

Nature Photography Supports Conservation

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Introduction

While the natural environment faces many threats, one of the most obvious and destructive is the loss of habitat.

Loss of habitat is the direct result of a growing human population and the economic pressures associated with that growth. With the value of land steadily increasing, so is the pressure for private landowners to cash in and sell their property for commercial development. All of these trends are bad news for the wildlife that makes these undeveloped tracts of land their home.

[Images for Conservation Fund](#) (ICF) is promoting an alternative approach for landowners to consider, an approach that has worked well in other countries – photo tourism. It's no secret that many nature photographers are more than willing to spend money to visit areas that are rich in wildlife, areas that offer excellent opportunity for wildlife photography. By showing landowners how they can preserve their land and have it earn an income at the same time, ICF is providing a valuable service for landowner, nature photographer, and most importantly, wildlife.

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Nature photography has always been about sharing the beauty of plants and wildlife. Now it can help to preserve them as well, while creating exciting new opportunities for photographers, according to the **Images for Conservation Fund** (ICF).

ICF is a nonprofit organization that believes strong economics are vital to the future of nature. The group promotes nature photo tourism as a way to create sustainable conservation incentives for private landowners, and to open private lands to amateur and professional photographers.

Prior to 1900, conservation of wildlife and habitat was not recognized as a problem for humans or our planet. Today, worldwide habitat loss and species extinction are accelerating at an alarming rate.

For the last 100 years, state and federal agencies and a host of non-governmental organizations (NGO's) have supported conservation by purchasing important habitats and enforcing state and federal regulations. However, John F. Martin, founder and chairman of ICF, states that buying land for conservation is not cost-effective, especially in areas that are seeing rapid development and population growth.

“Our objective is to develop a system that will give all wildlife value using the power of nature photography. We want to use the leverage of existing land ownership and management to more efficiently protect larger areas of habitat, thus protecting more wildlife,” he says.

Similar to hunting leases, private landowners can day-lease access to top-quality photographic settings on their property. In turn, significant and sustained income from these nature photography leases encourage landowners to maintain and improve wildlife habitat.

Martin is a retired financial planner, and he takes a free-market business approach to conservation. He believes that the active and willing participation of private landowners is absolutely vital to the future of nature and wildlife.

“70 percent of America and 80 percent of the Western Hemisphere are privately owned,” Martin notes. “The nature photo tourism industry has tremendous potential to aid those landowners who want to keep their land in wildlife habitat yet need to pay their bills and taxes. Our mission is to

Thumbnails are links to larger photos.



educate landowners who want to become involved, develop the demand for private lands nature photography, and organize the industry.”

“The nature photo tourism industry will bring nature and business together in a new and compelling way.” said Martin. “It can unite conservationists, landowners, photographers, tourism operators, and rural communities for the benefit of everyone, especially the wildlife. Right now, we are at the beginning. Once this economic engine is started, it will run itself. It is a truly historic moment in American wildlife conservation.”

“According to U.S. Fish & Wildlife,” Martin says, “there are about 14 million Americans who hunt and who spend a total of \$625 million per year on leasing private lands. U.S. Fish & Wildlife also estimates that there are 26 million Americans who photograph wildlife each year. That’s almost double the market size. And in most cases, nature photography can compliment a landowner’s existing hunting program by utilizing the several months outside of hunting season.”

To promote this concept, ICF is producing the Pro-Tour of Nature Photography, a world-class championship series that teams top nature photographers with major landowners of wildlife habitat.

The first Pro-Tour event was held in April 2006 in the Texas Hill Country. Future Pro-Tour events will feature other biodiverse areas of North America to promote them as choice travel destinations for nature photographers everywhere.

“Texas is the second-most biodiverse state in the nation, and 94 percent of Texas land is privately owned.” says Martin. “It’s an optimal location to begin the Pro-Tour and the nature photo tourism industry.”

The Pro-Tour event brings 20 professional nature photographers from across the U.S., Canada and Europe for a one-month competition. Each photographer is teamed with a private landowner of 500 acres or more, and the teams compete for a share of up to \$200,000 in prize money.

“The Pro-Tour of Nature Photography takes inspiration from the PGA’s Masters Tournament,” Martin said. “The PGA promotes golf to millions of amateurs and professionals, thus generating demand for more golf courses. Likewise, the Pro-Tour is designed to galvanize the market of nature photographers seeking access to private land.”

Local interest for the first Pro-Tour event in 2006 was strong, with 93 Texas Hill Country landowners applying for the 20 spots available. Most importantly, the 20 participating landowners were committed to the industry and intend to open their land for photography leases following the Pro-Tour, thus creating the country’s first major tourism destination for nature photographers.

ICF is currently seeking sponsors for this dynamic event. So far, the Pro-Tour’s business sponsors include: CEMEX, American Electric Power (AEP) of Texas, H-E-B, Frost Bank, the Loring Cook Foundation, the City of Kerrville, the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA), The Richards Group, Nature Photographers Network, the Gallagher Headquarters Ranch, CopyZone, Texas Military Institute, Muñoz Investment Banking Group, Plateau Land & Wildlife Management, Smith Fankhauser Voight & Watson PLLC, and Ellis Koeneke & Ramirez LLP.

Individual sponsors include: Anonymous, John & Audrey Martin, Georgia Mason, Howard & Millicent Mason, Bob & Cindy Petersen, Richard & Josephine Smith, George & Claire Vaughan, and Roger A. Zessin.

For more information, visit www.imagesforconservation.org or call (956) 381-1264.

About the Photos

The photos that accompany this article were taken by Rolf Nussbaumer at Rio Grande Container Game Ranch, which is owned by Harold Jones & Mark Gibbs, as part of the 2002 South Texas Shootout sponsored by the Valley Land Fund. Rolf participated in the ICF 2006 Pro Tour. To learn more about Rolf Nussbaumer and to view more of his photography, visit his website at www.rolfnussbaumer.com. To learn more about Valley Land Fund, visit their website at www.valleylandfund.com.



