

George Medley obituary

Controversial Director of WWF-UK whose laser focus on fundraising was much copied and transformed Britain's third sector into a global powerhouse

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George Medley's tenure as director of WWF-UK was a financial success, as the charity's annual income grew from around £800,000 in 1978 to more than £22 million by the end of the Eighties

George Medley's 15-year tenure as director of WWF-UK generated much debate, with his leadership provoking both positive and negative critique, but few doubted that his reforms transformed Britain's third sector into a global powerhouse.

Medley's appointment in 1978 drew a furious response from some of the fund's supporters, because he had previously sold pesticides on the Indian subcontinent and then pharmaceuticals for Glaxo, before it became known as Glaxo SmithKline.

The comedian Spike Milligan wrote to The Times deploring the appointment of someone to an organisation chiefly concerned with preserving endangered animal species who had lately worked for a company that had experimented on animals.

Yet if the likes of Milligan and others did not approve of him, hundreds of other British charities would eventually copy Medley's reforms, which focused on investing heavily in fundraising.

The first thing that the Old Wykehamist did was tear up the widely accepted rule that no charity should spend more than 25 per cent of its turnover on administrative and promotional costs. He then concentrated on building up a database of more than 1.25 million names and addresses and launched a direct mail campaign that would ultimately help to push membership of the fund up towards 100,000 in the UK.

Catalogue sales of merchandise boomed. A slightly risqué advertising slogan proclaimed that "more men commit intestacy [not making a will] than adultery". As a result of the advert more than 100,000 people requested WWF's booklet on will-making, a vital means for such charities to obtain donations through gifts.

Some of the charity's "old guard", who did not share Medley's reforming spirit, were let go and replaced by a 20-strong corporate fundraising department. In all, staff numbers rose from about 65 when he started to more than 200.



Medley with Prince Philip, then Duke of Edinburgh, in 1991. They got on well, as Medley came from a military family and was articulate and direct

Every month, Medley met other heads of charities who shared the same outlook, that charities should be run like business, to be more effective at supporting their cause. In 1980 the grouping was formalised and Medley was a key driver, founding member and chairman

(1982-95) of the Institute of Charity Fundraising Managers (now the Chartered Institute of Fundraising), which today boasts a membership of nearly 5,000 organisations.

Income was further boosted by the Duke of Edinburgh ([obituary April 9, 2021](#)), who stepped up his involvement in WWF by becoming international president in 1981, having been president of WWF-UK from its foundation in 1961 to 1982; he cared deeply about conservation in its wider context and his deployment by the British wing of the charity proved to be a big draw for would-be donors.

WWF-UK's annual income grew from about £800,000 in 1978 to more than £22 million by the end of the Eighties, but some of the fund's supporters voiced misgivings about Medley's plan to win sponsorship from industry in return for use of WWF's panda logo as an imprimatur of their environmental credentials. The initiative was a great success and the panda logo began to appear on tins of dog food, boxes of teabags and tubes of toothpaste in return for handsome payment.

"It is far more satisfactory to go along to the chairman of a company with something of mutual benefit rather than just turning up and asking for a donation," said Medley, who came from a military family, had a patrician manner, was articulate and direct and as such got on well with Prince Philip.

"If a company can demonstrate they are genuinely concerned to improve their environmental performance we will work with them."

He was adamant that the fund had to "put its head above the parapet" a little bit more to attract donors with campaigns, such as its call for a total ban on ivory trading, which had caused a drop in the African elephant population from about 1.2 million to 625,000 by the end of the Eighties.

"We are asking every jeweller in every high street to remove ivory from their shop windows today," Medley told *The Times* in 1989. "We have already received ivory jewellery and trinkets from supporters who say they would be too ashamed to wear them now. No one wants to play any part in what could become an elephant holocaust and unless all nations act now, there will be an enormous surge in poaching and smuggling."

The World Wildlife Fund, as it was originally known, had been created by a group of individuals, including Max Nicholson and Sir Peter Scott (who designed the panda logo) in 1961, to protect certain endangered animal species such as the giant panda, the rhino and elephant. However, it was Medley who advocated for widening the scope of the charity from "saving fluffy animals in tropical countries" to also campaigning for conservation of habitats and ecosystems.

Under Medley, many more of the nation's children were saving their pennies in "panda banks" and the extra funds were used to launch more conservation initiatives. Yet in 1990 a report by the Oxford zoologist Dr John Phillipson, which was commissioned by WWF, alleged that the organisation had mismanaged projects in Cameroon, Tanzania and elsewhere through a lack of local knowledge.

Phillipson claimed that some £600,000 had been spent on a panda-breeding programme in China, which had resulted in failure, with not a single panda being born. In fact the initiative had actually harmed the panda population, because some of the money had ended up being used by the Chinese authorities to build a dam, which led to the flooding of the pandas' breeding grounds.

Worse was to come when an investigation by the journalist Roger Cook on the TV programme *The Cook Report* alleged that while WWF had publicly called for a total ban on

ivory trading it was privately lobbying for a partial one, citing a letter from Prince Philip that said a total ban was a “knee-jerk reaction from the Greens”.

Some of WWF’s corporate sponsorships started to come under fierce scrutiny, with critics deploring the use of the logo on Natrell, a deodorant made by Gillette that had been tested on animals. It also emerged that WWF had invested in Mitsubishi, even though in public the fund was campaigning against the Japanese company’s involvement in depleting tropical rainforests.

Membership of WWF dropped by 14,000 as a result of the bad publicity and celebrity members such as Bill Oddie, John Craven and Derek Nimmo voiced their frustration. As the charity’s income dropped by £3 million between 1989 and 1992, WWF-UK was, in the words of Prince Philip, “in a pickle”. Ten per cent of staff were made redundant. Medley took early retirement after being presented with a cake in the shape of a panda, which had been cooked by the actress and WWF supporter Jane Asher.



Medley, centre, in 1975, while managing director for Glaxo India. Workers went on strike after his suggestion that staff be gifted a saucepan (rather than money) to mark an anniversary

George Medley was born in 1930 in Aldershot, Hampshire, where his father, Edgar, was stationed as an officer in the Royal Artillery, before going on to become a brigadier. His mother was Norah (née Templer). Medley was educated at Winchester College and would have followed his father into the army, but for a diagnosis of a disease of the mastoid bone.

He studied horticulture at Wye College in Kent, which was part of the University of London. Here he got to know Vera Brand while both performed in a summer production of *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, in which he played Max de Winter and she played the housekeeper Mrs Danvers. They married in 1952. His wife died in 2021. He is survived by their daughter

Alexandra, a former music teacher and head gardener, and son Patrick, a former management consultant with IBM.

When he and Vera were newly married, Medley tried fruit farming on a piece of land gifted to him by his parents in Felton, Somerset, but struggled to make it work as a viable source of income. Four years later the couple emigrated to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to work for the general export company Harrisons & Crosfield. He took with him a linen jacket (which he never wore), a Globetrotter suitcase (which he swore by) and sold pesticides to the tea plantations and rubber plantations in the country.

He went on to become the overseas sales director of the British pharmaceuticals and chemicals company Fisons, setting up agricultural product units all over the world. Fisons sent him to the London Business School to do an MBA, where Medley became an adherent of the management by objectives creed. Frustrated by the company's failure to offer him a seat on the board, he joined Glaxo India in 1972, where he became managing director of its India division and proceeded to "shake up" its management. He came to be known as "Saucepan Medley", after his suggestion that staff be gifted a saucepan (rather than money) to mark an anniversary led to them going on strike. He was pleased to be headhunted to become director of WWF-UK in 1978.

In retirement in Tisbury, Wiltshire, Medley became chairman of the parish council and pursued his lifelong interest in gardening. He and his wife perfected the production of jellies and preserves, which won prizes at the Tisbury Horticultural Show, and the couple started a labelling business.

Just to show there were no hard feelings, he continued to rattle tins for WWF, a fundraiser to the end.

George Medley OBE, former director of WWF-UK, was born on August 2, 1930. He died on December 7, 2023, aged 93