellow Indonesian. Unfazed, Wirawan, who has a degree in psychology, dressed in a giant Napoleon wrasse costume and visited

the village schools. Children loved the mascot, as well as the puppet shows and songs that carried an environmental message. Their excitement followed them home, where they brought their parents into the conversation. Before long, entire villages were talking about the need to protect the reefs.

"Adults began to see me not as an outsider telling them what to do, but as someone facilitating the community to design its own solution," says Wirawan. Gradually, villagers understood that protecting the reefs would be in their own long-term interest. By the end of Wirawan's two-year campaign, the islanders agreed to

protect traditional fishing sites from the use of dynamite and cyanide. Two years later, the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry declared almost 895,000 acres of the Togean Islands a national park. And an organization called Rare scored another quiet victory, demonstrating its ability to work the people side of the conservation equation.

Rare, a 35-year-old nonprofit based in Arlington, Va., has adapted to fill a special niche within the global conservation movement. Whereas many large environmental groups conduct grand conservation research projects, protect millions of acres, and shape the global conservation agenda, Rare waits for invitations from local communities, and then helps the people in those communities work out their own solutions. For Rare's low-key, person-centered, high-impact efforts, *The Motley Fool* called Rare "one of the best charities you've never heard of." And *Fast Company* picked Rare for its Social Capitalist Award four years in a row—the only environmental organization to earn that distinction.

Rare now works in 40 countries—especially in the developing tropics, where human poverty and endangered natural riches are precariously intertwined. Its customized and time-intensive local programs have kept the organization small. But in a recent shift, Rare staked its future on expanding its signature Rare Pride program. With requests for new campaigns coming from all over the world, Rare is having a hard time keeping up with demand. This may be a good problem for businesses, but it's a bad problem for species teetering on the edge of extinction. As Rare has rapidly expanded its boutique programs, it has learned how to grow without destroying its unique niche in the world of conservation.

A CONSERVATION COOKBOOK

Rare's most famous and successful program, Rare Pride, started with a parrot. Back in the 1970s, Paul Butler was a newly graduated English biologist looking for a place to put his training to work. He found it in St. Lucia, a small Caribbean island with a bird problem: the St. Lucia parrot was fast approaching extinction. Hunters captured the birds and sold them as exotic pets. And birds that escaped the hunters found less and less forest habitat to live in. Taking a species count, Butler found only 100 remaining parrots, submitted a dire report, and then took up the challenge of putting his written recommendations into practice.

Butler stayed in the area for 12 years, working as a conservation advisor to the St. Lucia Forestry Department. He soon figured out that he had to stop sounding like a scientist if he hoped to connect with rural islanders. And so he adapted Madison Avenue's methods. "I realized that companies selling cigarettes or perfume sell their

CASE STUDY QUESTIONS:

How can organizations quickly expand culturally sensitive, resource-intensive programs?

What behavior change methods work across cultures?

What are the costs and benefits of cultivating local leadership?

How can small organizations distinguish themselves from larger players in the same space?

message in a different way than we were selling conservation," he explains. "These companies are very successful at getting people to change behavior—even if it means buying a product that might kill them."

By comparison, he thought the conservation message should be an easy sell. After all, conservation has as much to do with human issues—clean water and renewable resources—as it does with biodiversity. "We don't want to change people's behavior so that they starve and the parrot lives," Butler explains. "We want people to change their own behavior so that the parrot lives and they live better."

Butler set out to market the bird as a symbol of this newly independent island nation. Before long, St. Lucia declared the parrot its national bird, set aside forest reserves, and harshly penalized hunters. Pop songs celebrated the parrot, and ministers praised it from their pulpits. Today,

the St. Lucia parrot population "has clawed its way back to 600 or 700," Butler estimates.

As the parrot story circulated, Butler's popularity soared. In the mid-1980s, a Rare board member met Butler during a chance visit to St. Lucia. At the time, Rare was known as the RARE Center for Tropical Bird Conservation, and concentrated on saving endangered birds in the Caribbean and Central America. Rare invited Butler to test his approach on a neighboring island with its own endangered parrot. Within a year, St. Vincent had passed new laws to protect its native parrot and to end the local custom of selling caged birds in markets.

APPEALING TO PRIDE

More requests followed from other islands in the Caribbean. At a third site, Butler taught a forestry staffer to lead the social marketing campaign. A replicable model began to take shape: choose a flagship species as an iconic mascot; build a multimedia marketing campaign around this mascot to gain grassroots support; remove barriers to change; and then convince people to change their behaviors so that conservation can succeed.

Rare Pride campaigns may look playful, but behind the fun are sophisticated social marketing techniques, which convince people to make changes for their own good. Campaigns use all sorts of vehicles—billboards, slogans, radio and TV spots, celebrity endorsements, cultural festivals—that are fine-tuned to their target audience. For years, public health officers have used social marketing techniques for everything from promoting seat belt use to discouraging smoking. Most recently, the "We Can Solve It" campaign, backed by Al Gore's Alliance for Climate Protection to the tune of \$300 million, uses slick TV spots and celebrity faces to convince Americans to reverse global warming.

In Rare's case, the target audience tends to be rural and poor, and campaign methods are considerably less flashy. Butler says that his use of social marketing came about "almost without thinking about it. We just wanted to get across a message that should be

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important to people.” From his first campaign, he realized that he had tapped into a powerful resource: local pride. “People recognized that this parrot is something that’s very special, and it’s ours. That changed the way the conversation went.”

Butler captured lessons learned in a manual he now compares to “a cookery book. The idea was we could send out this book instead of me. It seemed far more sustainable if you could find a local person to lead this rather than have me wandering across the Caribbean.” Butler followed the book with personal visits, mentoring local campaign managers who typically worked for a small nonprofit or government agency. By the late 1990s, Rare Pride had completed 33 two-year campaigns around the world.

GROWING GRASSROOTS LEADERS

Central to Rare Pride’s early success was its ability to identify and train local leaders who could sell their fellow community members on the value of conservation. These grassroots activists didn’t look much like traditional conservationists. With few exceptions, leaders of the recent conservation movement have been white male scientists, trained in the universities of North America and Europe. Having capable scientists at the helm “has been great for developing the science of conservation biology,”

says Brett Jenks, president and CEO of Rare. But achieving lasting solutions on the ground requires changes in human behavior. And that calls for a different and more diverse profile.

“What leaders do is not universal. It’s culturally adaptive,” says Chet Tchozewski, executive director of the Global Greengrants Fund, a Boulder, Colo.-based nonprofit that makes small grants to support innovative environmental solutions in the developing world. “There is not a prescribed design that we have mastered and can export.” He says that people in rich nations “need to trust indigenous leadership in these [developing] countries and not try to manipulate it into a Western style of leadership or management.”

In Kenya, for example, “the best candidate to lead a Rare Pride campaign might be a young guy they call a mini-elder,” explains Jenks. “He’s going to be an elder in his time.” In another community, it might be a woman who has led committees in her church or a radio DJ who is comfortable speaking to groups.

Similarly, environmental solutions often do not translate easily from one location to another. Convincing Ugandans to stop hunting bushmeat, for example, is a different challenge from convincing rural Mexicans to replace slash-and-burn agriculture with practices that will not destroy tropical forests and watersheds. Salvador García Ruvalcaba learned this in Mexico’s Sierra de Manantlán Biosphere Reserve, where he launched a Rare Pride campaign to reduce forest fires started by burning crop fields. He first used the Mexican trogon bird as a mascot, and then convinced farmers to learn better fire-management methods. But when he realized that local families were desperate for new income sources, he started a second campaign, which established the largest community-based recycling program in Mexico.

To cultivate local leaders, Rare turns to its partners: hundreds of tiny nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the developing

tropics that focus on addressing local environmental issues. These grassroots organizations must be willing to lend a staff member to run the two-year Rare Pride campaign. The ideal candidate is from the community where the campaign will focus.

Once Rare is invited to work in a particular site and has a local campaign manager on board, Rare Pride kicks into gear. The campaign manager attends university-based training with a cohort of other managers who speak the same language. The curriculum is a mix of environmental science and people skills, including behavior change theory and social marketing methods. Managers also get a laptop, technical support, a hefty manual, access to a tool kit of field-tested marketing tools, and mentoring. But planning the actual campaign happens back in the community with the involvement of local stakeholders.

Wirawan, for instance, led the Togeian Islands campaign through a Rare partnership with Conservation International (CI). Her psychology background made her an anomaly in CI’s Indonesian office,

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where staffers tend to specialize in biology or ecology, but a natural for this assignment. Her formal training from Rare was intellectually taxing at times. “I was ready to cry every time I heard the word ‘taxonomy,’” Wirawan admits. But she says she learned “how to integrate social science and hard science, and how to involve the target audience into the design of the solution.”

During the rollout of the campaign, Wirawan lived alongside villagers. Coming from a different region of Indonesia, she had to overcome being perceived as an outsider. “People had to decide, is this really the community’s campaign? And can this leader be effective?” She learned to listen for “what people already know. They have knowledge. I helped facilitate how they can realize their potential.” After the campaign ended, CI’s scientific staff continued building on the grassroots support that Wirawan had established.

SHARPENED FOCUS

Although local leaders eventually own and implement each two-year campaign, in the early years Butler was still their primary trainer. “It was impossible to take this model to scale,” Butler says in hindsight. “I was flying around the world every 10 weeks. We were going to have to clone me or kill me.”

When Jenks became Rare’s CEO in 2000, after years of grassroots work in Central America, he was ready to bring together lessons learned on the ground with business school-style strategies. In 2000, the organization had a staff of seven and \$60,000 in unrestricted assets. “We were tiny and we were broke,” Jenks says. Nevertheless, he set out to streamline Rare’s operations. He began reading up on management theory on his own and eventually enrolled in business school at Georgetown University, completing his MBA in 2004.

Rare first decided to centralize the training of its Rare Pride campaign managers. In 2001, the organization brought five English-

speaking Pride leaders from the tropics together for 10 weeks at its first training site, the University of Kent in England. Campaign managers (including Wirawan) now had the opportunity to learn from each other instead of only from Butler. They formed professional friendships that continued when they returned home, reducing their isolation in the field and creating a problem-solving network. With more time for training, they could fill knowledge gaps about biology, ecology, and social marketing—areas of expertise that aren't easy to find in one person. They also earned a diploma, which would help them advance in their careers. The model worked so well that Rare opened additional university training centers in Mexico and Indonesia to serve the non-English-speaking world.

Meanwhile, and despite its small size, Rare had managed to design several programs in addition to Rare Pride. Jenks had personally developed Rare's ecotourism program, which was critically acclaimed but required a long-term investment of staff and resources at each site. Another program called Rare Radio produced a long-running series of soap operas in the Caribbean and Micronesia that incorporated information about family planning and HIV prevention along with environmental themes. The Fisheries Fellows Pilot Project trained seven fellows to help small-scale fishing operations in the Gulf of Mexico.

"Until five years ago, we were basically an R&D shop," Jenks acknowledges. "We had some of the best little products in the field, but we were not scaling anything."

Rare began to realize that expansion was essential for meeting its mission, says Rare COO Dale Galvin. That mission: to conserve imperiled species and ecosystems around the world by inspiring people to care about and protect nature. "If we're going to make an impact in the world," Galvin says, "we have to grow."

And so two years ago, Rare's leadership team decided to focus almost all its organizational capacity on expanding Rare Pride. A tally of Rare Pride's successes doesn't look so impressive: 36 campaigns in 2007, 45 projected in 2008, 82 by 2011. Each resource-intensive campaign costs \$100,000 and requires a two-year commitment from a partner organization in the targeted country.

But as Jenks points out, "Our campaigns come in direct contact with millions of people in the richest ecosystems on Earth." Rare estimates its first 100 Pride campaigns involved 2,400 communities and touched some 6 million people in the developing tropics. "When you think about scaling an effort to save species, to protect watersheds that serve the needs of millions of people, you can start to envision a much bigger impact. That's what's exciting," Jenks says. "This is extremely high leverage."

Expanding Rare Pride has meant dialing back support for the much-lauded ecotourism program and spinning off Rare Radio to another nonprofit. It has also entailed doubling Rare's staff to 50 and growing the annual budget from \$5 million to \$7.5 million. Now every aspect of the Rare Pride pro-

gram is receiving intense scrutiny from the executive team, donors, and partner organizations. Jenks expects that attention to yield an even better program. "We're working to select the best sites, the best partners, and the best campaign managers. If we can get those things right," he says, "we see an increasingly high chance of success."

PEOPLE FIRST

Despite its recent growth, Rare still seems to belong to a species different from its larger, more famous conservation counterparts. The Nature Conservancy, for example, operates with an annual budget of more than \$1 billion and a staff of thousands, including more than 700 scientists. Rare relies on these big international NGOs—nicknamed the BINGOs—to inform its work, as well as to cofinance more than half of its Rare Pride campaigns.

Yet BINGOs have drawn some criticism. In *Science* last year, an international consortium of scientists from the Wildlife Trust Alliance compared them to transnational corporations that employ "corporate-style branding" and take "top-down approaches" to problems that ultimately must be addressed with local solutions.

Stephanie Meeks, former interim president and CEO of the Nature Conservancy, acknowledges a fairly recent shift in thinking about the role people play in conservation. "The Nature Conservancy and a lot of other conservation organizations have started to talk more about conservation of the natural world *for* people instead of *from* people. The day has passed when conservationists talk about buying land and setting it aside," she says. "We do that at our own peril."

The BINGOs are still learning how to make inroads with people living in small, poor communities in faraway places. Many of the

Luis Sánchez Samudio and his feathered friend promote organic farming in Panama's La Amistad Biosphere Reserve.



PHOTOGRAPH BY HAL BRINDLEY

hot spots where species threats are highest are also extremely remote, far from the reach of the “save the Earth” messages that echo across the West. In the developing tropics, “there has been almost no marketing of environmental values,” says Jenks. “People living in these places often don’t realize that what they have in their backyard is literally not found anywhere else on Earth.”

In this sometimes rocky terrain, Rare has found a place to flourish. While carving out a unique niche, Rare has managed to create mutually beneficial relationships with partners large and small. That’s important whether Rare is raising funds in the developed world or building grassroots alliances in the developing tropics. The organization has also become adept at telling the Rare Pride story. Each successful campaign leaves behind a legacy—of attitudes changed, species preserved, and leadership enhanced.

BOARDS FOR GROWTH

Board management has evolved alongside Rare’s programming and leadership. In

2000, when Jenks took over as CEO, Rare’s 30-member board donated \$140,000. The 16-member board is on track to donate \$4 million in 2008. To fund its expansion, the organization hopes to increase its budget to \$18 million by 2011.

Shifting to a smaller “but much more generous” board has been a deliberate decision, Jenks says. Rare board member Joe Ellis, a former partner with the Goldman Sachs Group and an expert in retail analysis, has helped shape that evolution. When he joined several years ago, he “loved what Rare was doing,” but wanted to see a bigger impact. Ellis was willing to take on what he calls “the rabble-rouser role” to make that happen. “Boards can have a tendency to be like clubs. We get together and share our love of conservation, but how much are we achieving? I felt impatient. I pushed hard for us to grow geometrically,” he says.

Soon after Ellis’ arrival, he recruited Wendy Paulson, a well-respected conservation leader who has served on the board of the Nature Conservancy. Her connections helped bring in more people who could underwrite Rare’s ambitious expansion plans. Many of the current board members are connected to other conservation organizations, especially the BINGOs. Their network has helped Rare strengthen partnerships.

Donor generosity, particularly unrestricted gifts and multiyear pledges, has given Rare more flexibility. “This gives us the opportunity to self-finance programs, or challenge other organizations to match us,” Jenks explains.

Going after a few big donations “is cheaper money in the long run than going after lots of little grants,” adds Galvin. But big dollars bring bigger expectations. “As our board members and donors become more sophisticated, it becomes more like a venture philanthropy approach to fundraising—with an expectation of transparency and results. It’s a virtuous spiral,” Galvin adds. “With the right resources, you can make the best decisions for your product. You can hire the right people. That leads to more success and better stories, and brings in more donors. The board is the beginning of all that.”

Hannelore Grantham is a Rare board member whose family foundation pledged \$5 million to help jump-start the expansion. “I’m in-

involved with a number of other organizations, and I don’t think anybody is quite as rigorous as Rare,” she says. “They have real business savvy. They’re constantly examining the figures and methodology.”

To reach the higher accountability bar, Rare has grown more scientific about its work with people, using measurement and metrics, and then looping that feedback into program improvement. A new technology platform called Rare Planet will support this process. Henry Poole, a technologist adept at social change and cofounder of Berkeley, Calif.-based Civic Actions, is developing the platform, using open source technologies. “We’re creating the kind of tool that enables groups to form and forge closer bonds,” Poole explains. “The objective is to enable Rare to grow its network exponentially.”

“The hardest part isn’t growing the program,” says Ellis. “It’s finding those great lieutenants who have experience managing across different cultures.”

Rare Planet will also help each campaign develop a scorecard for monitoring individual results and capturing best practices.

RARE 2.0

To prepare for expansion, Rare is overhauling its training program. In the new design, cohorts of 12 will go through the training experience together. They will return to the training center three times during the two-year campaign for a total of 11 weeks of in-depth learning. The Rare Planet technology platform will allow for course management as well as networking among participants and Rare Pride alumni. “We’re taking it from version 1.0 to 2.0,” says Butler. When candidates complete the two-year program, they will be eligible for a master’s degree from the University of Texas at El Paso—another carrot that should help with recruitment.

Rare is also opening a training center in China, and plans to open additional sites for Portuguese speakers from Brazil and French speakers from Africa, bringing the total number of training sites to six. “That will enable us to cover the most common languages of countries having the greatest natural resource base on Earth,” Jenks explains. “It’s a mass customization of the social marketing of conservation.”

As it expands, Rare asks itself: Can we grow and improve quality at the same time? “It’s a conundrum,” admits Galvin, “but others have done it.” Jenks looks to Teach for America as an example of a program experiencing “smart growth” that has yielded not only an expanded program, but also better applicants.

Rare will also have to adapt to a more regional management style. What Ellis calls the “garden rake structure,” with multiple programs reporting to a single manager, is no longer a good fit for an organization that is working through decentralized networks. It’s time for Rare to adapt—again. “The hardest part isn’t growing the program or growing the development,” Ellis says. “It’s finding those great lieutenants who have experience managing across different cultures.”

The solution, once again, has to do with people. That’s Rare’s story. And it’s sticking to it. ■