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Environmentalists Use Cell Phone Ringtones To Make Statement

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Amid the cacophony of cell phone ringtones these days, add these: the clickety-click-click of a rare Central American poison arrow dart frog, the howl of a Mexican gray wolf and the bellows of an Arctic beluga whale.

An environmental group is hoping that the more people hear these sounds from threatened animals, the more they'll wonder where they came from — and question the fate of the animals and birds that make them.

"The point here is education and inspiration," said Michael Robinson, a conservation advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity's office in Pinos Altos.

Like other activist groups, the center is looking to the immediate attention cell phones can bring to its cause. Already, some 24,000 people have downloaded the rare rings for free from the center's Web site at www.biologicaldiversity.org.

Four in five voting-age Americans have cell phones, and that number is expected to keep growing. By 2008, as many as 30 percent of wireless users are likely to forego their land lines and nearly all cell phones will have Internet capabilities, according to a study by the New Politics Institute.

"With the ringtones, this is the tip of the iceberg," said Peter Leyden, director of the institute, which studies the impact of cell phones — what he and others call "mobile media" — on political and social campaigns.

Take for example the efforts of U2 front man Bono. He got thousands of people to sign up for the ONE Campaign, a nonprofit dedicated to fighting global AIDS and poverty, by asking fans to send a text message during the band's concerts.

Amnesty International also uses text messaging to send action notices to members around the world.

Katrin Verclas, executive director of the Nonprofit Technology Network and a coordinator with MobileActive.org, said there's a lot to be learned as campaigns — both political and social — try new ways to connect with people.

"Nonprofits have been using online tools such as Web sites and e-mail to get out a message, but the handwriting is on the wall as far as the possibilities for mobile devices to be added to that mix," she said. "Mobile phones are just another piece of the equation. There is still so much room for experimentation."

Peter Galvin, a co-founder of the Center for Biological Diversity, came up with the idea for the free ringtones of endangered and rare species as a

way to educate people — especially the younger, technologically savvy generation.

"And with young people, it has to be interesting and it has to be cool," he said.

The rings are certainly that. In addition to the wolf and the whale, there are ringtones from several species of frogs from around the world, a few South American birds and North American owls.

The poison arrow dart frog will be added to the list once Galvin gets back from Panama. He spent three days in the jungle, patiently listening for the calls of the tiny frog.

It took similar efforts to capture the sounds of other rare animals.

Some at the center say the howl ringtone might be one of the only recordings of the Mexican gray wolf in the wild. Biologists began releasing wolves on the Arizona-New Mexico border in 1998 to re-establish the species in part of its historic range after it had been hunted to the brink of extinction in the early 1900s.

While the ringtones might be amusing to hear, Robinson said the ringtone is serious business.

"We can get people thinking about something outside their immediate world, a more wilder world," he said.

