

Working With the Media



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The media can help you reach a larger audience in your community and get the attention of your elected officials who read local papers, listen to local radio broadcasts and watch local television to stay informed about the concerns of their constituents. You don't have to be a communications or public relations expert to use the media effectively to call attention to wildlife and conservation issues. Writing letters to the editor and getting local media outlets to broadcast public-service announcements are two easy ways to get publicity for your issue.

Write a Letter to the Editor

Letters to the editor are great advocacy tools. They reach a large audience, including elected officials. They can bring up information not addressed in a news article and illustrate more widespread support for or against an issue. Following are some tips to help ensure success in getting your letter published and a sample outline to guide you as you write your own:

- **Know the newspaper's policy.** Call the newspaper or check its Web site for its requirements for printing letters from readers. Some newspapers have strict word-count limits; others only accept letters from people who live in the community. Many newspapers even have forms on their Web sites for submitting letters.
- **Focus on the message.** As you write, always keep in mind what you want the reader to come away with after reading your letter. Don't make the editor wonder what you're trying to say.
- **Be concise.** Keep your letter brief (150 to 200 words) and limited to one topic. If your letter is too long or complicated, it may be edited or discounted altogether. You can be direct, engaging and even controversial, but never defamatory or obscene—no matter how provoked you are.
- **Type and proof it.** Handwritten letters can be tough to read. Don't chance it—type your letter and proofread it carefully; letters with mistakes may be discarded quickly.
- **Refer to specific articles in the paper.** While some papers print general commentary, your chances of getting printed increase if your letter refers to a specific article. However, don't do a lengthy rehash of the article, simply refer to it briefly. For example, "I strongly disagree with (author's name) narrow view on habitat protection (op-ed title, date)"... "I am deeply saddened to read that Representative Doe is working to gut protections for endangered species (article title, date)"... "I am happy this paper has taken up the charge for protection of endangered species (op-ed title, date) and I hope Senator Doe listens to this message when casting her vote."
- **Be timely.** When responding to an article, submit your letter to the editor as soon as possible. You want the original article to be fresh in the mind of the audience.

"All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." — Edmund Burke

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- **Get personal.** The best letters contain attention-getting information or personal anecdotes. Refer to personal stories to make your point. Use personal examples whenever you can.
- **Include your contact information.** Many newspapers will print a letter only after verifying the identity and address of the author. Provide your full name, address, ZIP code and daytime telephone number so the newspaper can easily contact you to verify your letter or to discuss editorial changes prior to publication.
- **Don't give up.** Most publications are very selective. The smaller the newspaper's circulation, the better your chances of getting your letter printed. Don't keep calling to check on the status of your letter. If your letter isn't selected, don't be discouraged. You can send a revised letter with a different angle at another time. Be aware, too, that many publications have guidelines about repeatedly printing letters from a single individual, so don't expect to have your letters printed on a regular basis.
- **Share your success.** If your letter is published, don't stop there. Send the clip to your elected officials so they see what their constituents are writing and reading about. Don't forget to send a copy to Defenders of Wildlife, too. It's your voice that helps us succeed in our work and we want to hear it.

Place a Public Service Announcement

Public service announcements (PSAs) are an efficient way to spread the word about certain issues. Radio stations and newspapers use PSAs to fill unsold advertising space. These spots educate the public about a certain issue or inform them about an event and often prompt further discussion about your issue.

Defenders of Wildlife has radio and print PSAs available on several issues, and we need your help to get them out there. Visit Defenders' online Action Center at <http://action.defenders.org> to download PSA materials on the ESA and other issues to share with your local stations, newspaper or community newsletter.

To get a PSA picked up, contact your local radio station or newspaper. Ask for the news director or public affairs director, or simply ask for whoever handles PSAs. Tell them:

- **Who you are.** If you're a loyal listener or reader, don't forget to mention that.
- **Why you're calling.** Share why your community needs to hear this important message now. Thank the station or publication for taking the time to talk with you and to consider the PSA. Make sure you provide your contact information. Don't repeatedly follow up, but do send a thank-you note if you hear the PSA played, and do let Defenders know if it is.



Outlining Your Letter

First paragraph

- Refer to recent coverage or the reason for your letter in the first sentence, but don't waste valuable space by restating what the paper reported.
- State your primary message—the one point you want to make with the reader.

Second and optional third paragraph

- Reinforce your message with succinct details appropriate to the newspaper or journal's typical reader. Try to make your point personal—to grab your readers and to help them connect to the issue as passionately as you do.

Closing paragraph

- Restate your message in a succinct, memorable way.

Dear Editor,

As a longtime member of Defenders of Wildlife, I object strongly to Rep. Richard Pombo's push to gut the Endangered Species Act (*Chronicle*, July 5, 2006). I participate in conservation efforts in our community, but also know we need a strong national commitment to protect our wildlife. For more than 30 years, the Endangered Species Act has provided that commitment and has been one of our nation's most successful conservation laws. Only nine out of 1,800 species listed as endangered under the act have been declared extinct.

In California alone the Endangered Species Act has helped save the bald eagle, gray whale, brown pelican and California condor. Unfortunately, under the guise of reform, the U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation sponsored by Pombo that is full of buy-outs and loopholes for developers and could actually lead to more wildlife extinctions. Our congressman, Rep. [insert name], voted for this bill.

The U.S. Senate has the opportunity to ensure that the House of Representatives does not get away with crippling the Endangered Species Act. We must encourage both of our state's senators to continue our national commitment to wildlife conservation by supporting a strong Endangered Species Act that will continue to protect wildlife and its habitat for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Name

Address

Daytime phone number