

# Crowdfunding Biodiversity Conservation

**Crowdfunding is a new addition to the portfolio of conservation finance mechanisms with real potential to create valuable additional resources.**

In a world experiencing massive declines in biodiversity coupled with inadequate government expenditure, raising funds from the public is becoming increasingly important for saving species. One new mechanism of funding to emerge in recent years is

Because crowdfunding has only recently been added to the conservation finance portfolio, most of what we know is anecdotal. The emergence of a novel financial mechanism requires scrutiny so that pitfalls and opportunities can be identified. Consequently, we undertook a global empirical analysis to better understand how crowdfunding is being used for biodiversity conservation.

We found that crowdfunding for biodiversity conservation has now become a global phenomenon. Since 2009 almost 600 crowdfunding campaigns associated with biodiversity conservation have raised around A\$6.5 million, with an average value of A\$11,170. While the campaigns were delivered across 80 countries in all continents, proponents developing each project were based in just 38 countries.

This pattern signals a potential mechanism for resource mobilisation similar to international aid, where funds are transferred from high-income countries to lower-income ones. Importantly, some of the countries with the highest inflow of projects include regions containing high levels of biodiversity (internationally recognised as global conservation priorities) that have relatively low financial capacity. Countries in this category include Indonesia and Costa Rica.

The main proponents of crowdfunding projects include people affiliated with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), universities, or with no affiliation at all (freelancers). Notably, most of the NGOs operate at a subnational level. Activities being funded include research, persuasion (e.g. campaigns for threatened species advocacy or raising awareness) and on-ground actions (e.g. building captive breeding facilities, restoring habitat and pest control).

Most projects focused on species and terrestrial ecosystems, with marine and freshwater ecosystems receiving minor attention. More than 200 crowdfunding initiatives focused explicitly on species, with a disproportionate number of the targets being threatened mammal and bird species. The species with most crowdfunding projects included those typically considered charismatic, such as the black rhinoceros and orangutan. However, other species that are not so popular also received attention, such as the fishing cat.

While crowdfunding holds potential for raising additional resources, a word of caution is needed to manage expectations. The generation of millions of dollars from crowd-sourced



**"From Poacher to Protector" is a crowdfunded initiative for conserving marine turtles through the engagement of local communities on Maio Island, Cape Verde.** Credit: Fundação Maio Biodiversidade

donors may sound significant but it's only a drop in the ocean compared with other financial mechanisms for conservation. For instance, the total amount of funds raised through crowdfunding corresponds to less than 2% of the annual expenditure of the World Bank to support national parks in developing countries.

That said, crowdfunding seems to have found a place within the broader context of conservation finance. Crowdfunding may be expanding the potential role of small NGOs, as well as giving a voice to independent conservationists.

The process of crowdfunding is likely to be democratising conservation by allowing more people to be actively engaged. Crowdfunding could also be considered as an incubator of novel, and perhaps risky, ideas that do not fit the mould of traditional donors. Some of these ideas could be initially funded through crowdfunding, allowing testing that could lead to wider adoption.

Crowdfunding can also unleash funds at times of urgency when funding from traditional donors is unavailable in a timely fashion due to red tape. Last but not least, crowdfunding is a potent form of public outreach, as fundraising campaigns need active engagement with the crowd to be successful.

In summary, crowdfunding is unlikely to replace traditional funding sources, but it is a welcome addition to the conservation finance mix. At times where others funding sources dry up or entry barriers become too high, crowdfunding may make the critical difference in saving species and ecosystems in desperate need.

Eduardo Gallo-Cajiao and Carla Archibald are members of the Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions at the University of Queensland.