

Green Wombat

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Calls of the Wild: Endangered Species Ringtones

For all the innovative uses of technology to tackle global warming and other pressing environmental problems (while making a lot of money on the road to ecotopia), there's been relatively few green tech efforts to save endangered species. Such work, of course, usually falls to environmental groups and governments. After all, what's the business model, not to mention the exit strategy, for a startup dedicated to, say, bringing the northern hairy-nosed wombat back from the brink of extinction? So Green Wombat is intrigued to see the Tucson, Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity offering free endangered wildlife ringtone downloads of the croaking of the California red-legged frog, the otherworldly murmurs of the Beluga whale and vocalizing from some 40 other endangered or threatened birds and animals. Sure it's a gimmick, but it's also an ingenious viral marketing tactic to promote awareness of what the Center calls the extinction crisis - more than 16,000 animals and plant species are listed as threatened. Nearly all of us carry a mobile phone and each ring broadcasts a message to everyone in earshot. Safe to say, even the most ardent greenies - not to mention the public at large - have probably never heard the sounds of the creatures they fight to protect. So I downloaded a call of nature, and yesterday when my mobile rang during a Business 2.0 editorial meeting, conversation ceased as my Nokia echoed the "whoo-whoo-whoo-whooooo" hoot of the threatened California spotted owl rather than the opening chords of X's "Los Angeles." "What's *that*?" quizzed editor Josh Quittner, providing the opening for a short soliloquy on the old-growth forest dwelling bird. "The main purpose is to get people interested in the species, raise awareness, and familiarize people with our work to protect endangered species and wild places," Jeff Miller, the Center for Biological Diversity's Bay Area Wildlands Coordinator, told Green Wombat. "There is no fundraising aspect." (Though the Center does collect your name and email address before letting you download a ringtone.) But why not create a business model to leverage mobile technology, Web 2.0 widgets and social networking in the service of wildlife pushed toward oblivion by deforestation, development and climate change. If Green Day gets a cut from ringtones, why not the Bengal tiger? It's disturbing to think that one day somewhere in the wilds of Bolivia, the last blue-throated macaw will expire, leaving only the bird's raspy shriek as the ghost in the machine of millions of mobile phones.