

# The Great Turtle Race

Innovations in journalism revitalize mass communication.



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In April 2007 an unusual race involving 11 leatherback sea turtles was launched to help raise awareness about the plight of the world's largest turtles. With names like Windy, Purple Lightning and Freedom, the coffee table sized reptiles swam 500 miles from Costa Rica to the Galapagos Islands.

Satellite trackers were attached to each turtle so people could view the reptiles' progress on a Web site designed by a team that included Jane Stevens, a veteran science and environmental journalist.

"Fifteen years ago I would have written a 4,000-word magazine article to raise public awareness about the plight of the leatherbacks," said Stevens on a recent visit to classes at the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism at MSU. "Today, by designing a Web site I can reach a new audience and engage people in a very different way."

During the two weeks the race was held more than 600,000 people viewed the site ([greatturtlerace.org](http://greatturtlerace.org)) to check the turtles' progress. Viewers could check out colorful three-sided trading cards that featured details about each of the turtles and visit Leatherback World to learn more about environmental threats facing the species. The site lists reasons why the leatherback turtles have declined to an estimated 43,000 today, which include illegal poaching of turtle eggs, ocean pollution and development projects on beaches where the turtles lay their eggs.

Stevens is one of a new breed of journalists exploring innovative ways to inform the public about environmental issues through the use of online technologies.

"We're not talking about putting newspaper or magazine articles on the Web," said Stevens, who teaches journalism at the University of California at Berkeley. "It's a whole new medium that is participatory, interactive and solutions oriented."



Web sites like [greatturtlerace.org](http://greatturtlerace.org) enable journalists to explain old issues in new ways.

Until recently, the traditional model of journalism involved reporters researching an issue and producing a story that was read or listened to by an audience. "The online world is bringing about the end of the 'we talk, you listen' world of journalism," Stevens said. "People who use online media want to be involved in the story."

This new world has ushered in an era of heightened creativity that is changing the media landscape at a dramatic pace. In recent years such innovations as You Tube, Twitter, Flickr, wikis, social networks, text messaging and citizen journalism experiments have altered the ways information is used and disseminated.

Innovations such as the Great Turtle Race are undoubtedly interesting experiments. But are they really journalism? That's a question some journalists are asking.

I believe they are. These experiments inform, educate and engage the public just as traditional journalism does. They are different and they have limitations—just as newspapers, magazines, television and radio do.

I'm a believer in the Big Tent School of Journalism. Around the world there are many styles of journalism based upon the unique histories and cultures of different countries. And even within the boundaries of a single nation there are different types of journalism

using different types of news media.

Here are a few examples of interesting ways that journalists are telling environmental stories with new media:

- Dan Grossman, a Boston journalist, has created an innovative online site that describes the wildlife of Madagascar by using everything from roaming beetles to Malagasy music. ([wbur.org/special/madagascar/](http://wbur.org/special/madagascar/))
- Dave Poulson, associate director of the Knight Center, and his students have created a wiki, known as the Great Lakes Wiki, to involve citizens in disseminating news and information about the Great Lakes. ([greatlakeswiki.org](http://greatlakeswiki.org))
- Bloggers in California have used Twitter and other text messaging technologies to inform people about threats caused by natural disasters, such as the San Diego fires last fall. (See <http://blog.wired.com/27bstroke6/2007/10/firsthand-repor.html>)

The Knight Center at Michigan State University is engaged in a variety of efforts to explore new ways to tell environmental stories through the use of online and new media. To see some of the online efforts of our students go to [ej.msu.edu/studentreports.php](http://ej.msu.edu/studentreports.php) and [http://greatlakeswiki.org/index.php/Pine\\_River\\_Superfund\\_Site](http://greatlakeswiki.org/index.php/Pine_River_Superfund_Site).

And this summer the Knight Center will launch its first online environmental journalism courses. ([ej.msu.edu/onlinecourse.php](http://ej.msu.edu/onlinecourse.php)). These seven-week long courses are taught by Dave Poulson.

The Internet and new media technologies are transforming environmental journalism. These new media experiments are raising interesting journalistic, economic and ethical questions.

But it's an exciting time that is energizing the world of journalism. And, in the process, it's helping to educate the public about important environmental issues—such as threats to leatherback sea turtles.