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A Low-Cost Way to Help the Environment

By Dale Willman

In *The World According to Pimm: A Scientist Audits the Earth*, the noted conservation biologist Stuart L. Pimm warns that the earth is suffering from the huge and unmistakable impact humans have made, the consequences of which are about to become irreversible. "We are liquidating animals and plants 100 times faster than the natural rate of extinction," he says, and people around the globe have used up 50 percent of the world's water supply.

That frightening reality is not lost on private foundations that spend as much as \$7-billion a year on environmental projects aimed at reversing such trends. Yet, to paraphrase an old saying, if no one is able to hear of that good work, is it very effective?

The answer, of course, is a resounding no. And a reason for this silence is easy to identify. While foundations pour billions of dollars into worthwhile environmental efforts, they are spending precious few of those dollars on direct support for news-media projects that would gain wider attention for their causes.

The motivation of foundations for their environmental spending is admirable. Many environmental matters need quick attention. But the concern is just how some of that money is spent.

Foundations do spend millions teaching nonprofit groups how to better communicate with the news media, often emphasizing how to write better news releases. While efforts to train nonprofit groups are growing ever more sophisticated, their overall effect remains debatable. The majority of Americans continue to be woefully ignorant when it comes to the environment.

In 1998, the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation quizzed Americans on their knowledge of basic environmental issues. Two thousand people were asked 10 questions to determine the level of their environmental knowledge. The respondents averaged just 2.2 correct answers. Random guessing should have produced an average of 2.5 correct answers. Those results were not an aberration either. The findings were similar to those from six previous surveys. And later surveys have reached similar conclusions.

One major reason for this ignorance of all things green is a lack of news-media coverage for environmental issues. Despite being bombarded with news releases from environmental organizations, journalists do not cover the issues significant to our very existence. We can't live for long, or at least very well, without clean air and water. Yet you would be hard pressed to regularly find any story on those topics in most daily newspapers or on most evening newscasts.

The broadcast media are of particular importance. The majority of Americans still consider television and radio to be their primary sources of news, a fact reinforced as recently as this year by the report "The State of the News Media 2004" by the Project for Excellence in Journalism. In other words, Americans turn to the broadcast media to get a major portion of the news they need to be better-informed citizens. This means the broadcast media are major players in determining the national agenda.

Yet content analyses of news broadcasts consistently show that Americans are not getting the information they require when it comes to environmental issues. In fact, generally less than 2 percent of all news coverage on the commercial network broadcasts involves environmental stories. The numbers are similar for local newscasts as well. And those stories that do receive coverage usually involve crises, rather than needed information. In other words, all the news releases in the world dealing with any number of good deeds are generally ignored in favor of the sexier crisis stories.

Meanwhile, perhaps the biggest crisis now under way involves the lack of attention focused on, and money available for, organizations with the knowledge and background to cover environmental issues. Such specialized knowledge is needed because of the complex and interrelated nature of environmental news. For instance, it is quite common for someone covering such stories to face issues ranging from toxicology, hydrology, and botany to architecture and urban planning, all in the same article or newscast.

So the need is great for such specialized reporting. But the reality is grim. Living on Earth, National Public Radio's weekly environmental news show, is facing a major financial crisis, despite an annual budget that is less than \$1.5-million.

Pittsburgh's Allegheny Front, a radio show that focuses on the bioregion of the area's three rivers, can barely hold its own because it can't raise enough money to make a formerly all-volunteer show more professional. That show could expand its range, reaching many thousands of people, with less than \$250,000. Another regional program, Radio High Country News, which appeared on 32 public radio stations, has disappeared as a weekly news service. The show had been reaching tens of thousands of people each week in the western United States with news about significant environmental issues. However, its annual budget of less than \$130,000 proved too difficult to raise.

Even CNN, which for years had the only television network news unit dedicated to covering the environment, recently finished dismantling what remained of that unit, and now has no reporter covering such stories full time. And as all this happens around us, just one-tenth of 1 percent of all private foundation money spent on the environment -- my research using Foundation Center records has found less than \$10-million -- is going to support environmental news-media projects.

But not all is lost.

Some journalists are ready and willing to step forward. Struggling programs are still surviving and making a difference. And best of all, the cost of helping these people and programs flourish is small. Ten million dollars a year would more than double the money currently available for such efforts, and would go a long way toward assuring their viability.

Of course, few foundations are actually equipped right now with the expertise to adequately vet news-media projects. One potential solution would be to use the approach taken by a group of foundations interested in energy projects. They did not want to set up in-house units and hire separate staffs of experts, so they pooled resources and created the Energy Foundation in 1991. One staff, rather than several, was put in place to focus on these important issues. The result was less overhead and more money for projects. Regional foundations can also help by identifying and nurturing smaller efforts. They could support efforts to report on a specific bioregion, such as Allegheny Front or Radio High Country News.

Finally, grant makers should emphasize journalism training. Perhaps one reason limited funds are available for environmental journalists is the reality that too few journalists are capable of handling the complex issues involved. Established groups, such as the Society of Environmental Journalists, should be supported in their efforts to better equip journalists to cover these issues. And a premium should be placed on outreach to general-assignment reporters, who are on the front lines at radio and television stations, as well as newspapers. They get the bulk of assignments to cover environmental stories, and yet they are poorly prepared to cover them.

An interesting paradox is at work now. As scientists become more and more specialized, with interests becoming more narrow and much deeper, journalists are heading in the opposite direction -- being required to have a broader knowledge on a wider range of issues. That trend must be reversed when it comes to the environment. My own research several years ago involved surveying television-news decision makers. The findings appear quite obvious: Those decision makers with a higher knowledge of environmental and science issues allowed more of those stories on the air. So it is important that we provide training for those decision makers, as well as for other journalists.

The benefits from spending on journalism projects would be immense. For one thing, strengthened environmental journalism means wider exposure for other foundation projects.

While it's true that journalists would not accept money that came with a requirement that they report on a particular foundation's work, the reality is that much of that work would still be covered. When I ran a Midwest environmental news service I once received kudos from one of our grant makers for covering several of its projects. The funny thing was, I never asked those projects where their money came from. I had no idea this particular grant maker was even involved with their work. I simply assigned stories that examined some outstanding environmental efforts in the region. And through our efforts, hundreds of thousands of people were exposed to that work. Those people would have otherwise had no idea those efforts were occurring. What that means, of course, is that as more people learn of this work, they are likely to copy successful projects, thus expanding the reach of the foundation's initial effort.

There is at least one current bright spot in money for news coverage of the environment. The National Science Foundation clearly recognizes the need for more environmental reporting. The foundation's grants are now providing at least \$6-million to public-television shows, and almost \$1-million to radio for science reporting, including coverage of the environment. But these grants are more the exception than the rule. It's time for the private-foundation world to also step up, and to begin to focus on the need for a stronger, more vibrant environmental news media.

So let's begin to change the journalistic landscape, and when the next tree falls, there will be plenty of people around to hear it.

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