

# DOES SOCIAL MEDIA HARM OR HINDER CONSERVATION EFFORTS?

## INTRODUCTION

At present, the world is suffering huge biodiversity loss as habitats are degraded and species face extinction. Much of this loss is attributed to anthropogenic activity as our expanding human population requires increasing space and resources<sup>1</sup>. If we are to successfully coexist with nature, it is important we understand human-nature interactions and further influence them in such a way that this rapid biodiversity loss is addressed. Social media offers a contemporary platform for researchers to extract and share knowledge on conservation issues, improving their own understanding of the topic and raising public awareness. However, social media also has the potential to harm conservation efforts if misused and this must be taken into consideration when assessing its impact on conservation science.



## APPLICATIONS

Over 3 billion people use some form of social media. Social media enhances the potential for communication, allowing anyone with internet access to share information with others across the globe. This increased connectivity benefits conservation science in two ways, firstly by enabling scientists to **gather** huge quantities of data, opening new research avenues that will provide valuable insights for future conservation strategy and secondly, allowing them to effectively **transmit** information to fellow researchers and citizens.

## INFORMATION GATHERING

Posts are comprised of a combination of possible elements (see figure 1): User information 1 (profile, followers etc.), content 2 (photo, text, sound, video), geotag 3 (location –automatic or manually defined by user) and timestamp (timing of post). Analysis of these elements allows:

### 1) WILDLIFE MONITORING

- Tracking spread of invasive species<sup>2</sup>
- Monitoring sightings of rare species and phenological events
- Assessing species population size and distribution

### 2) TRACKING OF ILLEGAL ACTIVITY

- Understand structure/extent of illegal wildlife trade
- Monitor illegal trespassing in protected areas
- Assess impacts of hunting on species populations

### 3) UNDERSTANDING HUMAN-WILDLIFE INTERACTIONS

- Investigate popularity of protected sights and reasons behind this
- Understand public sentiment towards conservation issues
- Examine **who** is visiting, **why** they are visiting and **what** they are doing (in protected areas)

