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Greening the Media

How media technology contributes to the global ecological crisis.

by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.

Should We Care About Celebrity Environmentalists?

They're effective at greening their celebrity, but not at greening the media.

Published on March 18, 2013 by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D. in [Greening the Media](#)

Celebrity endorsements for products and [politics](#) add up to more than a billion dollars a year. Marketers make these investments based on what social psychologists call “associative learning.” According to this theory, consumers perform a kind of mental “match-up” between a star and any commodity they are pitching. This connection extends to social causes as well, so that a celebrity’s lifestyle transfers symbolically to a [consumer](#) who supports the celebrity’s cause.¹

This link is not as strong when the cause is environmentalism. The reasons are many: minimal media attention to such campaigns, audience skepticism, and credibility that lessens with the contentiousness of the issues discussed.

But a bigger problem weakening this link between environmentalism and celebrity has to do with the illusion of celebrity itself. A celebrity is an actor whose social and (publicized) private life obscures their professional experience to a point where they represent a lifestyle the public wants to emulate. It’s easy to forget that at they are like any other brand, a complex mix of marketing symbols of nation, capitalism, individualism, and personal and collective consumerist aspirations.

Consider the eco-activism of Leonardo DiCaprio, who announced a sabbatical from filmmaking this year in order to “fly around the world doing good for the [environment](#).” As part of this noble venture, DiCaprio helped launch the World Wildlife Fund’s “Hands Off My Pants.” With compelling solipsism, an accompanying press release focused on one country that had incurred DiCaprio’s particular displeasure: “I am joining WWF and others in calling on Thailand’s government to show [leadership](#) on elephant conservation by shutting down its ivory market before the country hosts a meeting of 177 nations on wildlife trade in March 2013.” This was duly noted in the local press.²

Ignoring for the moment how the DiC brand flies “around the world doing good for the environment,” let’s compare his filmmaking record with his activism. Consider *The Beach* (2000), set in Thailand and directed by Danny Boyle, who felt no remorse about overseeing a production in which natural scenery was bulldozed because it did not fit the company’s fantasy of a tropical idyll: sand dunes were relocated, flora rearranged, and a new strip of coconut palms planted.

Boyle made the outrageous claim that he was elevating Thai “environmental consciousness.” Did *The Guardian* newspaper know this when they called him a “champion of the people” and “the ultimate idealist”?³ Did DiCaprio know that the damaged sand dunes of the region collapsed in the next monsoon, their natural defenses against erosion destroyed by Hollywood bulldozers?

Before the film was released—but no doubt having had their consciousness raised—environmental groups sued the studio and local officialdom for contravening the National Parks Act and the

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Environmental Protection Act. It took seven years, but the Thai Supreme Court found in their favor in 2006. We have not found reactions from DiCaprio or Boyle.

Charlize Theron comes to mind as another celebrity who appears not to have looked into the contradictions that underpin her profession. The modestly eponymous Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project aims to diminish HIV/AIDS on the continent. Theron is also the star of the fourth *Mad Max* film. Not yet released, the picture has been criticized because the filmmakers destroyed swathes of the Namibian environment.⁴

Environmental celebrity does not have to be like that. For example, Darryl Hannah travels by train across the US, and was arrested after chaining herself to the gates of the White House in protest at the proposed pipeline delivering oil from Canada. This forms part of a serious engagement with issues that often sees her confront media scorn and state violence.⁵ Such actions produce press coverage and photos in a reflexive way that takes account of one's own complicity, as opposed to a hypocritical Messianic wish fulfillment, fueled by the very actions it purports to change.

So when we look at our favorite stars endorsing a product or cause, perhaps we can halt our "associative learning" just long enough to take account of the environmental impact they are leaving on our Earth.



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