

Closing case The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)

In April 2011, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), formerly known as the World Wildlife Fund, celebrated its 50th anniversary. Over those 50 years the WWF has grown from a small group of conservationists committed to saving wildlife to a global network, employing around 5000 people and with around 70 offices across the world.²⁶ Since its foundation the WWF has invested nearly US\$10 billion in more than 13,000 conservation projects in over 150 countries.²⁷ Along the way it has changed its name, adjusted its mission and restructured its operations and, although many of the environmental challenges it faces remain the same, its approach to tackling these has altered radically. As the WWF enters its next half-century, it faces growing competition from other non-governmental agencies with similar agendas, a challenging fundraising environment and uncertainty about the best ways to achieve its mission – all of which raise questions about the way in which its strategy might need to change in the future.

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A brief history of the WWF

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) was established in 1961 by the conservationist Sir Julian Huxley, following a visit he made to East Africa. During his travels he was horrified to find that once thriving areas had become barren. On his return to the UK he wrote a series of articles for Britain's *Observer* newspaper warning that a large number of species would be extinct within 20 years if no changes were made. As a consequence of writing these campaigning articles he was approached by a number of high-profile business people and scientists and together they established the World Wildlife Fund. The initial aim of the new organisation was to conserve the world's fauna, flora and natural resources. The WWF was registered as a foundation under Swiss law, governed by a board of trustees. A network of independent fundraising



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- ◀ offices were established in various countries, for example, the World Wildlife Fund – UK, the World Wildlife Fund – Canada and the central administration office (WWF International) was set up in Switzerland. The organisation adopted the image of a panda as its logo because this image was thought to transcend different languages and cultures.

The organisation grew quickly and had particular success with campaigns focused on 'charismatic' species such as tigers, pandas and whales. Project Tiger in 1973 involved the WWF working with the Indian government to establish nature reserves for endangered Indian tigers, the 'Seas Must Live' project in 1976 set up sanctuaries for dolphins, turtles and whales and Project Rhino in 1979 sought to end rhino poaching. The 1960s was a period when environmental issues started to move from the domain of scientists into the public arena and the WWF's imaginative campaigns captured the mood of the times. During the 1970s public awareness of environmental issues continued to grow but with that awareness came more sophisticated analysis and a greater understanding of the complex links between human economic activity and the environment. The opportunistic and crisis-driven approach that WWF had adopted in its early years was increasingly viewed as outdated and an ineffective way of achieving long-term sustainable development. In 1986 the organisation changed its name from the World Wildlife Fund to the World Wide Fund for Nature²⁸ in order to emphasise that its remit was broader than conservation of particular species and their habitats. It expanded its mission to encompass the preservation of diversity, promotion of sustainability and reduction of wasteful consumption and pollution.²⁹ Although both the international and the national WWF organisations continued to make progress with projects and fundraising during the 1990s problems began to emerge that eventually resulted in the organisation reconsidering its structure and governance arrangements.

Organisational structure and governance

From the outset the WWF was structured as a network of independent national organisations with a central secretariat in Switzerland. The national organisations raised funds and ran regionally focused conservation projects. The central body, WWF International, developed policy, established priorities, coordinated the national organisations and ran international projects and campaigns. WWF International did not have the authority to enforce strategy but relied instead on the cooperation of the national bodies.

As the organisation grew in size so this structure began to creak. There were an increasing number of complaints that decision making within WWF International was slow and that procedures were becoming excessively bureaucratic. An absence of standard project initiation and reporting procedures meant that the right hand sometimes didn't know what the left hand was doing and, as a consequence, the national organisations started to 'go it alone', preferring to make their own resource allocation decisions and undertaking their own conservation projects either unilaterally or in conjunction with a small number of other national WWF organisations. An internal report was alleged to have suggested that within the organisation 'supervision was poor, reporting sporadic, financial accountability non-existent and file maintenance appalling'.³⁰ Although the WWF's central office argued that these claims were overstated, nonetheless, it was recognised that communication between different parts of the organisation as a whole was poor, resulting in low levels of cooperation and an unnecessary duplication of tasks and skills development. In addition the WWF's lack of transparency and accountability alienated donors who wished to know how their money was being spent.

In response to these shortcomings the WWF restructured its operations to achieve a more unified approach. A network executive team (NET) was established with a membership drawn from the national organisations and programme teams as well as from headquarters. The NET was supported by four, newly formed expert groups – Programmes, Global Partnerships, Marketing and Operations, and Network Development – and a system of key performance indicators introduced.

Continuing challenges

Over time there has been a growing recognition within the WWF that, although it has had a good deal of success in terms of its specific projects and campaigns, environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and global poverty are beyond the scope of any one organisation. Whilst they have continued to invest in acquiring land and saving particular habitats, their focus has shifted more towards lobbying, research and educational activities. The organisation has placed greater emphasis on working in partnership with others, including big business. For example in 2007 the WWF announced a US\$20 million tie up with Coca-Cola to conserve water and its US national office was a major beneficiary of donations from Alcoa, the world's largest aluminium producer. These links have produced mixed reactions. Critics complain that the WWF is colluding with big business, allowing corporations to engage in 'green washing', i.e. using 'green' projects and links with organisations like the WWF to create the misleading impression that

- ▶ the company's policies are environmentally friendly even though they continue to pursue activities that are environmentally damaging.³¹ Advocates of the policy argue that it is only by harnessing the resources of big organisations and influencing their attitudes and behaviour that progress on environmental issues will be made.

Fundraising also represents an ongoing challenge, particularly in the light of recent crises in the world economy. In 2010 the operating income of the WWF network was around €525 million with 57% coming from individual supporters, 17% from public-sector finance and 11% from corporations. Although the WWF still constitutes one of the largest independent conservation agencies in the world, there has been a significant growth in the number of non-governmental agencies addressing conservation issues and the fear is that both individual donations and government grants may diminish as a consequence of the continued economic uncertainty.³²

The WWF is proud that it operates at many different levels dealing with specific local projects as well as lobbying national governments and speaking to supra-national agencies like the European Commission and the World Bank and sees itself as well placed to 'see the bigger picture and open doors at every level'.³³

Case questions

- How has the WWF's strategy changed over time? What factors do you think have prompted these changes?
- Identify the International WWF's key stakeholders and map these stakeholders in terms of the power/interest grid outlined in Figure 5.5.
- Using your answer to the previous question, suggest the ways in which WWF might manage its relationships with different stakeholder groups with respect to its growing engagement with big business.
- Identify some of the key trends and uncertainties facing the WWF over the next decade. Use this analysis to generate two possible future scenarios for the organisation.

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