

# How Conservation International Used High Tech Video While Dodging Its Obstacles

By Maureen McCarty

**O**ur oceans are under severe threat. Overfishing and damaging fishing practices are causing the destruction of coastal habitats at an alarming rate. 75% of coral reefs—vital fish spawning grounds and barriers against storms—are in danger of dissolving or dying out. Rivers are filled with dead zones, places in the sea where nothing can live because chemicals promote the growth of harmful plants that suck up oxygen.

Until now, the best way to inspire policymakers, business leaders and everyday citizens to engage and invest in conservation was to take

them on a site visit to experience these worlds for themselves. Because that's costly and complex, our reach had been limited to the very few who can afford to make such a remarkable journey.

But now with the power of virtual reality, we're able to transport people in a way that's much more accessible and cost-effective. We're able to reach people more broadly.

One of **Conservation International's** most successful restoration projects took place in a remote location in Indonesia called Bird's Head Seascape. From the East Coast of the United States it takes four flights, one boat ride and over 40 hours to travel there. The region covers an



Conservation International's immersive 360-degree short film was simultaneously technologically advanced and emotionally engaging. View it at [https://youtu.be/MC\\_ILxVluT4](https://youtu.be/MC_ILxVluT4)

area the size of Great Britain and includes more than 2,500 islands and reefs.

This underwater paradise had been decimated by unregulated commercial fishing, poaching, and damaging practices such as dynamite fishing. By the 1990s, some fisheries were reporting a decline of up to 90% catch-per-unit-effort.

But in 2004, the Bird's Head Seascape Initiative was launched. It quickly became one of the world's most ambitious community-based conservation programs. Together with over 30 partners, CI created a network of 12 marine protected areas covering more than 8 million acres.

And I'm proud to share that the area is still thriving today. Coral is stable or recovering across the seascape. Fish have returned in abundance and local fishers are catching more fish with the same level of effort. And human well-being is up measurably—local people have better access to food and education.

Virtual reality has allowed more people to experience the beauty and importance of these places without the time or cost of travel. What would have otherwise been an area few could see, experience, touch—folks like me who have no desire and time to sit on a plane for 40 hours—can now be reached in seven minutes with Conservation International's virtual reality film, "Valen's Reef."

### Advantages and Consequences of Cutting-Edge Tech

"Valen's Reef" is a film that shares the wonder of the Bird's Head Seascape. Through the eyes of West Papuan fisherman-turned-coral-reef-scientist and conservationist Ronald Mambrasar and his eight-year-old son, Valen, we witness a touching story of what it means for a father to protect his home for the next generation and how successful conservation can be when local communities are empowered to take a leading role. Our protagonist, Ronald, shares

how his people have reclaimed their ancestral waters, creating one of the world's most successful community-based marine conservation projects. His passion, the empathy, the connection you feel, is with his story as a father.

Through this immersive technology we're able to put the viewer directly into Ronald's shoes, to feel the compassion and drive he has to protect the lands and waters for future generations.

But, as a consequence of being on the cutting edge of technology, virtual reality—the tool necessary for the experience—is not commonplace. While VR is becoming more accessible, thanks to companies like Samsung and Google, for the average household, it is still beyond reach, much like Raja Ampat.

### Think of Video Launch in Phases

To overcome this obstacle, CI's Brand Team constructed a three-phase roll out: a teaser phase, a launch date and the campaign phase.

The teaser phase began on June 8—World Oceans Day—with a steady drumbeat toward the film premiere. A sweepstakes was launched offering **Samsung** VR gear, and social media content was sequenced not only to build up excitement for a movie premiere, but also to teach our audience how to use 360-degree and VR technology. Teaser clips, panoramic shots in 360, were launched. We released social media cards with facts about the Bird's Head Seascape, and reminded our audience to "tune in" on June 20.

Phase 2 began on June 20. Conservation International worked with production company **Here Be Dragons** (formerly Vrse) to produce and launch Valen's Reef, which was showcased in the curated selection of virtual reality films at the Cannes Lions YouTube event and launched to millions on the Within app to bring the story directly to you.

During our campaign phase, we reached out to our conservation storytellers—our brand am-

bassadors and influencers, experts in the field and in the technology to get them to try virtual reality, and to promote the conservation movement on social media. Weekly toolkits were sent to help them keep the drum beating for us on digital.

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### **Bring the Digital Into the Real World**

The current age of social media places the highest value on authenticity and insight into lived experiences. Similarly, the conservation movement relies on the touchable, forcing us to continue to prove why conservation matters to the audience. So, how do you bring a cutting edge technology into this context and into the comfort zone of your viewers? Don't stop at digital. We took our story on the road—to events like Cannes Lions, Aspen Big Ideas Festival and the World Conservation Congress.

### **Results and Lessons Learned**

The extensive social media strategy worked, resulting in more than 2.6 million social impressions, over 258,000 engaged users, and nearly one million views on YouTube. “Valen’s Reef” continues to garner praise, achieve widespread

reach, and drive community growth.

However, there are vital lessons in this rollout that proved invaluable during the launch of our second film “Under the Canopy.”

- First, shorten your teaser phase. It is important to provide a sense of anticipation for the film, but don't scoop yourself. Less truly can be more.
- Second, give people a reason to play (and stay). Create exciting opportunities for your audience to play with the characters of the film and engage with your content.
- Third, content is a means, not an end. Your content can do amazing things, but it is only a piece of the larger puzzle. Provide your audience with an opportunity to engage deeper with a clear call to action.

“Valen’s Reef” makes you feel Ronald’s passion for conservation. While we are pleased with our ability to harness the power of social media to bring it to a mass audience, the true success of “Valen’s Reef”—for me—lies with the success of the community-led conservation initiative in the area, and just how successful conservation can be when local people are empowered to take a leading role.

There is much work left to be done. ■

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