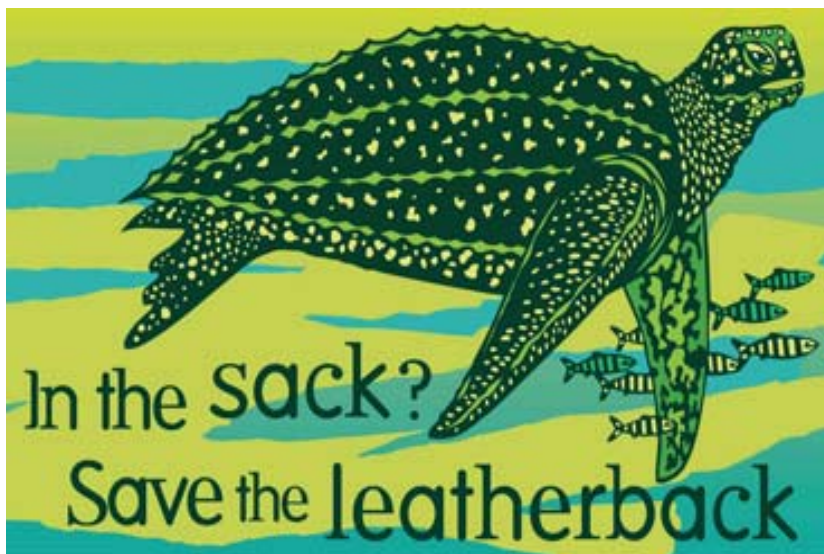


## Condom campaign to save planet



Written by Lisa Neff, Staff writer  
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“This is where the rubber meets the road to rescuing the red fox,” says Wayne Kitchens, who on New Year’s Eve received a smartly packaged Endangered Species Condom from a female admirer.

The 19-year-old university student and Madison resident, having grown up in an age of AIDS, knows the importance of a condom in practicing safer sex.

And he knows the value of a condom in preventing an unwanted pregnancy.

But on Dec. 31, 2012, with the small gift in hand, Kitchens considered for the first time the importance of a condom – and other family planning tools – in safeguarding the environment. “It’s a pretty cool way to have a conversation about climate change and population,” the math major says of the condom distribution effort. “I’m a convert.”

Over the end-of-year holidays, the Center for Biological Diversity’s 7 Billion and Counting Campaign – the name comes from the size of the Earth’s human population – shipped 50,000 arty, eye-catching Endangered Species Condoms to volunteers in all 50 states, including 12 volunteer distributors in Wisconsin. “They are out in the field, with the people leading the distribution efforts,” says Jerry Karnas, CBD’s new population campaign director.

Karnas, a resident of the boom state of Florida and a veteran in its environmental movement, knows that population is “a major driver of the species extinction crisis and a major threat to our country’s ecological heritage.”

“There are more than 3 billion people on the planet under the age of 25,” he says. “The choices this generation make will determine whether the planet, its wildlife and natural resources are burdened with 8 billion or 15 billion people. The difference between these paths can be measured by how many other species are left to roam alongside us.”

In the 1970s, population growth was an integral component of the environmental movement. Agendas changed over the years and, for various reasons, the movement veered away from the focus.

But since at least 2009, the Center for Biological Diversity has worked to bring back a focus on population growth with an approach that celebrates common goals with others in the broader progressive community.

“Some of the past efforts on population resulted in coercion, a lack of respect,” says Karnas. “This campaign is about education, empowerment and freedom. People want access to family planning and they don’t get it. ... We’re trying to call attention to that, and respect diversity, human rights and freedom of choice.”

CBD emphasizes that access to family planning is a universal human right – a health and welfare issue – but also an environmental issue.

So in 2011 and 2012, when the right wing challenged the contraceptive mandate in the Affordable Care Act, CBD stood with women's rights groups, as well as LGBT and other civil rights organizations, in defending the provision.

The center also hailed the recent declaration from the United Nations Population Fund that access to family planning is an essential human right. UNFPA executive director Babatunde Osotimehin said, "Women who use contraception are generally healthier, better educated, more empowered in their households and communities and more economically productive. Women's increased labor-force participation boosts nations' economies."

In the paper, the U.N. fund declared that access to family planning benefits women, their families, their communities and the environment.

Of panthers and family planning From 1800 to 1930, the world's human population went from 1 to 2 billion. By 1975, the population had doubled again. By October 2011, the world's population had surpassed 7 billion. CBD says the population increase is "staggering" and the consumption it drives is "massive," overwhelming the Earth. Species once abundant in North America – the Rocky Mountain grasshopper, the woodland bison, the Culebra parrot of Puerto Rico, for example – are gone forever.

Most biologists seem to agree that the Earth is experiencing a mass extinction – its sixth and the first one that is man-made and tied to unsustainable population growth. Species are disappearing about 1,000 times faster than usual in the planet's history.

In the United States, species threatened with extinction by human overpopulation include the Atlantic bluefin tuna, the loggerhead sea turtle, Lange's metalmark butterfly, the Mississippi gopher frog, the Gulf sturgeon, the San Joaquin kit fox, the polar bear and the Florida panther, which once ranged throughout the southeastern United States and now survives in a tiny area of South Florida. Experts estimate there are 100-120 panthers left, and the animals continue to face human threats. Just last year, motorists struck and killed 26 panthers.

A U.S. report on a proposal to protect 66 coral species cites "the common root or driver" of the threats faced by coral reefs as human population growth. Another report, released by the U.S. Department of the Interior, raises questions about the ability of the Colorado River to meet the needs of a growing population in the western United States.

Synergy of causes Karnas says the Endangered Species Condoms are "a great way to get a conversation started about how the growing human population is affecting the wild world around us, especially animals already teetering on the edge of extinction." Since 2009, CBD has given away 450,000 condoms. For the holiday campaign, the nonprofit received applications from 5,000 people who wanted to volunteer as distributors. Given the interest, CBD may launch distribution efforts for Valentine's Day and Earth Day.

Karnas says the campaign is popular, in part, because "the condoms are cool, beautifully packaged." Another appealing aspect of the campaign is its synergy of causes.

"People understand generally that the more space we take up, the more we consume, the less room there is for wildlife," Karnas says. "But ... there's this untapped reservoir of activism. This gives people the opportunity in a fun, creative way to engage. What we're trying to do is emphasize that access to family planning is a universal human right. But it is not just a social issue, it is an environmental issue."

The distributors are dispensing the condoms at health clinics, bars, nightclubs and house parties, and engaging people in conversations about the link between the overpopulation of the human species and the decimation of other animal species and plants.

"We are not helping ourselves, other species nor the planet Earth by unwanted pregnancies," says Wisconsin volunteer Lisa Lind. She plans to distribute condoms at the bars during NFL playoff games because "it is a great place to have the conversations and no doubt the need for them will be there as well."

Volunteer Rhea Esposito of Green Bay handed out condoms at a New Year's Eve party and gave some to a friend who teaches philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

“In general, it triggered short conversations about population control,” says Esposito, a doctoral student. “Several people made jokes about whether we should all stop reproducing, which I would explain was not the point of the campaign, just that people should reproduce responsibly.”

She adds that some who received the condom gifts hadn't “thought about overpopulation and the influence on the environment and endangered species. Mostly they'd made reproductive decisions based on smaller-scale impacts on their immediate lives. ... I think it was good to highlight the larger-scale effects.” Esposito says, “I became interested in the campaign when I heard about it from a newsletter from the CBD, because I agree with them that human overpopulation is a huge environmental problem that is often overlooked. And I liked the idea of doing something about this to increase awareness of the connection.”

Wisconsin isn't experiencing the population growth of some other states, especially warm-weather states such as Florida, where about 1,000 people move every day and the population doubles every 20 years. But Wisconsin, which in 1972 passed the first endangered species bill in the nation, is home to species in trouble.

Federally threatened or endangered species in the state include the Canada lynx, Kirtland's warbler, piping plover, whooping crane, Eastern massasauga, the winged mapleleaf, Hines emerald dragonfly, Karner blue butterfly and the poweshiek skipperling. Surveys indicate the black tern population in Wisconsin has declined as much as 36 percent in recent years and 78 percent over a 30-year period. Once reported at 79 sites, the bird was found in just seven breeding colonies in 2010.

The upland sandpiper also is in decline, as large blocks of idle and or grazed grasslands are consumed by development.

CBD and its condom distributors – Wisconsin's volunteers are in Madison, Green Bay, South Milwaukee, Sheboygan, Milltown, Redgranite and Sawmill – know protecting these species and others is complicated. But they also know a simple truth – taking care to plan families is taking care of the Earth. Karnas calls it connecting the dots.

He says, “Universal access to birth control, a rapid transition to clean energy, robust land-acquisition programs and much smarter growth policies can combine to forge a future for wildlife and a high quality of life for people. There's no better time to start than in the new year of 2013.”