



Frustrated Scientists Turn To Crowdfunding For Research Money

Scientists get plenty of money from grants, NGOs and corporations, but they need more to properly save the world. Crowdfunding is one step away from standing on the street corner with a sign, "Will work for science". □ TN Editor

Stymied by futile attempts to fund research into the lead poisoning of eagles, a UC Santa Cruz scientist has resorted to asking for contributions online.

"It's a little frustrating to not get traction," said Myra Finkelstein, a wildlife toxicologist. "I do science that can directly be used to help animals."

Finkelstein is hardly alone. Researchers facing a severe shortage of government and foundation funding are increasingly using "crowdfunding" as a way to get their projects off the ground.

It works like this: An idea or research project is posted online, usually

with a catchy video telling a story. Dozens of people then donate money to fund the project. Each project has a deadline for fundraising. So if scientists don't meet their goals, they don't get any of the donated money.

The all-or-nothing technique helps create excitement around the process. The donated money also doesn't go into a black hole — it either funds the project or gets refunded to the donor.

Crowdfunding has been used to raise money for everything from films to wearable technology to paying medical bills. Entrepreneurs commonly use it to fund business ideas. But as funding for science dwindles as government agencies such as the National Institutes of Health and National Science Foundation cut back on research dollars, more scientists are turning to alternative techniques.

Finkelstein hopes to investigate lead poisoning in bald and golden eagles. Although she has a decades-long track record of tackling lead poisoning of birds around the world, she's been turned down by a slew of government and private funding sources.

Dead eagles, Finkelstein said, have shown up across the country, most with detectable lead levels and many with lethal levels of lead in their system, presumably from eating the carcasses of prey shot by hunters with lead bullets.

Her proposed research would determine how often a representative sample of the eagles were exposed to lead — and to what degree. She knows the research would be important for future conservation efforts, but she admits that wildlife toxicology work is notoriously difficult to fund.

“Many funders would rather fund action,” Finkelstein said. “Actionable science” refers to things like cleaning up an oil spill using science versus learning more about why the spill is harmful to the environment.

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