



Meet a Panda

Steve Ertel the Senior Director of Media Relations and External Communications answers questions about his position at WWF and what inspires him about his work in conservation.

Summarize your position as the head of Media & External Affairs



My team acts as WWF's external storytellers. We engage in the public discourse through both traditional and social media channels to educate and mobilize people to take action on

behalf of WWF and our mission. Our role is to engage the public and key influencers to help advance WWF's conservation goals, enhance the access and influence of WWF and our leadership, and increase broad understanding and support for the conservation of nature.

In essence, my job is to try to drive change. From individuals to businesses to governments, we need action at all levels

to meet the ever-increasing threats to our planet head on.

What do you find most challenging and most rewarding about your job?

The biggest challenge we face is breaking through the clutter of information Americans are bombarded with every day. We are competing with thousands of other messages, from celebrity gossip to wars and the economy, to make our case that protecting the environment is intimately linked to everyone's prosperity.

The biggest reward is when we are able to directly affect a big conservation win. For example, just this month we were engaged in a major outreach campaign with Leonardo DiCaprio that resulted in

a chorus of 1.5 million people demanding action to end ivory sales in Thailand. The effort resulted in an announcement from Thailand's Prime Minister that she would do just that. This was a huge win for elephants and reflects the power of people to make a difference. A big part of my job is thinking about pressure. Sometimes we seek to create positive pressure to encourage an individual or group of individuals to take bold action. Depending on the strategy and audience, sometimes negative pressure is a better motivator. In the end, we are seeking to leverage the public to achieve conservation successes and we do that by telling stories that connect and inspire.

What has your role been throughout the Stop Wildlife Crime campaign?

My team has led the media outreach strategy tied to the Stop Wildlife Crime campaign and even we have been amazed by the results. Literally thousands of stories about wildlife crime in hundreds of media outlets like CNN, NBC, the New York Times, and many many more. These stories have helped to educate the public on the issues and recruit and mobilize people on our behalf.

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What are some successes your team has had during this campaign thus far?

The petition to ban the ivory trade in Thailand mentioned above was a huge success and an historic milestone in the history of elephant conservation. That effort culminated with an editorial we helped create and place in the Bangkok Post co-written by our CEO, Carter Roberts, and Leonard DiCaprio on the morning of a significant speech by the Thai Prime Minister.

Our campaign efforts also helped contribute to increased engagement from the US State Department on the issue of illegal wildlife trafficking. We did this by pushing stories and evidence of the militarized scale at which poaching now occurs across Africa. This is creating serious security concerns as militias and insurgencies use profits from elephant poaching to buy arms and sustain conflicts.

What's the coolest thing you have gotten to do at WWF?

Hard to pick just one thing! Throughout my career in conservation, I have had the amazing opportunity to travel to really cool places and see amazing things. One of the more recent trips was to the Arctic to translocate polar bears by helicopter that had wandered into the town of Churchill, Manitoba. These bears spend all summer on dry land and barely feed at all while they wait for the sea ice to return and their seal hunting season to begin. When the ice is delayed by weeks due to climate change, these already starving bears are forced to wander into town to dig through garbage and find whatever food they can.

The bears are captured and “jailed” to buy time until the ice returns and then they are air-lifted by helicopter far north of the town in hopes that they will get out onto the ice to hunt and not return until the following summer. I brought along producers from Good Morning America on this trip to tell the story of these polar bears, the community of Churchill and how climate change is affecting people and wildlife across the Arctic landscape.

I've also had the privilege to help release black-footed ferrets in the Badlands of South Dakota and track Komodo Dragons in Indonesia, among other adventures. I am also a policy geek and so would be remiss if I didn't mention the thrill I get from working on high level policy campaigns, particularly the international negotiations within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which I've worked for nearly 10 years.

The best part about working at a place like WWF is that no matter how tough your day is, you can count on the fact that you did something to help make the world just a little bit better.

