**An Evening with Chris Palmer**

**CAN COMEDY ENCOURAGE CONSERVATION?**

Environmental Film Festival in the Nation’s Capital

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Introduction—*see separate notes*.

Can comedy encourage conservation? I’ll make the case this evening that in fact it can, and that paradoxically we can use humor to encourage people to take environmental challenges more seriously.

We greenies tend to be too serious. Certainly, there's a lot to be serious about, but zealousness can turn people off. Humor, on the other hand, is one of the most powerful tools available to us. Making viewers laugh is an effective (and fun) way to grab their attention and hopefully hold on to it long enough to get an important message across. Comedy has *so* much potential, and as advocates for our planet, we must learn to harness this potential to do good.

I want to start by showing you a web video from Greenpeace, which attacks Mattel’s use of virgin paper from Indonesian rain forests in its Barbie doll packaging. The video worked beautifully. The company received 500,000 e-mails protesting their packaging. Barbie’s overloaded Facebook page had to be shut down. The result was that Mattel, the largest toy company in the world, announced it would stop using environmentally-damaging packaging.

***Barbie, It’s Over* (2:55)**

[**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3MT71Vy8\_s**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3MT71Vy8_s)

That web video from Greenpeace leads me to the first point I want to make: Environmentalists should use humor more often. When a person laughs, they become more open to new viewpoints. They are paying attention and listening. Humor increases likeability of the message source. It can bring down the natural defenses audiences have around controversial issues, and encourage them to consider a fresh point of view.

My colleague Mike English from Maryland Public Television says that laughter dissolves the ego. And that process affords people precious moments of clarity in which they can see their place in the world.

When we read humorless, serious arguments, we tend to be skeptical and read with our defenses up. But when we are laughing, we relax and become receptive to new ideas.

Here’s another good video, this one about sustainability:

***Follow The Frog* (3:10)**

[**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iIkOi3srLo**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iIkOi3srLo)

That short film on sustainability was produced by the Rainforest Alliance, which is run by my friend Tensie Whelan. When I asked Tensie about the public’s reception to the video, she told me that it has been enormously successful, with over 1.5 million views and having won a number of prestigious awards.

So the Rainforest Alliance is clearly doing something right! In Tensie’s words “Humor opens the door.” Conservation is great, she says, but for many, it can be dull and boring. Humor makes things more interesting, so people are more likely to listen.

Some of you may feel that issues like sustainability and climate change are too serious for jokes. My feeling is that the very severity of these issues requires us to think of innovative techniques to get people’s attention, and humor is one of the best ways to get heard.

***Put audience in pairs for one-on-one discussion, followed by Q&A***

The next four clips raise another point I want to make tonight. When we do use humor, we must use it effectively. Let’s watch these four short clips. In my opinion, each has a shortcoming in terms of effectiveness.

***If Animals Were Allowed to Talk* (4:30)**

[**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUyKNMBOh8I&feature=youtu.be**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUyKNMBOh8I&feature=youtu.be)

*If Animals Were Allowed to Talk* is funny, but lacks any message. The humor has no purpose beyond making us laugh.

***The Wild Boyz* (0:32)**

[**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HQpbGq010c**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HQpbGq010c)

*The Wild Boyz* provoke a snapping turtle and suffer the consequences. This is a good example of how comedy can unfortunately be created by provoking and harassing wild animals, which is clearly unethical.

***Don’t Frack My Mother* (3:15)**

[**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfymhAEe-TM**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfymhAEe-TM)

*Don’t Frack My Mother*, though made with the best of intentions, will only appeal, I believe, to card-carrying environmentalists, despite the many celebrities in it.

***Sky is Falling* (1:00)**

[**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bak50U6HiRk**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bak50U6HiRk)

*Sky is Falling* really isn’t that funny; at least, not to me. It makes an excellent point, but I’m not sure it is effective at getting its message across. It’s too brazen and unsubtle, and too lacking in empathy and goodwill.

So, from my perspective, I think all four of these films lack something.

So that brings me to my second point: when we use humor, we must use it effectively.It should actually be funny and it should make a point. Schools like American University’s School of Communication should consider offering classes in humor as a communication tool.

*I’m calling for the formal integration of comedy into the SOC curriculum.* We need to teach and research the role of humor in crafting effective messages that produce real results. We need to understand why laughing opens a person up to new ideas that they might otherwise reject. We need to learn how to use humor effectively to bring people together and inspire action.

Diane MacEachern, one of the leading communication experts here in DC, suggested to me that we get Second City in Chicago, or the Capital Steps, or Hexagon to collaborate with us, and I think that’s a great idea. All of those organizations have done an excellent job at using humor, irony, and satire to bring political issues to the public spotlight, and I think the conservation world can learn from their lead.

My colleague Professor Caty Borum Chattoo at SOC is using comedy to find new ways to help people around the world to connect with – and take action on – global poverty. She is producing *Stand Up Planet*, a new documentary TV and transmedia project that showcases life in some of the toughest places on Earth through the lens and experiences of stand-up comics.

Having been a stand-up comic myself for five years, I think that’s a great idea. Caty believes that dark jokes can shed deep insight into the tough realities like poverty, and she wants to use the universal power of humor to change the conversation about global poverty.

***Put audience in pairs for one-on-one discussion, followed by Q&A***

Now I’ll show you three clips that, in my opinion, use humor effectively.

***A History of the 5 Cent Bag Tax* (2:00)**

[**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpxEstCqUfY**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpxEstCqUfY)

*A History of the 5 Cent Bag Tax* delivers a conservation message with unexpected slapstick humor. The fictitious Department of the Environment is on a mission to rid the city of its plague of plastic bags.

***Clean Coal* (2:31)**

[**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2h3rmPb4hc**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2h3rmPb4hc)

*Clean Coal* by AU alum Alex Lucas describes a brainstorming session at the fictional Bituminous Marketing Agency for a new campaign to combat growing concerns about the environmental effects of the use of coal as a primary energy source. Both this video and the 5 cent bag tax video won the Eco-Comedy Video Competition in 2011 and 2012 respectively.

***Song of the Spindle* (4:00)**

[**https://vimeo.com/24884553**](https://vimeo.com/24884553)

*Song of the Spindle* reminds us that it is okay to give insight into serious issues through comedy and that humor can be a way of saying something very serious. Communications strategist Peter Stranger says what is really effective is a lightness of touch, a voice that isn't ponderous, a message that doesn't come from a place of self-righteousness. He points out that *Song of the Spindle* may not be laugh-out-loud funny, but its non-preachy, engaging, light, intelligent tone invites us to relate to the message more deeply.

***Put audience in pairs for one-on-one discussion, followed by Q&A***

So far, I’ve made two points: First, environmentalists should use humor more often, and second, we must use humor effectively.

My third and final point it that humor alone may not change behavior. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t use it—it just means we need to use it as part of a broader message. We must combine humor with strong conservation messages. Humor gets people’s attention, increases sharing, and starts conversations. Humorous conservation videos should lead an audience to websites and other resources where they can find substantive articles about the issues and become more involved.

I’ll take questions, and then I’ll finish with two final clips.

***Put audience in pairs for one-on-one discussion, followed by Q&A***

Let me end by showing you two examples of using humor to advance a cause:

*The Daily Show* with John Oliver criticized the Discovery Channel for its fake documentary *Megaladon* which opened Shark Week in August 2013. To me, this is a good example humor being used in a great cause—this time to keep broadcasters honest and ethical. It makes you think about the issue and want to learn more.

[**http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-august-7-2013/sharks--lies--and-videotape**](http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-august-7-2013/sharks--lies--and-videotape) **(3:30)**

And my second example is from Greenpeace. This short film graphically draws attention to the corrupting relationship between lobbyists and legislators:

[**http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=nIfnVM4O3js&desktop\_uri=%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DnIfnVM4O3js**](http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=nIfnVM4O3js&desktop_uri=%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DnIfnVM4O3js) **(3:00)**

My friend Melissa Thompson, Senior Video Producer at Greenpeace, told me that the most gratifying comment she received about that video was when someone wrote, “I hate Greenpeace, but I love this video.” Such can be the power of humor.

So, can comedy encourage conservation? Yes, it can play an important role in getting people’s attention, and when it is part of a larger campaign, it can more deeply engage people in conservation messaging.

Believe it or not, sometimes the best way to instigate and catalyze change is to get someone to laugh. And that’s no joke. In the words of my colleague Caty Borum Chattoo, “Laughter opens our ears and our hearts—and once people are listening, who knows what they might be inspired to do?”

Thank you.

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Now I want to segue right into announcing the winners of this year’s Eco-Comedy Video Competition/

To encourage environmental and wildlife filmmakers to use more humor, six years ago the Center for Environmental Filmmaking, EPA, Mill Reef Productions, Eco-Sense, and the Sierra Club banded together to launch an annual Eco-Comedy Video Competition open to everyone.

Tonight I want to announce the winner and runners up for 2014, but first let’s applaud all those here who submitted a video. Please stand up if you submitted a video? (*Applause*)

We had about 40 submissions from all corners of the globe.

The winner receives a $1,000 prize from the Center for Environmental Filmmaking.

I thank the judges: **Adrienne Bramhall from the Sierra Club**, **Janice Canterbury from EPA**, **Josh Kaplan from AU’s Office of Sustainability**, **Fred Grossberg from Mill Reef Productions,** and **Jamey Warner (my Teaching Assistant)** for serving as the judges. (*All stand and be recognized*).

I especially want to thank **Jamey Warner** for running this year’s competition and doing such an excellent job. *(Stand and be recognized.)*

***Show the finalists and winner:***

In third place: [“Earth Copz”](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbHp61JGHc4&feature=youtu.be) *(Written by Patrick Flynn, Directed by Matthew Lucas and Patrick Flynn, Produced by Matt Sharpe)*

In second place we have a tie: [“Joe Wakes Up”](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TY9XeiqSL7w&feature=youtu.be) *(Written, Directed, and Produced by Nick Brown), and* [“Go Green with Eloise”](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_L_XFcTLvn0&feature=youtu.be) *(Directed by Theo Schear, Produced by Tierra Forte and Steve Schear; and Starring Eloise Mae Simons)*

And our winning video is [“Be a Better Roommate”](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwxmOKTuEP4&feature=youtu.be) *(Directed by Patrick Gilmore, Written and Produced by Paul North)*

***The winner receives a $1,000 prize from the Center for Environmental Filmmaking. Bring winner and runners up on stage for photos.***

On behalf of all the judges, I congratulate the winner and finalists, as well as all those who participated.

*Promote our EFF events tomorrow, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.*

Please give me your business card on the way out if I don’t already know you.

And let me end with wolf credo by Del Goetz:

Respect the elders

Teach the young

Cooperate with the pack

Play when you can

Hunt when you must

Rest in-between

Share your affections

Voice your feelings

Leave your mark

Thank you and goodnight!

EFF Speech on comedy videos March 2014