

This News Release can be published as-is, or as the basis for a new article. The story will appeal to people and organizations interested in: nature, wildlife conservation, photography, tourism or economic development.

60 top-quality nature and wildlife images by the Pro-Tour photographers are available to accompany the News Release or a new article. All images must include photographer credits. Low-resolution images are now online, and high-resolution images are sent upon request. To browse these images, visit <http://imagesforconservation.org/media.html>

John Martin and several Board and Staff members of our organization are available for interview. Contact us at (956) 381-1264 or icfprotour@aol.com

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Nature Photography Promotes Conservation

Nature photography has always been about sharing the beauty of wildlife and plants, and now it can help conserve them as well, according to the Images for Conservation Fund (ICF).

Images for Conservation Fund is a nonprofit organization that believes that strong economics are needed to ensure the survival of nature and that it is critical to create sustainable conservation incentives for landowners. The nature photo tourism industry may be the answer.

Prior to 1900, conservation of wildlife and habitat was not recognized as a problem for humans or our planet. Today, worldwide habitat loss and species extinction are accelerating at an alarming rate. For the last 100 years, state and federal agencies and a host of non-governmental organizations (NGO's) have supported conservation by purchasing important habitats and enforcing state and federal regulations.

John F. Martin, founder and chairman of ICF, contends that buying land for conservation is not cost-effective, especially in areas that are seeing rapid development and population growth. "Our objective is to develop a system that will give all wildlife value using the power of nature photography. We want to use the leverage of existing land ownership and management to more efficiently protect larger areas of habitat, thus protecting more wildlife," he says.

Similar to hunting leases, private landowners can day-lease access to top-quality photographic settings on their property. Significant income from nature photography will encourage landowners to maintain and improve wildlife habitat.

Martin is a retired financial planner, and he takes a free-market business approach to conservation. He says that the active and willing participation of private landowners is absolutely vital to the future of nature and wildlife.

"Private lands represent 70 percent of America and 80 percent of the Western Hemisphere," Martin notes. "The nature photo tourism industry has tremendous potential to aid those who want to keep their land in habitat yet need to pay their bills. Our mission is to educate landowners who want to become involved and to develop the demand for private lands nature photography."

"The nature photo tourism industry will bring nature and business together in a new and compelling way," said Martin. "This industry will unite conservationists, landowners, photographers, tourism operators, and rural communities for the benefit of everyone, especially the wildlife. Once this economic engine is started, it will run itself. Right now, we are at the beginning. It is a truly historic moment in American wildlife conservation."

"According to U.S. Fish & Wildlife," Martin says, "there are about 14,000,000 Americans who hunt and who spend a total of \$625,000,000 per year on leasing private land. U.S. Fish & Wildlife also estimates that there are 26,000,000 people in America who photograph wildlife each year. That's almost twice the market potential. And in many cases, nature photography can compliment an existing hunting program by using the months outside of hunting season."

The vehicle to promote this concept is the Images for Conservation Fund Pro-Tour of Nature Photography, a world-class championship series that will team top nature photographers with landowners of wildlife habitat.

The first Pro-Tour event will be held in April 2006 in the Texas Hill Country. Future Pro-Tour events will feature the biodiverse areas of North America to promote them as choice travel destinations for nature photographers everywhere.

"Texas is the second-most biodiverse state in the country, and 94 percent of Texas land is privately owned," says Martin. "It's a perfect place for us to begin the Pro-Tour and the nature photo tourism industry."

The 2006 Pro-Tour will bring 20 professional nature photographers from across the U.S., Canada and Europe to the Texas Hill Country for a one-month competition. Each photographer will be teamed with a private landowner of 500 acres or more, and the teams will compete for a share of up to \$200,000 in prize money.

"The Pro-Tour of Nature Photography is modeled after the PGA's Masters Tournament," Martin said. "The PGA promotes its sport to amateurs and professionals, thus generating demand for more golf courses. Likewise, the ICF Pro-Tour is intended to galvanize a market of photographers seeking access to private land."

Local interest has been strong, with 94 Texas Hill Country landowners applying for the 20 spots available. Participating landowners are committed to the industry and intend to open their land for photography following the Pro-Tour.

ICF is seeking sponsors for this dynamic event. Current Pro-Tour sponsors include American Electric Power and the Loring Cook Foundation. Sponsorships and contributions to ICF are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

For more information, visit <http://www.imagesforconservation.org> or call (956) 381-1264.