

## **The Ethics of Social Marketing for Conservation: A Learning Module**

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During the 1970s, advocates for public health began adopting marketing techniques from the business sector to achieve their education goals, something termed *social marketing*. Advocates for the environment and socio-economic justice followed suit in the 1980s, and in the 1990s, environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were using social marketing to improve their educational and political campaigns. In the new millennium, social marketing is an accepted strategy for environmental NGOs. Little is said, however, about the ethics of social marketing for conservation, the subject of this learning module.

### **What is Marketing?**

Before we begin discussing ethics, let us remind ourselves of the essential characteristics of marketing. Businesses use marketing to sell goods and services to consumers and thereby achieve a profit. This is called commercial or corporate marketing. Marketing helps business discover what products people want to buy, how much they are willing to pay for these products, the places where they are likely to buy the product, and how best to promote the product. Market research helps advertisers promote goods and services, by identifying products, prices and places in demand by different groups of consumers. Once market research discovers a consumer preference, business can produce a good or service to meet that demand. Market research also affect the promotion of a good or service, by identifying the social characteristics (e.g. race, class, gender, ethnicity) that influence the purchase of goods and services.

### **What is Social Marketing?**

Social marketing is one of many practices used to achieve social change. NGOs have adapted the outlook and techniques of commercial marketers to help 'sell' environmental and social change to the public. Examples of environmental NGOs using social marketing include the RARE Center for Tropical Conservation and Defenders of Wildlife. RARE is an international NGO that uses social marketing campaigns to promote biodiversity and sustainable development. Defenders is a North American NGO that uses social marketing research to aid predator conservation. In their campaigns, NGOs use many social marketing techniques, ranging from survey and focus group research, to mass-media educational campaigns, to democratic efforts at forming public policy.

Note, however, that while the techniques of marketing remain essentially the same, there are very important practical, social and moral differences. Corporations use marketing to sell products to consumers, and they do so for the purpose of making a profit. Advocates use marketing to persuade citizens to adopt certain values, behaviours and/or policies, and thereby improve the well-being of people, animals and nature. Marketing to citizens (instead of consumers) to achieve social change (instead of market share) in order to improve well-being (instead of profits) is

fundamentally a moral goal. What this means is this: social marketing's commitment to a moral good is what distinguishes it from most corporate marketing. Whether or not you believe that corporate marketing is or should be ethical, the moral intention of social marketing requires conservation advocates to consider the ethics of their efforts. Ends and means -- goals and the manner of achieving those goals -- are connected. Good intentions are not enough. If we want to reach a moral goal, we must connect our good intentions to subsequent actions and their consequences.

Let me give a fictional example based on a real place. Suppose you were a citizen of a small town in the state of South Carolina, USA. Your town is near Congaree Swamp National Monument. The Congaree is the last lowland deciduous forest of significance in North America, and has one of the highest densities of Woodpeckers and Owls per hectare. People come from around the world to see this forest and its animals. Indeed, your forest is so ecologically significant, the United Nations has declared it a Biosphere Reserve. Arguable, the social and economic well-being or 'health' of your town might depend on the tourism that Congaree Swamp generates. You therefore have both an individual and community interest in conserving your forest, and well as developing business that can 'work' with the forest to provide jobs for your community. Conserving your forest might mean protecting the diversity of birds and their nesting areas. It may mean developing economic policies that regulate pollution or encourage local investment in sustainable lumbering. It may mean emphasizing environmental education and eco-tourism. Of course, conserving the forest and sustainable development are intertwined, that is, by protecting the birds and their habitat, the economic and social welfare of a community is ensured. Before you can conserve the forest or create a sustainable economy, however, you have to convince the local community that this is the right thing to do -- for themselves, for their children, for the forest and animals. This is where social marketing comes in. As an advocate for conservation, you would use social marketing research and techniques to persuade people about the need for sustainable development around the Congaree.

### **What is Ethics?**

Now let us spend a moment on the idea of ethics (often referred to as moral philosophy or morality). While there are a number of complicated definitions, ethics is really quite simple. Ethics helps us reflect and deliberate on the ends and means of life. What this means is that it helps us establish what goals we should strive for, and how we can best meet those goals. Another way of saying this is that ethics helps us identify, clarify and evaluate the moral values that should guide our lives. Perhaps the best definition of ethics was by Socrates, an ancient Greek philosopher. Socrates said ethics is about 'how we ought to live' (Socrates, in Plato's *Republic*, 1:352d). What Socrates meant by this is that people should ask the big questions about how we live our lives, and how our decisions and actions affect the well-being of others. In sum, ethics is about how we ought to live, with special attention to the intentions and consequences our actions for the well-being of animals, humans and the rest of nature.

Is there anything else we should know about ethics? Yes. First, moral understanding is always situated, and we must always consider the circumstances or 'situation' in which we apply our ethical knowledge. Few moral answers are always the same, and what is right in one culture, or place or time, may not be right in another. This is because no two situations are ever exactly alike. What we should do in one situation may be very different from what we should do in another situation. This does not mean that ethics is purely relative, that one person's ethics is just as good as another's. We do have thousands of years of experience, and we can say that injustice and violence and poverty (to name a few moral evils) are bad for the well-being of individuals and communities the world over. Nevertheless, what kind of injustice or violence or poverty we face will make a huge difference in how we think about and respond to them. For example, errors

of procedure in the courtroom are not the same kind of injustice as discrimination based on race or ethnicity. We need to think about and respond to each situation in the most appropriate way.

Second, there are no simple and unambiguous answers in real-life ethics. Life is complex, moral problems reflect this complexity, and people believe in a wide variety of moral values. When faced with a diversity of moral points of view, we have two choices. If someone's ethics is fundamentally flawed, we concentrate on convincing him or her that our viewpoint is superior. What is more frequently the case, however, is that both points of view have moral insight, and we learn from each other's perspectives. In most circumstances, then, it is helpful to remember that the important question in ethics is not 'who is right', but 'what are they right about'. We should ask, 'what insight does this perspectives contribute to our moral understanding of how we ought to live'?

For example, we frequently hear people pitting 'jobs' against the 'environment', with the implication that we must always choose between one or the other. Life is more complex, however, than this simple choice allows. It may be that jobs depend on environmental protection (e.g. ecotourism), or we need to shift away from the kind of jobs that degrade the economic or medical health of the community (e.g. clear-cut forestry; toxic polluting from industries). In other words, we may be able to protect the environment and provide jobs. Recognizing both moral insights -- people are important and need jobs, local environments are important and need protection - enables us to reach for 'win-win' solutions to our problems.

Finally, ethics 'talk' constantly surrounds us, even if we do not recognize it as such. This has important implications for social marketing. Because the environment affects the well-being of current and future generations, it is often the subject of intense moral debate. Ironically, people often confuse the moral nature of this debate with matters of science or economic policy. Social marketers must learn to distinguish the moral and non-moral arguments of such debate. How then can we recognize when people are speaking about moral matters? We hear it when they speak, and we see it when they act. When people begin to talk about goodness, rights or justice, they are making moral arguments. They are defending some idea or action by saying it is good for us, or is the right thing to do, or is a matter of treating people justly. When we make moral arguments, we are exploring how moral values (things that are important, i.e. of value, for moral reasons) ought to inform how we live our lives. When people act for the good of their children, their community, animals or the natural world, we are seeing people act with their ethics in mind. What this means is that you and I think about ethics every day. Each time we wonder what is best for our children, or how we might make our community better, or why we should conserve biodiversity, we are engaging in ethical thought to one degree or another. As you can see, ethics is not just for philosophers, but is important part of everyday life!

Please note that ethics is important not only in our personal lives, but in environmental and social policy. Our personal and collective actions have consequences for the well-being of human and non-human 'others'. As individuals or societies, we can do good or ill to the lives and livelihood of creatures in both the human and animal worlds. Because of this, whether intentional or not, our work is laden with moral implications. We cannot escape the inevitable moral responsibilities of our way of life, nor the moral significance of conservation. This does not mean that science and politics are less important than ethics in conservation. Rather, each is important in its own way, and because each deals with unavoidable realities in conservation, they are all necessary and complementary to one another.

I want to end our discussion by noting that the topic of ethics can scare people. Some see ethics as a topic for intellectuals, and not something the average person can think about. Others avoid

ethics because they associate it with rigid codes of behaviour. Still others say there is nothing we can do to change someone's values. Frankly, all these objections have a degree of truth to them. There are overly abstract philosophies, dogmatic personalities, and people immune to argument and evidence. That said, I think these are the exception to the rule. As a whole, human beings are intrinsically moral. What I mean by this is that most people care about what we do, why we do it, and what happens as a result. We may differ about why we care, but the caring remains, and it is caring that is the heart and soul of ethics.

### **Moral Principles in Social Marketing**

How then should we think about the ethics of social marketing for conservation? Because ethics is always situated, there are no easy or constant answers that I can give you. How we judge the ethics of a social marketing campaign will depend on situation-specific features that we can never fully anticipate. Nonetheless, there are three concepts that should help us think through some of the moral issues. These concepts are well-being, integrity and empowerment. Instead of an abstract discussion of what each concept means, I will phrase them into principles. A principle is a 'rule of thumb', that is, a general guideline that helps us direct our thoughts and actions. To aid your understanding and use of these principles, I have named them according to the concept they use, provided associated descriptions, and concluded with what I hope is a clarifying example.

1. Principle of Well-Being -- Social marketing should achieve greater well-being for humans and nature. The well-being of humans and nature refers to the 'flourishing' of people, animals and the environments in which they live. There are a variety of ways to measure well-being, such as environmental health for people, biodiversity in nature, human rights within nations, peace between nations, and respect for animal life. Particular social marketing campaigns may target different kinds of well-being, and we cannot expect all forms of well-being to be equally pursued at all times. Even so, following the principle of well-being means that social marketing should always have the prospect of helping humans and nature flourish.

2. Principle of Integrity -- Social marketing should maintain high standards of integrity. Here integrity refers to personal and professional honesty. This honesty applies equally to the gathering and analysis of data, to the creating and interpretation of environmental policy and management, and to the 'advertisements' directed at the target audience. At no time should conservation advocates misrepresent facts or people's ideas, even if they do not agree with those facts or ideas. Nor should advocates misrepresent the intentions and consequence of particular instances of environmental policy or management. Misrepresentations of this sort are not only dishonest, but risk the loss of personal and professional credibility, and undermine the very mission of social marketing.

3. Principle of Empowerment -- Social marketing should empower citizens to make democratic decisions about environmental policy and management. To do this, social marketing makes the best scientific, political and moral arguments available to the public. This might include quantitative data, historical evidence, practical political compromises, or moral reasoning, that is, anything that will deepen the public's understanding and appreciation for the importance of biodiversity and sustainable development. In so doing, social marketing engages in a kind of 'education' that empowers citizens to make better decisions about how we live, how we use resources, and how our way of life affects others. Democracy depends on an informed and involved citizenry to individually reflect and collectively deliberate on the ends and means of community life. A lack of proper information hampers democratic processes. Moreover, just as misinformation violates the principle of integrity, dishonestly manipulating community values and behaviours violates the principle of empowerment. It is not wrong to try to change people's minds and actions. Yet, when one misrepresents oneself or others in order to trick people into

believing you, it disempowers the democratic process. It does so by obscuring the real and honest facts, ideas, and arguments that people need to make the best decisions they can for their communities.

For our final example, let us return to Congaree Swamp National Monument. Questions about the well-being of the human and natural community should guide conservation advocates as they formulate a social marketing plan. So too, they can judge the effectiveness of social marketing by seeing how much well-being it produces over time. In this way, they can keep the big picture in mind -- saving biodiversity and improving people's lives -- while assessing which strategies are most effective in the short run. Suppose, however, that in misguided zeal, a rogue advocate grossly 'overstates' the economic benefits of a certain kind of ecotourism, say alligator wrestling (yes, people really do this in Florida, USA!). Trusting the intentions and information of the advocate, the NGO and local communities invest heavily in alligator wrestling goods and services, only to find out at a later time that there never was a prospect for sustainable development through this particular kind of economic activity. The good reputation of the advocate is now lost, but of far more serious consequence, the integrity of the NGO for whom he worked is undermined. Local citizens may even come to reject the idea of sustainable development and biodiversity as a sham perpetrated by 'outside' environmentalists. This dishonesty has subsequently disempowered the democratic process of the local community, depriving it of both the trust and information it needs to make the best environmental policy and management decisions.

This is not how the story has to end. Suppose that instead of exaggerating the benefits of alligator based tourism, the advocate for the NGO correctly identified alligators as a minor resource and focused on something much more fruitful -- like guided tours for bird-watchers. The subsequent social marketing campaign promoted sustainable development and the protection of biodiversity, but did so by providing honest information about the trade-offs of various forms of ecotourism. Not only is the integrity of the NGO maintained, but it builds NGO-community trust. The NGO has helped the community avoid a costly mistake by empowering it to make better public policy decisions. Moreover, by identifying a real opportunity for sustainable development, the NGO is maintaining the well-being of the Congaree's biodiversity. Social marketing in this instance has created a morally praiseworthy 'win-win' solution for both people and the natural world.

### **Recommended Reading**

Evans, Nicholas (1998) *The Loop: A Novel*, New York: Random House.

- A reality-based novel about contending visions of how wolves affect natural and social well-being.

Lynn, William S. (1998) *Contested Moralities: Animals and Moral Value in the Dear/Symanski Debate*. *Ethics, Place and Environment*, 1, 223-242.

- This article exemplifies how to appreciate contending insights into the moral value of animals and biodiversity.

Weston, Anthony (1997) *A Practical Companion to Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press.

- A short and very accessible introduction to ethics.

### **Bibliography**

#### Readings on Ethics

Boss, Judith A. (1998) *Ethics for Life: An Interdisciplinary and Multicultural Introduction*, Mountain View: Mayfield.

Cicero, Marcus Tullius (1990) *On Duties*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Originally published in 44 BCE.

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Midgley, Mary (1993) The Origin of Ethics, in Singer, Peter (ed.) *A Companion to Ethics*, Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 3-13.

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Singer, Peter (1993) *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Toulmin, Stephen and Albert R. Jonsen (1988) *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Weston, Anthony (1997) *A Practical Companion to Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press.

#### Websites on Ethics

*Association for Practical and Professional Ethics* -- [ezinfo.ucs.indiana.edu/~appe/home.html](http://ezinfo.ucs.indiana.edu/~appe/home.html)  
- APPE has become the premier organization for ethicists who are not professional academic philosophers

*Centre for Environmental Philosophy* -- [www.cep.unt.edu](http://www.cep.unt.edu)  
- An important starting point for environmental ethics and philosophy

*Ethics Updates Home Page* -- [ethics.acusd.edu/index.html](http://ethics.acusd.edu/index.html)  
- Comprehensive outlines of theories, topics, and resources

*EcoNet's Environmental Racism/Environmental Justice Resources* -- [www.igc.apc.org/envjustice](http://www.igc.apc.org/envjustice)  
- A comprehensive listing of topics and resources

*The Hastings Center* -- [www.thehastingscenter.org](http://www.thehastingscenter.org)  
- The world's pre-eminent institution in bioethics, with research programmes in medicine, health care, genetics/biotechnology, and the environment

*Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy* -- [www.puaf.umd.edu/ippp](http://www.puaf.umd.edu/ippp)  
- The IPPP publishes a quarterly Report, each issue of which is devoted to an important ethics and values theme.

*Practical Ethics* -- [www.practicaethics.net](http://www.practicaethics.net)  
- A 'portal' of select resources in practical ethics as it relates animals, nature and society. It is also the author's website.

#### Readings on Social Marketing

Andreasen, Alan R. (1995) *Marketing Social Change: Changing Behaviour to Promote Health, Social Development, and the Environment*, Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Earle, Richard (2000) *Art of Cause Marketing: How to Use Advertising to Change Personal Behaviour and Public Policy*.

Levine, Michael (1994) *Guerrilla PR: How You Can Wage an Effective Publicity Campaign Without Going Broke*, Harperbusiness.

Levinson, Jay Conrad and Seth Godin (1995) *The Guerrilla Marketing Handbook*, Houghton Mifflin.

McKenzie-Mohr, Doug and William Smith (1999) *Fostering Sustainable Behaviour: An Introduction to Community-Based Social Marketing*, New Society Publishers.

Wallack, Lawrence, Katie Woodruff, Lori Dorfman, and Iris Diaz (1999) *News for a Change: An Advocate's Guide to Working with the Media*, Sage Publications.

Weinreich, Nedra K. (1999) *Hands-On Social Marketing: A Step-by-Step Guide*, Sage Publications.

#### Websites on Social Marketing

*Social-Marketing.Com* -- [www.social-marketing.com](http://www.social-marketing.com)

- A communications firm (Weinreich Communications) specializing in health-related social marketing. A venture of Nedra Weinreich, author of *Hands-On Social Marketing*.

*Sage Press* -- [www.sage.com](http://www.sage.com)

- An academic press publishing monographs and handbooks on the theory and methods of social research, including social marketing.

*Rare Center for Tropical Conservation* -- [www.rarecenter.org](http://www.rarecenter.org)

- The Rare Center offers the world's only undergraduate degree in conservation education with a social marketing focus.

*Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development* --

[www.foundations.novartis.com/social\\_marketing.htm](http://www.foundations.novartis.com/social_marketing.htm)

- A 'short-course' on the use of social marketing for sustainable development, by a leading biotech firm.

*Social Marketing Institute* -- [www.social-marketing.org](http://www.social-marketing.org)

- An institute to 'advance the science and practice of social marketing'. A venture of Alan Andreasen, author of *Marketing Social Change*.

*SOC-MKTG Listserver* --

- To join this social marketing email distribution list, send an email to [listproc@listproc.georgetown.edu](mailto:listproc@listproc.georgetown.edu) with the message: subscribe soc-mktg *yourname*. For example: subscribe soc-mktg smokythebear.