# CELEBRITY ENVIRONMENTALISTS: THE EFFECTS OF THE RICH AND FAMOUS ON CONSERVATION EFFORTS

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#### Introduction

Significant changes in the way that Americans receive information can be directly tied to the recent invention of the television. Since its creation, the United States has increasingly become a society obsessed with media, and consequently the people who are portrayed within it. Although celebrities and conservation have always been a part of American history, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century they become exponentially more visible largely as a result of the media. Celebrities have worked their way into virtually every media outlet possible, in turn increasing their fan base while also broadening their outreach. Celebrities are not unaware to the extent of the impact they have on the general public, and as a result have to varying degrees used their fame to endorse certain causes for a variety of reasons. This paper serves to first examine the function of celebrity within our society, which in turn will allow us to better understand the role that they play in the recent history of the environmental movement. After establishing a more holistic understanding of this trend, the three most prominent categories of celebrity environmentalists will be differentiated and their unique motives analyzed. The first of these three types are the celebrities who gained fame independently of any movement and later used their fame to help a cause, which I will hitherto refer to as the 'celebrity turned conservationist'. The second is the celebrity who gained fame as a result of their conservation work (conservationist turned celebrity), and the third will be the politician-turned-celebrity (or vice-versa). Each of these denominations of conservationists have unique motives. Whether they are rooted in improving a personal image, receiving monetary compensation, genuine concern for their cause, or various other reasons, each intention will be highlighted and explored. Finally I will weigh the positive and negative aspects that celebrities have on their various causes. Lastly, I will attempt to draw conclusions about whether or not the contributions they make are more beneficial or detrimental to the

environmental movement as a whole; or as Boykoff and Goodman (2009) phrase it more simply, we will aim to discover whether or not it is more effective to 'plant' celebrities instead of trees.

# **Understanding the Function of Celebrity**

Celebrities and environmentalists have a long history of being intertwined. However, the 20<sup>th</sup> century marks the beginning of the era in which celebrity conservationists gained significant momentum. With the invention of film and the implementation of easily accessible and widespread media, the modern celebrity of today began to take shape. Those with access to these luxuries became engrossed not only in the professional, but more notably, the personal lives of these icons. Why is this so? In order to understand the extent of impact that celebrity's have on a given cause, we must first understand why they are so influential in the first place. Two prominent theoretical categories attempt to explain celebrities: structuralist and post-structuralist.

According to Brockington (2009) structuralist theories of celebrity "...emphasize the utility of celebrity for political and economic regimes, and particularly for capitalism" (p. 9). People see celebrities as the ultimate personification of the American dream and obsess over their lives as an escape from the monotony of their own. Essentially, the average person is now able to vicariously live through the rich and famous, the lavish lifestyle that they may never have. This has all become possible due to our increasingly invasive media and press which obsessively stalk the daily on-goings of celebrity's personal lives. So what function do celebrities actually serve in our society, are they simply an escape from our own lives or do they represent something more complex? Celebrities exist not as individuals in their own right but instead as mechanisms used for the monetary benefit of others. Capitalist societies perpetuate this fixation as their economies rely entirely on consumption –a practice that fuels the need for celebrity endorsement; and through the introduction of film and media, these opportunities to make massive profits were not overlooked by movie producers. The amounts of products that film stars were able to endorse were seemingly endless and "fame as an industry" rapidly became a more

important money-maker than the movies which made these celebrities famous in the first place (Brockington, 2009).

What is essentially celebrity economics is explained by Rojek through the 'culture industry thesis. "Celebrities are conceptualized as one of the means through which capitalism achieves its ends of subduing and exploiting the masses. They express an ideology of heroic individualism, upward mobility, and choice in social conditions where standardization, monotony, and routine prevail" (Rojek, 2001, p. 33). He concludes that the relationship between the public and celebrities is one based entirely on fabricated untruths, created only to serve and perpetuate consumption within the capitalist system. The weaknesses in structuralist theories are also noted, particularly the lack in diversity of viewpoints, as well as quantitative research, to name a few.

Post-structuralist theories of celebrity reject economics as the foundation for the celebrity phenomenon. Instead, focus is placed on quantitative techniques which aim to explain celebrities through their audiences. Su Holmes argues that celebrity persona is not solely a product of the media, but instead should be viewed as a dynamic process. She notes that particular attention should be paid to how celebrities solicit their audiences in order to understand their fame to the fullest extent (Holmes, 2005). Post structuralist theories of celebrity reject the simplicity and narrowness in points of view of structuralist theory. It is argued that capitalism and consumerism alone cannot explain celebrity, but instead, both cultural politics and capitalism should be recognized. "A proper account of celebrity needs to acknowledge both possibilities, while recognizing —as always—the larger frame around such a cultural politics that overdetermines its structural effects" (Turner, 2004, p. 103).

#### Celebrities and the Environmental Movement

Celebrity Conservationists: Categories

Understanding celebrity theory detached from the environmental movement has allowed us to attain the most basic understanding as to why these people's opinions are so influential and important to the causes they promote. Prior to this point, I have referred to celebrity as a single entity, however now that the discussion will focus more specifically on their relationship to the environmental movement; I wish to categorize the different types. The three major typologies (and subtypes) that I focus on have been taken from a variety of analyses on this topic and therefore I have selected those that are most relevant to my research.

The first and perhaps most visible category of celebrity conservationists are those who first gained fame and then lent that fame to their desired cause. This type of conservationist, the celebrity turned environmentalist, spans a wide variety of occupations ranging from actors, to politicians, to athletes. Actors such as Leonardo Di Caprio and Angelina Jolie represent a subtype of environmentalists known as celebrity activists (aka celebrity endorsers), which according to 't Hart and Tindall's (2009) typology are environmentalists who originate from a non-political sphere but use their fame to endorse certain conservation efforts. Celebrity activists choose to endorse their causes in many ways, one of which includes showing support for environmentally minded politicians. Talk show host Oprah Winfrey, who has been described as the most influential woman in the world (Harnden et al., 2007) is a famous example of a celebrity activist/endorser. During the 2008 presidential election Winfrey ruthlessly supported Barrack Obama –a candidate whose platforms centered on creating "green jobs" and action in reducing climate change. It has been estimated that Winfrey's endorsement of his campaign "...was worth over a million votes in the Democratic primary race and that without it, Obama

would have lost the nomination" (Levitt, 2008). In a 2007 online poll distributed by University of Oxford, respondents were asked: "Who would be the most influential person/people to champion the efforts to combat global warming/climate change?", Winfrey placed a close second behind famed celebrity-politician Al Gore (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Ten Influential 'Celebrity Champions for Climate Change'

	Total	Australia	Canada	UK	US
Al Gore	23%	28%	24%	12%	30%
Oprah Winfrey	20%	23%	22%	7%	28%
Bill Clinton	16%	12%	21%	13%	17%
Bono	12%	14%	15%	7%	10%
Richard Branson	12%	20%	1%	23%	2%
Nelson Mandela	11%	15%	10%	14%	5%
Arnold Schwarzenegger	9%	6%	11%	9%	11%
Bob Geldof	8%	12%	1%	18%	1%
Kofi Annan	7%	8%	6%	10%	3%
Angelina Jolie	6%	5%	9%	5%	6%

(Source: See Note)

Celebrity endorsers tend to do more than support a few charities; instead they go a step further and attempt to serve as a leader who will mobilize the public to support their cause. They give the public a reason to pay attention to environmental issues that might otherwise go overlooked. Recently the topic of anthropogenic induced climate change has captured the attention of many celebrity endorsers.

Since the turn of the twenty first century, climate change has become perhaps one of the fastest growing environmental issues gaining celebrity support. In a study done by Evans and Hesmondhalgh (as cited in Boykoff & Goodman, 2009) which tracked celebrity involvement in climate change efforts since 1987, results found a massive increase in newspaper articles which mentioned this relationship. Authors Boykoff and Goodman (2009) note that increases in coverage can be seen in Figure 2 around the years 1997 and 2000. These increases were likely a

result of events such as the Kyoto Protocol and Al Gore's presidential campaign. Climate change therefore serves as a relevant example of celebrity activist's involvement in conservation issues.

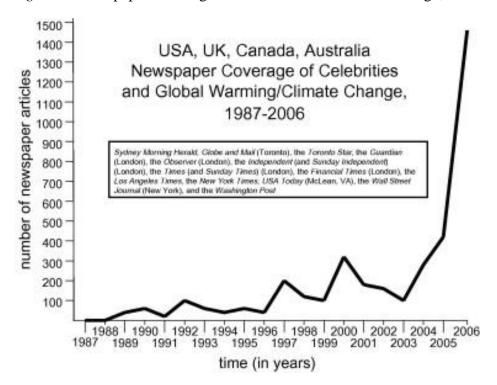


Figure 2: Newspaper Coverage of Celebrities and Climate Change, 1987-2006

(Boykoff & Goodman, 2009)

The second category of celebrity conservationist I will differentiate between is the conservationist turned celebrity. This type of celebrity environmentalist differs from those previously mentioned as they gained fame as a result of the success of their conservation efforts. Environmentalists who have risen to stardom have always been present in the environmental movement, one of the first being "Grey Owl". He was born in England but moved to Canada where he became a First Nations elder and wrote a series of popular books on the conservation of the North American landscape (Brockington, 2008b, p. 560). A more recent and perhaps more famous environmentalist turned celebrity is Australian born Steve Irwin, earning stardom as 'The

Crocodile Hunter'. "His effects to conserve wildlife through land acquisition and popularise conservation will be long lasting. Awareness is key to conservation, and Irwin brought issues to the fore" (Northfield & McMahon, 2010, p. 413).

The final category of celebrity environmentalists I will focus on are celebrity politicians. A celebrity politician is a highly visible figure from traditionally non-political spheres who seeks legislative or executive offices (Marsh, 't Hart, & Tindall, 2010). It is important to differentiate celebrity politicians (i.e. Ronald Reagan) from politicians-turned-celebrity, who have gained fame as a result of their position in office (i.e. Al Gore). Notable celebrity politician and past Governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger, used his fame in combination with his position in office to express his concerns about global warming.

The number of politician-turned-celebrity conservationist has been quickly gaining momentum within the environmental movement. Al Gore is possibly one of the most recognizable of his kind, known for his documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. The Oscar winning documentary, which highlighted the detrimental effects of global warming, eventually led to Gore being awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. Another mentionable politician-turned-celebrity environmentalist is Tony Blair, former British Prime Minister. He is known for his criticisms of industrialized nations like the United States, who he believes are not taking enough initiative to combat climate change. All three typologies of celebrity environmentalists: celebrity turned conservationist, conservationist turned celebrity, and celebrity politicians have their place in the environmental movement. It is now important to understand the motives behind each to gain a greater understanding of the relative strength of their impact.

# Celebrity Motivations

Why do celebrities choose to support the environmental movement? One motive that all three have in common is that of genuine concern for their cause. Celebrity's turned conservationists can be sincere in their efforts to draw attention to issues of the environment. In fact they take considerable risks when deciding to publicly support a given cause, as it most likely will not be aligned with the opinions of their entire fan base. Therefore they risk a loss in popularity when choosing to publicly take sides with a particular politician, GMO or non-profit. More importantly, celebrities who become active environmentalists chance a loss in potential monetary gain. Companies that hire celebrities to represent their products may disagree with the partisanship they show by speaking publicly on conservation issues. David Meyer addresses the personal conflict that celebrity conservationists must accept: "Participation in a social movement means embracing identification with that movement, and for any person whose livelihood and status are tied up with her relationship with a larger audience, such identification can be terribly risky" (Meyer, 1995, p. 189). The risks taken by those in the public eye may sometimes outweigh the benefits of contributing to their particular cause, which allows me to assume that the motivations behind some celebrity conservationists are genuinely sincere.

Celebrity turned environmentalists often have insincere motives as well, and as noted above, the modern day celebrity functions in part for the monetary benefit of others. Celebrities themselves have become as much of a brand as the products they are paid to endorse, and as a result have a variety of insincere motives for supporting a cause. The two motives that I will address are: to improve the image they are selling to their fans and profit. Boykoff and Goodman (2009) question the legitimacy of celebrity concern for climate change and instead argue the idea of "conspicuous redemption". This is the idea that celebrities will do anything to retain their

popularity within the media, and to do so will connect their fame to a political issue with even larger media coverage than themselves. Improving their own image and fame leads to more opportunity for monetary gain, which is the second selfish motive of celebrity conservationists. With increased media attention comes increased opportunity for making massive profits for themselves but also for the group of people who work to maintain their public image. This concern for acceptance from the general public is one of the many pitfalls Boykoff and Goodman see in this kind of endorsement. They conclude that, "Ultimately, the danger in this celebrity path to conspicuous redemption *for everyone else* has been that it has further distracted and muffled the articulations of discourses calling on systemic and large-scale political, economic, social and cultural shifts that will likely be necessary to address the multifarious problems and difficult choices associated with modern global climate change" (Boykoff & Goodman, 2009, p. 404). In other words, celebrities who endorse conservation issues to increase their own personal fame or wealth, risk reducing the importance of the issue to merely a superficial fad within popular culture.

Conservationists turned celebrity are probably least suspect regarding the legitimacy of their concern for their cause. Because these celebrities gained fame as a result of their success in conservation efforts, their initial motives are solid.

Perhaps the most influential and complex set of reasons why celebrity's choose to support environmental efforts can be discovered when researching celebrity politicians. Scholars have studied the relationship between celebrities and politics for a long time, and therefore many explanations about the nature of this relationship have been theorized. Some have even suggested that celebrities and politics have become so interconnected that the "Celebrity without a cause

has become almost anomalous" as a cartoon in the *New Yorker* (1993) noted almost two decades ago (See Figure 3).



Figure 3: The Celebrity Without a Cause

(New Yorker, as cited in Meyer & Gamson, 1995)

This satirical cartoon questions whether a celebrity can exist without eventually being criticized for not using their power and fame to influence political change. Politicians are not unaware of the power that celebrities bring to social movements, and they themselves may align their policies with a given cause in order to be in close social circles with the famous. Some politicians want their own share of the spotlight, and if that means meeting publicly with a

celebrity to show unified support for their cause, then time can be made. As "...a member of Congress is more likely to find time in his or her schedule to meet with Jessica Lange or Sally Field about farm policy than with another lobbyist or policy expert" (Meyer & Gamson, 1995, p. 186). Celebrity politicians can open doors for grassroots activists that otherwise may not be given the opportunity or consideration by policy makers. Celebrity politicians, like the other three typologies also have genuine concern for their causes. Arnold Swarzeneggar, as mentioned before used his stardom to enact policy changes combating global warming, showing the people of California his sincerity through political action. "Among his many activities, in June 2005 he issued an executive order for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions to 2000 levels by 2010, 1990 levels by 2020, and 80% below 1990 by 2050. Actions such as these have reconfigured discussions of energy production and distribution in the US, and have prompted headlines that drew on his celebrity 'action hero' status such as 'Arnie: Let's Terminate Global Warming' (Boykoff & Goodman, 2009, p. 400).

Although Schwarzenegger's motives seem legitimate in the eyes of the public, Timothy Weiskel voices his concern with the celebrity turned politician. In what he refers to as "the politics of distraction", he critiques the recent trend in which politicians wish to become celebrities and vice versa. He argues that the politics of distraction are the primary reasons why the American public has failed to perceive the climate crisis. As entertainment celebrities have begun to enter the political realm, "...political figures cultivate their role as celebrities, with image handlers and engineered media campaigns that treat voters like fans" (Weiskel, 2005, p. 393). Although their motives may be sincere, the fame of the celebrity turned politician may begin to eclipse their cause.

# Celebrity Environmentalists: Positive Components

Celebrities also influence politics when they voice support for politicians who share the same conservation concerns. Although the celebrity themselves may not be a politician, through supporting a certain candidate they come to represent that politician's campaign in one way or another. "Initially celebrities appeared as "sidekicks" to those in power... However, these sidekicks came to function in a strangely different manner. Some celebrities from the realm of entertainment began to take on explicitly political roles. It was as though once they had learned to 'act,' some of the entertainers began to act politically, taking on the added role in their repertoires of the 'elected official'" (Wieskel, 2009, p. 397-398). No matter the motive, the power that celebrity environmentalists have on influencing a cause is immense. Now I wish to address the positive and negative effects associated with celebrity conservation efforts.

A most obvious positive impact of celebrity involvement in the environmental movement relates to public awareness. As one of the most important functions of celebrity is to remain in the public eye, when a celebrity chooses to speak out on behalf of conservation issues the public listens. Of course grassroots activists play an active role in informing the public about environmental issues, but the outreach they have is minute compared to that of the rich and famous. In a society where news and entertainment (for better or worse) have become relatively indistinguishable from one another, celebrities and scientists must learn to work together to mobilize the public. For example, the issue of climate change has long been misrepresented in the media as pseudoscience, consequently the scientific community has struggled to accurately inform the public about the severity of this issue. If climate scientists are aware of this disconnect that they have with the general public, what is stopping them from working with our celebritized media instead of against it? "By paying attention to popular culture events and

spokespeople, being prepared to speak to a non-scientific audience, and reaching out directly to this audience, scientists can play a significant role in the evolving public dialogue on climate change" (DeWitt, 2006, p. vi).

Environmental issues like climate change can be extremely complicated and may sometimes require in depth research in order to fully understand. This may further deter the public from being informed or more importantly, wanting to be informed about conservation issues. Furthermore, scientists are not necessarily well known for their ability to successfully relay scientific information to the general public, as noted in DeWitt's statement above.

Celebrities on the other hand have the ability to simplify very complicated matters into laymen's terms that can be easily understood by their fans and audiences. Keeping with the example of climate change, Al Gore was able to condense this complicated issue into an hour and a half film that was exceptionally well received by audiences. In this way, celebrities can be valuable "...as a means of reducing complexities, and summarizing the overload of information available in the public domain... By virtue of being given more authority to speak, what celebrities say matters more" (as cited by Brockington, 2009, p. 37). However it is argued that there is a fine line between helping the public understand complicated issues, and simplifying them to the point that their meaning is lost.

There has been a fairly recent trend within the environmental movement to use simplified symbols or images to help further certain causes. Whether it is a documentary on climate change, pictures of polar bears drowning in the Arctic, or a nude celebrity posing in PETA's latest ad, symbolic representations of conservation issues are making their way into the media. Celebrities essentially brand themselves as conservationists through their work on various causes. As celebrity endorsement gains momentum and popularity as a means of advertising, they

themselves become symbols for their cause. However, by buying a stuffed replication of Knut the polar bear are we really advancing the environmental movement? Or are these symbols purposefully targeting to our consumerist lifestyle and in turn, reduced these complex issues to simply another commodity within our economy? Celebrities as symbols within the conservation movement certainly perpetuate the risk of reducing complex environmental issues into overly simplified images that lose their intended meaning.

Bedsides informing the public about environmental issues that may otherwise go unheard of, celebrities have the ability to motivate them even further. If a celebrity agrees to make an appearance at a rally or protest, there is the chance that more people will participate in hopes of seeing or coming in contact with them. This may not seem like an entirely positive consequence of celebrity endorsement, however the more people at a rally the more likely that cause will be addressed by policy makers or local governments. Also, more people typically means more potential for donations of volunteer hours or money. Money is important to the success of all conservation movements, which brings me to the next positive outcome of celebrity environmentalism.

Celebrities certainly have much more income than the general public, and therefore they typically give large sums of their earnings to further their cause. Barbara Streisand is one of many celebrities who has donated nearly \$20 million to her foundation which gave grants to national organizations working on preservation of the environment (Balasubramanian, 2011). Besides donating their own money, donations may motivate their fans or the general public to do the same as well. It is also possible that if a celebrity makes a donation to an environmental group it may be publicized in the media, which at the very least will draw public attention to the issue. The hope that the public may mimic the actions of celebrities who support environmental

issues can also be damaging. As celebrities are so closely watched by their fans and the media, the highly publicized choices they make may contradict their conservation efforts.

How can a movement whose foundation is imbedded in reducing consumption be so largely represented by those who consume the most in our society? The rich and famous are expected to live accordingly—lavish lifestyles defined by the amount of mansions they keep and the private jets they ride to access them. But as long as Schwarzenegger's fleet of Hummers runs on vegetable oil his stance on global warming is legitimized? Celebrities do not make the best role models when it comes to being the concerned environmentalists they claim to be, or are paid to be.

In a world that is rapidly industrializing, and as more and more people move to large cities, human interaction with nature is dwindling. According to the United Nations World Urbanization Prospects (2005), in 1950 merely 29 percent (732 million) of the world's population was living in urban areas, and by 2030 an upward of 60 percent (4.9 billion) of the population is expected to be urban dwellers (See Figure 4).

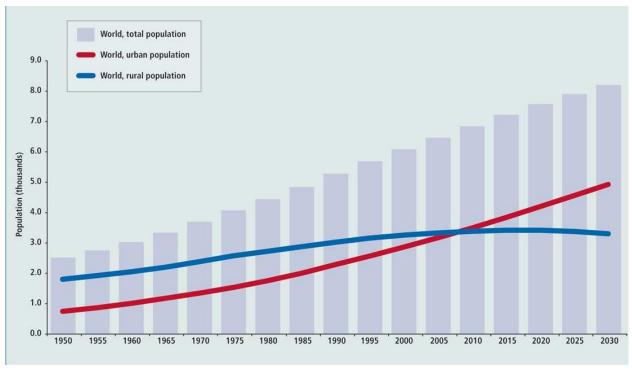


Figure 4: The Urban and Rural Population of the World, 1950-2030

(United Nations, 2005)

This massive migration to the urban industrial core has, and will continue to further isolate the majority of humanity from our natural environs. This is where another positive effect of celebrity environmentalists can be observed. As noted earlier, celebrities function partially as an escape for the average person who may not have as much access to the means, money or free time to interact with nature. Celebrity conservationists allow people living in industrialized societies to feel like they still have somewhat of a connection with nature –although a superficial one. This is also what Brockington believes to be one of the most important characteristics of celebrity conservation. Grassroot environmental activists have always pushed the general public to reconnect with their natural environment as a way to gain support for their cause, now "…many can do so simply by following the exploits of celebrities" (Brockington, 2009, pp. 3).

This is also what he believes fuels the demand for environmentalists who are elevated to stardom. Conservationists who gain celebrity like fame serve to "...demonstrate the other commodity that celebrity conservationists can market: themselves as interesting and charismatic people and as one of the means by which their supporters can hear about, learn and know nature" (p. 71).

Probably one of the most charismatic conservationists of his time, Steve Irwin will forever be known for his success in marketing celebrity conservation. He entertained and educated his audiences, all while creating a memorable persona that granted him massive international fame. Dave Attenborough, although a more subdued conservationist turned celebrity, is also well known for his role in filling this void. His documentaries make its audience feel privileged to be given a glimpse into the lives of exotic species, while instilling the upmost respect for the animals involved. Irwin and Attenborough's success as environmentalists turned celebrities can be largely attributed to their perceived credibility by their audiences, a characteristic that is key to the success of their cause.

# Celebrity Environmentalists: Negative Components

Maintaining credibility is essential to the value of a celebrity as an endorser. This may have negative consequence associated with the celebritization of social movements. Celebrities are first and foremost, commodities that rely on the acceptance and the breadth of outreach to their fans. Therefore when a celebrity chooses to associate with a given cause, the risks of alliance are carefully considered by his/her public relations team. David Prindle (1993) argues that these perceived dangers have consequently steered celebrity activists towards supporting issues that appeal to the majority of the population (i.e. homelessness, environmentalism, and

civil rights). Because celebrities are hyper aware of how they are perceived by their fans, they also may be more likely to settle for less extreme policy changes than a grassroots activist would like. Meyer and Gamson (1995) also note the issues that may arise with this tendency towards less polarized politics and warn that "If celebrity participation means that the disadvantaged or unrepresented can only win visibility by limiting their claims to that which can be gained through noncontroversial politics or charity, then our politics and culture become dangerously distant from the concerns of the dispossessed" (p. 202). For this reason, environmental activists must be cautious when a celebrity expresses interest in helping their cause.

Although public attention is typically a reason for wanting celebrity affiliation with a cause, conservationists must also be wary of the power associated with celebrity fame.

Oftentimes a celebrity endorser's association with an issue, eclipses the issue itself. Media coverage of a rally or protest may choose to focus only on the celebrity involved and not the policy change being demanded by activists. Samwick (2004) believes that the idea that has been dubbed 'the politics of distraction' functions by "shifting the public's attention from the essential to the superficial" (as cited in Weiskel, 2005, p. 396). And in this case the "essential" relates to social movements, and the "superficial" relates to the celebrities involved in them. Gitlin (1980) argues that a spokesperson can more easily, and is more likely to overshadow their movement if they have not originally shown allegiance with that particular cause (as cited in Weiskel, 2005).

Also, he argues that even conservationists who have gained fame as a result of their work can end up stealing the limelight away from a cause. Some scholars have taken it a step further and argued that celebrities not only have the potential to overshadow the issues they try to assist, but the issues themselves begin to function like celebrities.

Using climate change as an example, author Keeling (2009) argues that this environmental issue has gained celebrity like status within the media, and as such, has begun to function like one as well. He parallels pressure groups to publicity agents —as they promote the issue at any possible cost, to its fans who fanatically read and absorb the latest news. He is worried that the celebritization of the American political system has allowed the Earth's atmosphere to be viewed simply as another commodity, "... with a price and value being placed on it. This is evidenced in the trading of carbon quotas by companies and governments keen to be perceived to be reducing their carbon emissions" (Keeling, 2009, p. 50). The possibility that conservation issues can become overshadowed by their celebrity endorsers, or as Keeling suggests, become celebrities themselves is definitely a negative consequence of this phenomenon.

Another detrimental side effect resulting from celebrity conservation efforts can be attributed to the untruthful biases that they may attach to their campaigns. Whether or not a celebrity is sincere in their support for a conservation issue, they are typically coached on the best way to present their opinions to the public. The portion of the public who rely on these celebrities for information about conservation issues are therefore only receiving information that, more than likely, has been filtered and censored by various PR teams. The choices that celebrities make oftentimes come from 'individualistic frames' which "...appear as free, reasonable, good and even heroic, but they are the product of particular worldviews and particular industries. They are the result of specific interactions between conservation organizations, consumers, audiences, states and industry" (Brockington, 2009, p. 13). Celebrities are typically applauded for the bravery they exhibit when they stand up for environmental issues, ironically these 'individualistic' viewpoints are carefully planned personas crafted specifically to

appeal to the underlying opinions of the vast majority. Just how much impact do these celebrities actually have on the campaigns they endorse? Very little quantitative research has been done on this topic, however a study completed by Thrall et al. (2008) is particularly relevant and conclusive. The following will detail their study which explores the relative effectiveness of celebrity involvement in progressing the environmental movement.

# Quantitative Evidence: Effectiveness of Celebrity Endorsers

First, Thrall et al. selected two random samples of celebrities: one from a list with a wide variety of celebrities, and one from the 2006 Forbes 100 ranking of the most powerful celebrities in the US. Once these groups were collected, the researchers determined the amount of advocacy engaged in by each individual using four different methods. Their results found that in the first sample 63% of the celebrities were engaged in some kind of advocacy, the average being active in 1.8 issues. The second group of celebrities taken from the Forbes 100 list proved to be much more involved, with 90% of the sample actively advocating an average of 4.16 issues each. Therefore the biggest stars proved to have more of a relationship with advocacy efforts.

Further tests were run in order to calculate the relative effectiveness of this advocacy that the majority of celebrities chose to involve themselves in. Their results found, "...that the conventional wisdom has oversold the powers of the average celebrity to move the news machine and thereby shape policy agendas" (Thrall et al., 2008, p. 369). They found that 'star power', a factor that they calculated for each individual, was not as valuable as other factors that resulted in more news coverage of an issue. However, their test results did find that the environmental groups that work with many famous celebrities will receive more news than those groups who work with less. Perhaps the most revealing finding of their research was when they

examined the tendency for celebrities to appear in *People* magazine as a result of their advocacy efforts. Thrall et al. found that an average of zero percent of celebrities were featured in *People* because of their environmental advocacy efforts. The 'star power' of a celebrity did show a positive correlation with the amount of times they were featured in this magazine however, 'star power' did not influence the magazine to cover their advocacy efforts.

In a similar study evaluating the *New York Times*, Thrall et al. discovered that the number of articles containing the words 'global warming' and 'celebrity' have risen substantially over the years. However they did not find that those articles which mentioned both phrases to precede those only containing the words 'global warming'. The authors suggest the possibility that increased news coverage of an environmental issue will likely cause more celebrity advocacy of that issue, which may explain why both groups experience similar rises and falls in number of article mentions (See Figure 5).

The Rise of the Global Warming Issue

Note: The bold line represents the number of stories containing the term global warming. The

Figure 5: Number of New York Times Global Warming Stories

Note: The bold line represents the number of stories containing the term global warming. The gray line represents the number of stories containing both global warming and celebrity.

(Thrall et al., 2008)

In sum, Thrall et al.'s research on the relative effectiveness of celebrity advocacy on news coverage yielded little relationship. Their results show that there has been an increase in the coverage of celebrity advocates over time (See Figure 6 below), yet the power of these advocates to gain political news coverage for their issues seems to be very limited. The authors conclude, that in the broadest sense that, "...star-powered advocacy is more important for mobilization and building social movement infrastructure than it is for mass agenda setting and persuasion" (Thrall et al., 2008, p. 381).

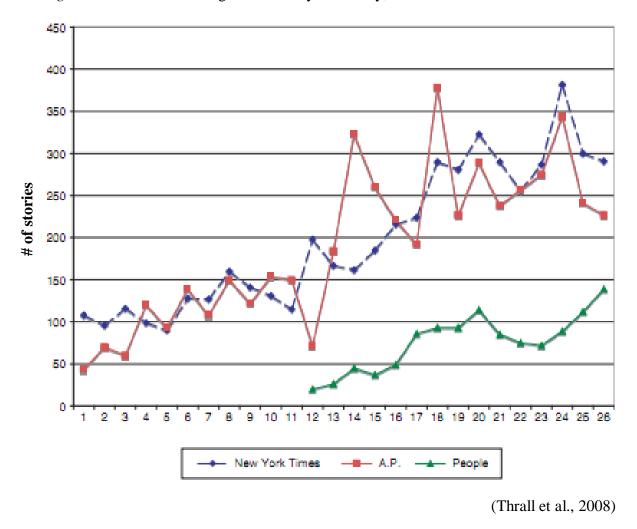


Figure 6: Trends in Coverage of Celebrity Advocacy, 1981-2006

If Thrall et al.'s conclusions are legitimate, then why do so many analysts believe that celebrities are taking control of our political system? Perhaps it is due to the exponentially increasing invasion of celebrities into all forms of media outlets. Despite the reason, celebrities continue to take part in the environmental movement year after year, and whether their contributions are effective or not, their presence doesn't seem like it will fade anytime soon. Scholars who debate whether celebrity involvement in the conservation movement is generally a positive or negative phenomenon are largely split. Now that we have a general understanding of

the research on celebrity environmentalists, I wish to wrap up with my opinions and some conclusions on this phenomenon.

#### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Overall, I feel that society cannot fault celebrities for supporting conservation efforts. Although their endorsements may not be entirely effective, sincere, or even beneficial to their cause; in a country where the public expects to be entertained, celebrities deliver. It is a celebrity's job to remain in the public eye, and endorsing conservation issues is just another way to maintain their fame. It is no secret that environmentalists and the majority of the public have always had a significant amount of disconnect which has proved detrimental to the well-being of both groups. I therefore do not find any problem with celebrities accurately endorsing conservation issues to the masses. The line which separated news and entertainment has long been breached, and as a result, Americans expect both when receiving the majority of their information. So who is to say that coverage of environmental issues should be limited to simply news sources? The goal of all activists is to inform and motivate people to contribute to their cause. Logically it wouldn't make sense to turn away the support of someone who has the possibility to influence so many more people. The more media attention conservation issues receive the more people will become aware, possibly choose to change their lifestyle, or even begin to support the cause.

However, I cannot ignore the negative impacts associated with celebrity environmentalists, and although I do not think we can blame the rich and famous for doing their job, something can be said for the system as a whole. Our capitalist society and its tendency towards a consumer driven economy is largely the reason for these negative outcomes. As previously noted, the primary function of celebrity in our society is for the monetary benefit of others. Celebrities as a part of the environmental movement are participating in what is known as 'market environmentalism'. This view contends that the best way to protect the environment and

America epitomizes one of the largest examples of free market capitalism in the world, some believe that as country we have "...a special obligation to discover effective ways of using the power of market forces to help save the environment" (Gore, 2000, p. 182). Under market environmentalism, nature itself becomes a commodity to be bought and sold, and celebrity endorsers help sell even more. By viewing environmental issues as just another way to make profit, the root of the negative aspects of celebrity conservation can be discovered.

Celebrities who lack genuine concern for their cause are typically motivated by the monetary benefits associated with advocacy. Those who support an issue hoping to gain a larger fan base or to receive monetary compensation are using their power for selfish reasons, and consequently supporting the idea of marketing environmentalism. Another negative aspect I discussed, the tendency for celebrities to simplify conservation issues in order to appeal to the masses, is also market driven. By settling for less extreme policy change they can maintain a larger fan base which of course, widens their marketing possibilities. The risk that celebrity conservationists will create untruthful biases which skew public perception is another negative outcome of this phenomenon which can also be connected to the market. Public relation teams may encourage a celebrity to leave out, or skew certain politicized actions needed to progress a cause in fear of losing supporters; which to reiterate, means possible loss of profit. Finally, the void between the public and natural environment which celebrities attempt to fill can also be tied to market environmentalist sources. The public may feel more connected to nature or to an environmental issue if they buy a 'save the rainforest' t-shirt because they saw a celebrity wearing it in the latest issue of *People* magazine. It is apparent that some of the negative aspects

connected to celebrity conservation cannot be entirely accredited to the individuals themselves, but instead to the systematic underpinnings of the capitalist market.

It is my opinion that the present day environmental movement has resulted largely from the need to fight the degradation created by overconsumption in capitalist countries; countries who continually fail to address the consequences of a market characterized by short term profit and little concern for its long term effects on our natural world. The hope that American's consumerist lifestyles will help rather than hinder the environmental movement is a far stretch, and therefore the idea of free-market environmentalism should be of great concern to all conservationists: celebrities and grassroots alike. The flaws associated with celebrity conservationists have the potential to be somewhat or entirely avoided if they resist the temptation to endorse the market as a solution, rather than the cause of environmental problems (Bakker, 2005). It is my personal hope that this paper has allowed the reader to draw his or her own conclusions about the increasing presence of celebrities within the environmental movement, while also addressing the question posed initially: "... is it more effective to plant celebrities instead of trees?"

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