CASE STUDY:

Using social media and storytelling to drive climate action on carbon credit projects

Executive Summary & Key Behavioral Insights

Social media has profoundly impacted our culture, revolutionizing how we communicate, share information, present ourselves, and engage with the world. It helps us reach and mobilize a wider audience for social and environmental causes, like climate activism, and impacts consumer behavior and marketing strategies.

If used effectively, social media and its influencers can help shift people's beliefs and decisions and help us move our culture towards more pro-climate and pro-environmental beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, actions, and, ultimately, systems change. Pairing the power of storytelling and art (using narrative and visual mediums rather than logic and numbers to engage audiences emotionally) with Rare's insights on human behavior can help build a culture of climate solutions.

Rare's Climate Culture program harnesses the power of social media to drive climate action. Through this project, Rare collaborated with five exceptional artists and content creators to test the impact of social media and storytelling to drive engagement and donations to carbon projects.

We co-created compelling short-form videos with Nicola Russell, Scott Sava, Takeyce Walter, Laura White, and Juxtaposition Arts, leveraging their remarkable talent, captivating storytelling, and devoted online followings.

This case study highlights successful strategies and insights for driving consumer engagement with carbon projects on social media through storytelling and art. The findings also apply to nature- and climate-based donation projects marketed through other digital means, e.g., email, YouTube, etc.

The case study also…

- Showcases the effectiveness of using artist influencers and storytelling on social media to drive meaningful climate action.

- Highlights how these 'trusted messengers' can encourage their audiences to update their beliefs and take high-impact climate actions to protect nature through donations.

Click to jump to the
INSIGHTS AND LESSONS

Key Insights: How to leverage social media storytelling to drive climate awareness and action on carbon projects

TIPS TO
Leverage Influencers for Carbon Projects

Seek out an engaging influencer to be the trusted messenger

- Utilize YouTube channels of popular creators to engage audiences.
- Target followers accustomed to receiving offers to buy/donate on their channels

Shape a captivating story

- Make the narrative emotionally appealing
- Maintain the creator's authenticity
- Raise awareness of the impact using accessible language
- Clearly state a call to action e.g. "Donate to conservation."

Streamline the donation experience

- Simplify the donation process by providing a direct clickable link to the donation page.
- Offer donation amount choices to set expectations i.e. $5, $10, $20
- Motivate donations with incentives, such as art pieces or merchandise

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Storytelling in a personal voice enhances the accessibility of carbon projects by making them understandable, engaging, and relatable.

- Tailoring communication to the audience's demographics and utilizing trusted messengers, particularly thoughtful, engaged artists, facilitates effective engagement.
- Co-benefits of carbon credit projects should be communicated through clear, simple messages using layperson terms.

Leveraging artists' influence overcomes challenges like the perceived disconnection of carbon projects from individuals.

- They can normalize donations through endorsements, interactions, and raising awareness and visibility of carbon projects and donations.
- Influencers should include a clear call to action for donations, and material incentives, like art pieces, can boost contributions.

A standalone donation page should be simple, trustworthy, and emotionally appealing by referencing the artist.

- Providing flexible donation amounts eases the process for new adopters.

Background: Incentivizing nature-based conservation carbon credit projects

Americans who think global warming is happening outnumber those who think it is not happening by a ratio of nearly 5 to 1 (72% versus 15%). And 63% of Americans say they feel a personal sense of responsibility to help reduce global warming[1].

Rare's Climate Culture program harnesses our expertise in using the science of human behavior to empower tens of millions of Americans to act against climate change. Collectively, individual actions can reduce emissions significantly while strengthening the constituency demanding climate-positive policies. Rare has identified the highest-impact behaviors Americans can adopt to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, including driving an electric vehicle, investing in home solar energy, eating more veggies, and cutting food waste. Americans understand that they have a personal carbon footprint and that reducing their carbon impact is essential to protecting our planet[2].

However, most consumers are unaware that they can also support high-quality nature-based carbon sequestration projects that protect trees and forests locally in the U.S. or globally. While more and more corporations are developing meaningful sustainability plans and committing to NetZero emissions, e.g., purchasing carbon offsets from the Voluntary Carbon Market that inventories these carbon credit projects, most individual consumers are not familiar with how they can participate. The positive news, however, is that although only two percent of Americans have purchased carbon offsets for their own personal carbon footprint, many individuals (37%) are open to considering it[3].

While Rare has been part of a movement of thought leaders seeking to engage Americans to support high-quality nature-based carbon credit projects, it has been a daunting challenge to educate consumers on the science of how projects remove or reduce carbon and how purchasing carbon offsets incentivize the markets to conserve more forests. This is an incredibly nascent market.

Rare had a working hypothesis based on our research and behavioral science principles. Because the subject matter of carbon credit projects is weighed down with complex science concepts and jargon, we wanted to engage consumers through the medium of trusted creative artists using their voices

1. "Climate Change in the American Mind: Belief & Attitudes, Fall 2023" (Yale Program on Climate Change Communication), released January 11, 2024. Retrieved from https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/climate-change-in-the-american-mind-beliefs-attitudes-fall-2023/
2. "Gen Z, Millennials Stand Out for Climate Change Activism, Social Media Engagement With Issue." (2021, May 26). Pew Research Center. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2021/05/26/gen-z-millennials-stand-out-for-climate-change-activism-social-media-engagement-with-issue/
3. "Rare Climate Index Surveys (2021-2024)." Rare. Retrieved from https://rare.org/climate-culture-index/

and storytelling as well as commissioning original visual art. We refrained from engaging formal social media influencers who often receive remuneration for their social media posts. We found artists who admired their work, and would be open to hearing and learning about high impact carbon projects in the artists' own words and while looking at their art.

Our thesis was that if used effectively, our artist storytellers could educate and shift people's beliefs and decisions to support these nature-based carbon credit projects. We paired the power of storytelling with Rare's insights on how human behavior can help build a culture of climate solutions, and we used authentic narrative and compelling visual images, rather than heavy science and math, to emotionally engage audiences.

Rare's Approach

Rare uses research and behavioral science insights to develop, test, and scale social media strategies to shift social norms around climate solutions among social content creators and, ultimately, with their audiences. Using a behavior-centered design process, Rare:

- Creates campaigns to influence social media consumers on donating to nature, eating less beef, reducing food waste, adopting solar energy, driving electric vehicles, and other high-impact climate practices.

- Collaborates with influencers, online communities, and other partners engaged in climate issues to amplify climate campaigns and messages.

- Shares personal stories and experiences related to climate change to humanize its impact.

- Tests behavioral interventions and campaigns to measure engagement, responses, and overall impact on climate-focused outcome measures.

# Part I: Storytelling Pilot Research and Design

Key Research Questions

We identified the pilot's following objectives in partnership with Rare's Center for Behavior & the Environment:

1. Utilize strategic artist partnerships to test market positioning and convert engagement into sales by designing and implementing storytelling pilots.

2. Stress-test backend functionality and design to ensure optimal performance in converting engagement to sales.

3. Assess the impact of storytelling videos by addressing the following questions:
   a. Who constitutes the donating audience?
   b. Which platform proves most effective for video dissemination?
   c. What are the relevant behavioral levers that drive positive actions?
   d. What insights can be gleaned to enhance future storytelling pilots?

4. Create reusable and valuable visual assets through storytelling pilots for integration into our API, enhancing future campaign strategies.

Design

Rare used behavioral insights to develop a journey for individuals from awareness (of the carbon projects) to action (donating to them), using behavioral science-based principles to design the content prompts and the creators' message delivery.
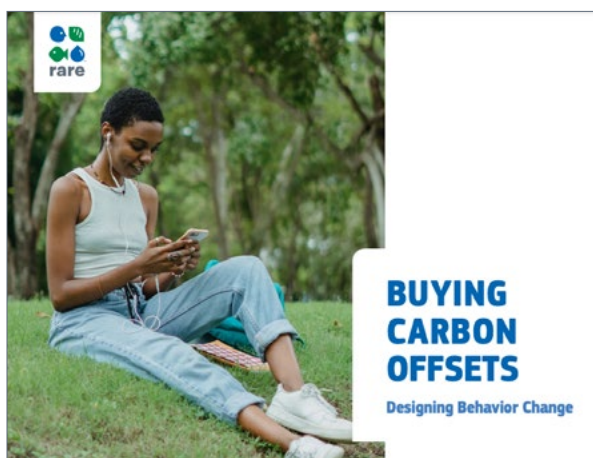
We also leveraged Rare's Journey Book, developed by Rare partner 'Harmonic' in 2021. The book's insights suggested utilizing four key moments on an individual's journey: attention, activation, adoption, and affirmation. We used distinct design elements for each moment. This approach aimed to effectively engage the audience, immerse viewers in the emotional narrative, and motivate behavioral change — specifically, encouraging viewers to donate to carbon offsetting projects.

Four key moments

ATTENTION MOMENT: Video of creating a painting that features our projects
Viewers see a video featuring a painting or other art creation depicting a project that is both beautiful and compelling – a painting being created that brings to life aspects of the project with a voiceover that tells a corresponding story (for example, a painting of the peatlands from our Katingan Peatlands project and a story of the community/biodiversity impacts of the project.) The video comes from a trusted source (an artist viewers follow and Rare).

ACTIVATION MOMENT: Link to donate via the video's source
A call to action (CTA) at the end of the project asks for a donation with a custom link for viewers that comes directly from the artist (also offers a digital version of the painting they viewed as a material incentive to donate). Viewers click on the link and are taken to a custom Payment App that features Rare and the artist, additional project information to emphasize impact, information about Rare/tax deductibility, and a recognizable, easy donation checkout experience.

ADOPTION MOMENT: Donation made via a Payment App
The viewer enters their information and donates to the project. The donation success page emphasizes the donation's impact. It moves them on a journey towards Rare's Climate Culture program more generally (and eventually towards the relevant website's landing pages for more about the projects). The shared email and receipt reinforce this messaging (celebrating impact and offering additional journeys towards high-impact emissions-reducing behaviors).

AFFIRMATION MOMENT: IMG of the painting to share/save
The donor is sent a digital download of the painting that compelled them to donate. They are encouraged to use it as wallpaper or phone background, share via their social networks, and tag the artist and Rare.

How did we measure the pilots' impact?

We used Google Analytics to measure engagement and conversion accurately. We tracked conversion data from the platform(s) to check out pages, integrated user/engagement analytics from social media platforms, performed sentiment analysis of the video comments sections, and tracked donations via our Stripe account.

Take a look at our campaign content here:

Nicola Russell

YouTube · Instagram · TikTok

YouTube · Instagram · TikTok
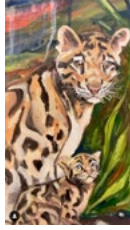
YouTube · Instagram · TikTok

Scott Sava

YouTube · Instagram · TikTok

YouTube · Instagram · TikTok

Takeyce Walter
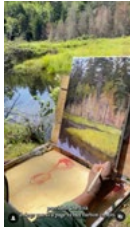
Instagram · TikTok

Laura White

Instagram · TikTok

Juxtaposition Arts

YouTube · Instagram

Part II: What are key insights for designing social media based donation campaigns?

Key Study Findings

Storytelling boosted general awareness of critical projects in Rare's carbon projects portfolio.

These videos have reached over two million views combined (and growing) and hundreds of thousands of likes and comments. The videos have been posted on multiple platforms (primarily TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram), and "bumps" in viewership have been seen depending on algorithms and other factors.

Storytelling can engage audiences beyond our partner's current followers.

Artist Nicola Russell had large followings on both TikTok and YouTube, but the audiences for these videos varied. After two months on the platforms, on average, 63% of TikTok viewers followed Nicola's account, but on YouTube, that number was far lower: 20% on average were followers. The video that has been the most successful across our entire pilot, the Peatlands video on YouTube, has been viewed over 800,000 times and counting, of which 93% of the views are from non-followers. We are still learning what triggers the algorithm to display to non-followers (effective hashtags, comments, background music, etc.).

We made the desired behavior more convenient and accessible to do.

The best conversion rates for pilot videos (click-throughs to the checkout page + donations) ranged from 10-15%. Through comment sentiment analysis of our top performing videos (Nicola Russell's Peatlands video and Scott Sava's Global Collections video), we noted adequate activation of viewers with the topic even if they could not adopt the behavior (donate) due to limited financial ability.

Some parts of our videos *really* worked.

Specially, two moments:

Best Attention Moment: Our best performind video — a 60-second piece by Nicola Russell on the Katingan Peatlands project — demonstrated key best practices. The critical element was the opening "hook" where Nicola confessed,

> *"I didn't know what Peatlands were, and I bet you don't either."*

This statement not only revealed her initial unfamiliarity with the topic but also presumed the same of the audience, effectively engaging them. This hook was direct, educational, and impactful, making viewers eager to learn more, as reflected in their comments.

Example comments include:

Best Activation Moment: Our highest converting video was Scott Sava's debut, "I Painted a Forest Nymph for Earth Day!" It features a brisk voice-over that underscores the general benefits of supporting carbon projects through Rare, with a particular emphasis on reforestation. At the 35-second mark of the one-minute video, Scott highlights a material incentive for about ten seconds, presenting a clear call to action:

> *"The Forest Nymph painting and the ink line art, for those who like to color, are available as gifts to download with any donation on Rare's website."*

Additionally, he displays the ink line art with a "Color me!" caption to reinforce the message.
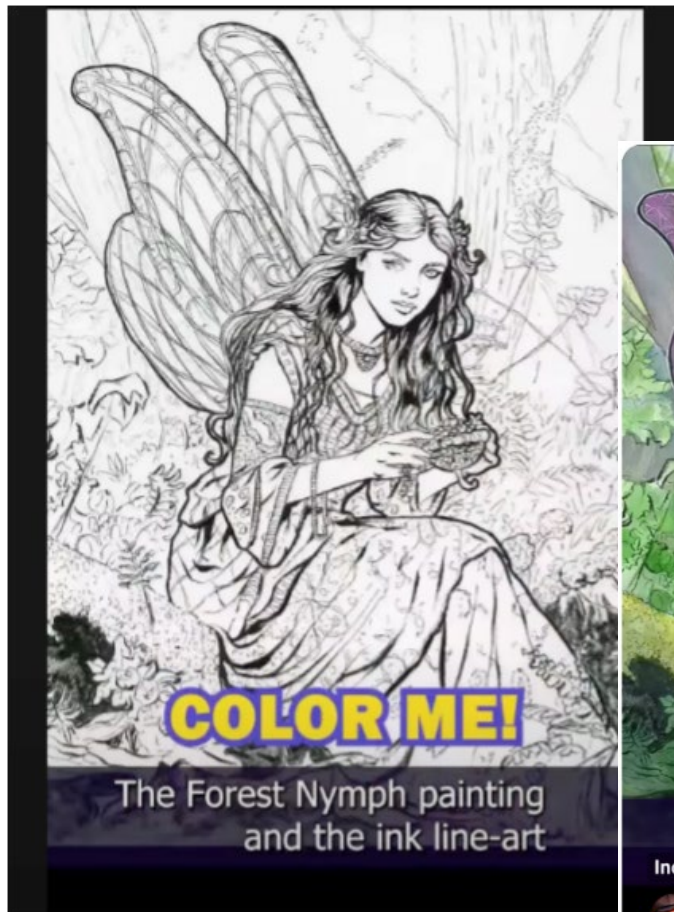
Scott's activation moment was the ease of finding the donation link. His most watched videos were on YouTube, allowing the artist to add the donation link in the video's caption and link and pin it in the comments section. Scott further added the link to his website, frequently trafficked by his following to find his art to purchase or learn about the art tools he is currently using.

> "We put a link on my site for anyone who wants to donate to the fantastic art or an incredible planet."

Scott ends his video with an emotional appeal to his audience, not shaming or guilting them into donating but encouraging people to view this as a positive, affirming action they can take to support the planet with him (as part of his community).

> "I know we can't fix all the bad things in this world, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. And we may not immediately see the good we're putting into this world. But I promise, it will be appreciated tomorrow by those who sit in the shade of the trees we planted...today."

We were able to track more limited insights through the final two moments:
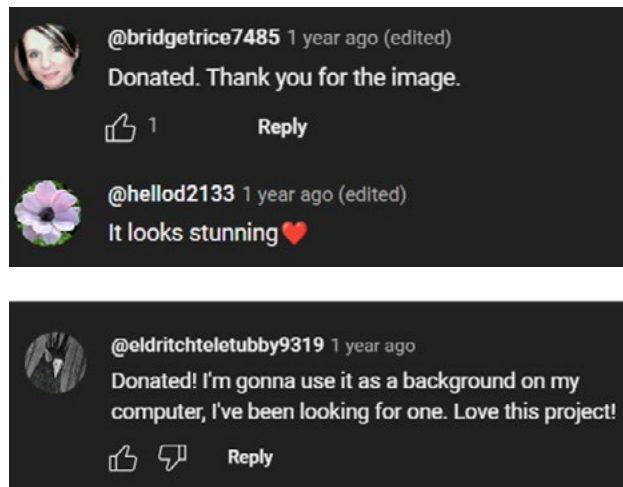
Best Adoption Moment: Besides learning about the carbon project, we saw a 10-15% click-through rate when prompted with a clear call to action and an art incentive.

Best Affirmation Moment: Buyers shared their donations in the comments section and encouraged others to do the same. We also tracked the number of shares within their network to spread awareness. With the shares and a boost from the algorithm, 93% of Nicola's Peatland views on YouTube were from non-followers at the two-month mark.

Insights and Lessons: How to leverage influencer reach to drive donations on social media

Leverage an artists' influence.

One of the key strengths of our pilots was the artists' substantial online reach. At the time of the pilot, Nicola Russell had a following of 886K subscribers on TikTok and 250K on YouTube. At the same time, Scott Sava has an extensive reach of 1.6M subscribers on YouTube, 845K followers on TikTok, and 136K on Instagram (their audiences have since grown). By leveraging their influence, we reached a broader audience beyond Rare's singular capacity, allowing us to expand our impact and raise awareness about donating to protect habitats and nature.

Focus on educational and emotional storytelling.

Incorporating educational information about the carbon projects in the video scripts proved impactful. Explaining concepts such as peatlands and their significance in carbon storage resonated positively with the audience. Emotional appeals using impact on animals, and meaningful quotes evoked a strong response from viewers, creating a deeper connection to the cause and generating positive engagement.

Consider audience demographics.

Content creators with older audiences tend to significantly influence donations more, as they typically have greater financial capacity. While Nicola had higher video views, despite awareness reactions, her younger audience had limited means to donate, as evident in their video comments. On the other hand, Scott's relatively older audience, who were already used to buying art products on his website, exhibited more significant support through donations.

A clear Call-to-Action (CTA) leads to more donations.

A clear and explicit call to action significantly increased donation rates. When Scott employed language such as "support Rare" without explicitly referencing donations, the number of contributions was noticeably lower. However, mentioning "donations on Rare's website" in a separate video resulted in more donations. The bottom line? Make the call to action extremely clear: Do you want people to share? Like? Donate? Just say it!

Highlight rewards for donations.

Clearly stating the rewards for donations, such as an artwork print or a coloring page, led to higher engagement and donation rates. When the reward was not explicitly mentioned, we received fewer donations compared to videos where Scott communicated the reward: "The forest nymph painting and the inkline art for those of you who like to color are available as a gift to you to download with any donation," and by Nicola: "Only donors of $5 receive a digital copy of this painting." By highlighting the reward, offering flexible donation amounts, and creating educational and emotional narratives, we aim to design future video campaigns to inspire people to use their dollars and their personal influence to support important carbon projects worldwide.

Offer flexible donation amount options.

Providing specific donation amount options, in addition to an open donation amount, resulted in higher donation amounts. During Nicola's campaign, the donation page was pre-loaded with a $5 donation option. However, we observed higher donation amounts when Scott's campaign offered specific donation options of $5 and $15, along with an open amount option (with a default of $25).

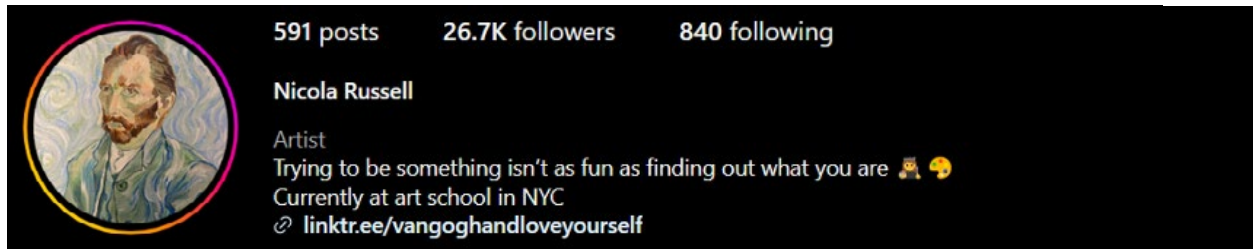### Identify the most suitable platform for your initiative.

In our study, YouTube was the most effective space to clearly, concretely, and unambiguously motivate donations for carbon projects. It's easy to post across platforms (IG or TikTok) but the key demographic might be most willing to donate on one of them!

Part III: Understanding each pilot's impact

Want more details on each of the campaigns? We've included more details in this section. Each storyteller's remarkable talent and captivating storytelling have garnered them devoted followings, composed of genuinely engaged individuals in their art and personal journeys. This deep connection makes each a messenger their audience trusts and to whom they respond and react when updating their beliefs around protecting nature.

Pilot 1: Nicola Russell (aka Vangoghandloveyourself)

We partnered with visual artist and content creator Nicola Russell to create beautiful, engaging paintings and corresponding "making of" videos introducing carbon projects. We chose to highlight the benefits of each singular project featured and include a CTA to donate with an incentive (digital download of painting). We leveraged Nicola's established viewership and popularity online, assessed the engagement, and measured conversion rates in our pilot evaluation.

591 posts   26.7K followers   840 following

Nicola Russell

Artist
Trying to be something isn't as fun as finding out what you are 🧙 🎨
Currently at art school in NYC
🔗 linktr.ee/vangoghandloveyourself

Study details

Our methods for the pilot included the sequential release of videos on multiple platforms (TikTok and YouTube from September 29 through October 7, 2023), as well as co-posting the videos as a collab with Rare on Instagram from October 26 through November 8, 2023.
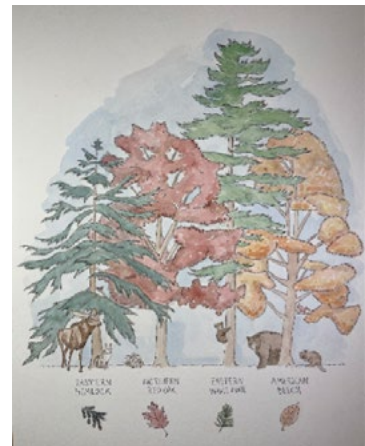
Nicola's Collection

Katingan Peatlands in Indonesia


Kasigau Corridor in Kenya

Hersey Mountain in NH

Engagement Data (combined across YouTube, Instagram and TikTok):

Video #1: Katingan Peatland	Video #2: Kasigau Corridor	#3: Hersey Mountain
• 812,600 views • 96,200 likes • 401 comments • 406 click-throughs (0.2% of views) • 42 donations (10% conversion)	• 29,010 views • 3,756 likes • 47 comments • 48 click-throughs (0.2% of views) • 5 donations (10% conversion)	• 105,200 views • 14,941 likes • 83 comments • 20 click-throughs (0.02% of views) • 3 donations (15% conversion)

Pilot 2: Scott Sava (aka ssavaart)

We partnered with visual artist and content creator Scott Christian Sava to create two beautiful, engaging paintings and corresponding videos introducing carbon projects to his audience. For the first video, we chose to highlight the benefits of overall carbon projects, offer donations to the Global Solutions Collections, and include a CTA to donate with an incentive (digital download of painting). For the second video, Scott traveled to the Lookout Mountain Conservancy (near his home in Tennessee) to visit our first urban forest carbon credit project. This video was released on Earth Day and featured educational moments about the project and conservancy overall, with a CTA to support the project. We leveraged Scott's established viewership and online popularity, assessed the engagement, and measured conversion rates in our pilot evaluation.
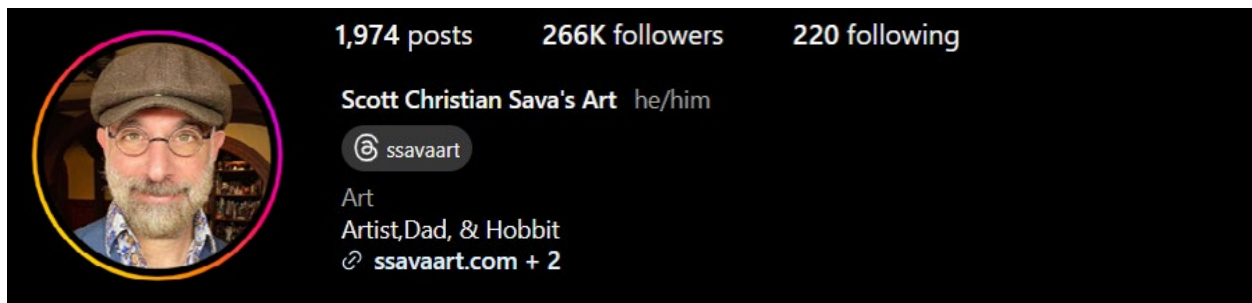
Study details:

Our methods for the pilot included the sequential release of videos on multiple platforms (TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram) on April 14 and April 22, 2023.

Global Solutions Collection

Lookout Mountain Project

Engagement Data (combined across YouTube, Instagram and TikTok):

Video #1: Global Solutions Collection	Video #2: Lookout Mountain
• 404,207 views • 52,490 likes • 514 comments • 1300 click-throughs (.32% of views) • 73 donations • USD 593 • (5.6% conversion)	• 239,194 views • 28,102 likes • 285 comments • 214 click-throughs (.09% of views) • 6 donations • USD 35 • (2.8% conversion)

Pilot 3: Takeyce Walter x Northeast Wilderness Trust (@takeycewalter)

We partnered with fine artist and content creator Takeyce Walter and Northeast Wilderness Trust, a Vermont-based land trust with a carbon project in our portfolio, to create a beautiful piece, painted plein air, at the Eagle Mountain Wildlands project site. We featured footage of Takeyce hiking the property with Northeast Wilderness Trust staff members. We took a more measured, quiet approach to the narrative and voiceover that felt more authentic to the campaign's partners. Takeyce shared many important environmental and scientific facts in the piece and highlighted the importance of the Wild Carbon™ credits that Northeast Wilderness Trust creates with the CTA to donate with an incentive (digital download of painting).

Study details:

Our methods for the pilot included the video's release via the artist's social media accounts on October 1 and further promotion of the campaign by Northeast Wilderness Trust via its newsletter and website in November and December.

Engagement Data (Instagram):

Video #1: Eagle Mountain Wildlands
1,812 views   125 likes   19 comments   1 donation   - USD 25   - Negligible conversion

Eagle Mountain Wildlands

Pilot 4: Laura Jennifer White x Entertainment Lab (@loops.w)

We partnered with animator Laura Jennifer White to develop a short video in collaboration with our Entertainment Lab colleagues at Climate Culture. The animation depicted a day in the life of a Painted Bunting bird in the forest area protected by the South Carolina Old Growth project. It showed the danger these beautiful little birds face, the juxtaposition of the beautiful, protected forest areas in the project, and the harsh realities of logging and precise cutting. During the posting, Laura's online audience was about 80K followers combined on Instagram and TikTok.

Study details:

Our methods for the pilot included the video's release via the artist's social media accounts on November 17 (Instagram and TikTok).

Engagement Data (Instagram and TikTok):

Video #1: South Carolina Old Growth
11,030 views   583 likes   32 comments   0 donations   - USD 0   - Negligible conversion

South Carolina Old Growth Forest

Why this video didn't work as well

Our assessment of why this video didn't work as well (even though the artist had a sizable audience) is that the CTA needed to be more apparent than our higher-performing videos. Without a voiceover, the video relied entirely on written text at the end of the video to share the call to action to donate. Our data shows that most people don't watch to the end of the video (Laura's average watch time was only 7 seconds of a 60-second video), so they were missing the CTA altogether.

Additionally, this artist had more significant followings on both Instagram & TikTok, which presents a more convoluted donation experience where links to donate are embedded into link trees at the artist's

profile. This adds multiple clicks to the donation experience and introduces additional friction that reduces donations significantly. We consistently saw the most donations through YouTube, which allows links to be embedded in a video's caption and pinned to the top comment, providing two direct links to donation opportunities for viewers.

The final reason that may have resulted in fewer donations was that this famous artist did not often leverage her influence to sell things to her audience. Thus, her audience was not used to being asked for money or to do something, which created another barrier to donations.

Pilot 5: Juxtaposition Arts x Green Minneapolis (@jxta_arts)

Juxtaposition Arts is a youth-oriented non-profit visual art center in North Minneapolis, Minnesota, and it is known for community collaborations, studio classes and workshops, public mural programs, and art exhibitions. We partnered with Juxta and Green Minneapolis, a local urban tree planting organization, to create a piece of art that raised awareness for the need for more tree planting in North Minneapolis and to support the carbon credit project that Green Minneapolis runs in North Minneapolis. The piece was a combined effort among the Juxta youth entrepreneurs who learned about tree planting from the Green Minneapolis team and then created a poster and video to share via their social accounts.

North Minneapolis Tree Planting Project

Study details:

Our methods for the pilot included the video's release via the group's social channels on December 8 (Instagram, Facebook, and X).
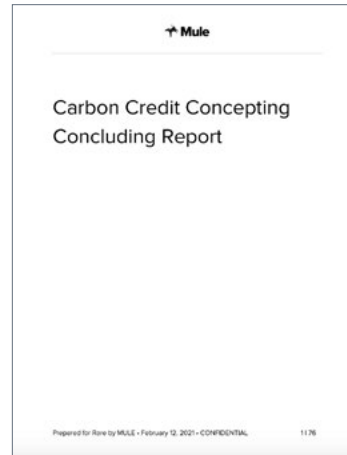
Engagement Data (Instagram and TikTok):

Video #1: North Minneapolis Tree Planting
• 957 views • 32 likes • 0 comments • 3 donations • USD 40 • Negligible conversion

Additional Resources

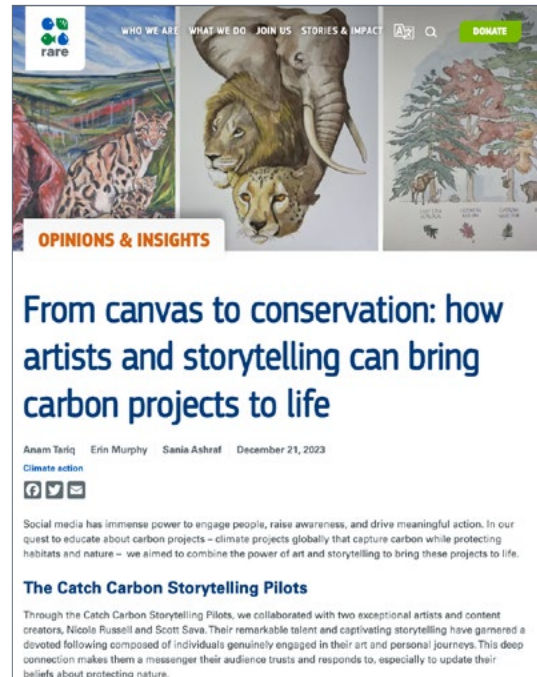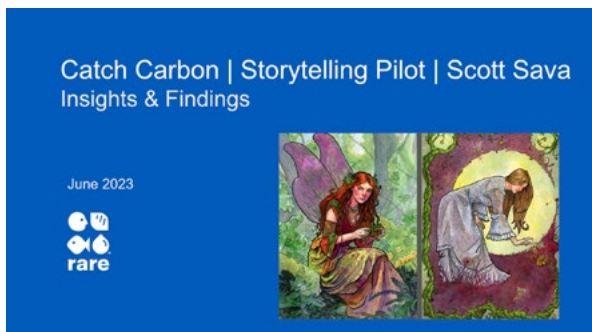
[Harmonic Journey Book](#)

[Mule Design Research](#)

[Nicola Russell Learning Presentation](#)

[Blog post](#)

[Scott Sava Learning Presentation](#)

rare

Rare inspires change so people and nature thrive.

Rare is an international non-profit organization specializing in social change for people and the planet. For over 50 years, Rare has partnered with individuals, communities, and local leaders on the frontlines of conservation to help them adopt more sustainable behaviors and practices. With a behavior-based approach, Rare empowers individuals and communities to manage and protect the nature on which we all depend.

Learn more at rare.org and follow us at @Rare_org.

Charity Navigator

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