



“Trust us to provide relevant updates rather than imposing a rigid, structured reporting process.”

A Conversation with Rhett Butler of [Mongabay](#)

Ashley Hopkinson
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Ashley Hopkinson: Can introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about yourself and about the work you do?

Rhett Butler: My name is Rhett Butler, and I run an organization called Mongabay, a nonprofit media outlet that covers issues at the intersection of people and nature. What makes our organization distinctive is our focus on international environmental issues, things like conservation, ecosystems, and indigenous communities, as well as our multilingual reporting and network of local journalists.

Ashley Hopkinson: Was there a specific reason you chose to approach it that way? Did you envision a bureau-style setup with news coming out of Latin America? What drove your decision to make it so far-reaching?

Rhett Butler: Yes. Our initial focus was on the tropics because they have the highest biodiversity but also face the greatest threats. At the same time, these regions receive the least media coverage. If I wanted to add value at an issue level, it made sense to focus on places where we could have the most impact. While reporting in Europe or the United States is important, the potential for impact isn't as high. The people best suited to tell these stories are local journalists, yet they often have the fewest opportunities. It all aligned—providing local journalists with paid opportunities to report on the issues that affect them most just made sense.

Ashley Hopkinson: In your experience, do you have an example that illustrates the impact of your work? What has been a key indicator for you that your approach is making a difference?

Rhett Butler: Right next to Guyana is Suriname. Either in late 2023 or last year, there was a plan to bring in a large group of Mennonite families to clear about half a million hectares—over a million acres—of primary forest for large-scale industrial agriculture, including land that belonged to Indigenous communities. We brought that issue to global attention, which put significant pressure on the Surinamese government to disclose what was happening. Eventually, a court ruled that Indigenous people had rights to that land, and the project was canceled. It was a great example of how our journalism contributed to real-world impact.

Ashley Hopkinson: I believe we learn just as much from what doesn't work as we do from what does. In the process of building this organization, was there something you tried that didn't go as planned? What did you learn from that experience?

Rhett Butler: When I started the nonprofit for Global English, we began with a prize concept where we would award a journalist a \$15,000 prize to do reporting. That did not work well. We found that when journalists won a prize before they did the reporting, they had very little incentive to actually follow through. In some cases, they would win the money and then go dark. We completely scrapped that model and switched to a distributed approach, engaging journalists on a per-story or per-project basis. This also made it easier to work with a greater variety of journalists, and for those who did well, we invested more in them. It was also more inclusive because, by involving more people, we created more opportunities.

Ashley Hopkinson: Have you come across a funding model that you feel effectively supports quality environmental journalism? Is there a particular approach that stands out as especially effective?

Rhett Butler: Yes. We have two primary channels for support: grants from foundations and donations from individuals. Last year, I was doing a health equity fellowship funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), which does a lot of work in the health equity space. One thing I appreciated about them was the flexibility—they allowed funds to be used for things like paying videographers or photographers or even hosting community events in a newsroom's city. That kind of flexibility is really valuable.

When I started Mongabay as a for-profit, I operated under the assumption that we could secure project-specific grants—restricted funding—as a way to get our foot in the door. I thought that as we built trust with funders, they would eventually transition to providing unrestricted funding. That turned out to be completely wrong. Most funders are not willing to give unrestricted or flexible funding. Even funders who publicly claim to be moving toward a trust-based philanthropy model often don't follow through in practice.

with our grants. When we do find a funder that provides unrestricted or general operating support, it's incredibly valuable—but it's also extremely rare in our experience.

Beyond just general operating support, another challenge is funders who are too prescriptive in the types of reports they require from us. Ideally, they would trust us to provide relevant updates rather than imposing a rigid, structured reporting process. Right now, we're producing 150 to 200 grant reports a year, which requires a huge amount of staff time and resources. We appreciate funders who don't burden us with an overly complex grant reporting process.

Ashley Hopkinson: What advice would you give to someone looking to do similar work? Are there any key lessons or insights you've picked up along the way that would be valuable to share? Particularly when it comes to working with a global network of journalists and launching a media site to get important information out there.

Rhett Butler: Think about who your audience is. I think a lot of people don't pay enough attention to that. Everything has to flow from the audience because it shapes your approach—what kind of impact you're trying to have, and things of that nature. That's a high-level takeaway. In terms of media, it's important to understand the gap you're filling in the ecosystem. Understanding the media ecosystem and where you fit in is crucial because it's constantly evolving. Finally, knowing how you're going to measure your impact is key.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are the key factors that would help you scale, sustain, or expand your work? On the structural side—when it comes to having a team of journalists—have you found that having reporters based in different locations makes a difference?

Rhett Butler: Funding. We have a whole list of places and areas we'd like to expand into, but funding is the only real limitation. And yes, we couldn't do what we do if we relied solely on parachute journalism. Having a network of local journalists is absolutely critical to our work. We do have reporters in the U.S. and Europe covering these stories, but they intersect a lot with local journalists. Often, their role is to take those local stories and build them into a bigger-picture narrative, identifying trends across different regions. That distributed model is fundamental to how we operate—and one of the things that makes us distinct.

Ashley Hopkinson: If you had to give advice to funders looking to support more social ventures successfully, what would you say? Since funding is at the top of your list of needs, if you were speaking directly to big funders, what advice would

you give them to ensure their support actually helps ventures like yours succeed?

Rhett Butler: Unrestricted funding would be the top priority—probably 9 out of the 10 things I'd recommend. Beyond that, there are broader recommendations that may not apply directly to us but could be valuable for other organizations. Many small organizations need support with back-office functions, leadership development, or mentorship. Mentorship, in particular, can be important because when you're starting an organization, there aren't always clear role models to follow. My approach has been to figure things out on my own—that's just how I am—but for many people, having mentorship or leadership development would be really helpful. For some organizations, investment in technology or better systems could also make a big difference.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think has helped you stay operational and continue growing? To be frank, what are the key factors that have kept you solvent and moving forward? Are there specific things you've tapped into that have been essential in sustaining and expanding your work?

Rhett Butler: One key thing is being scrappy—making do with what I have and making the best of whatever circumstances I'm in. Another is persistence. Being flexible and iterative has also been crucial; I've had to evolve Mongabay multiple times, adjust our models, and learn from small mistakes before they become big ones. Something else that's really important is recognizing when success is due to circumstances or good fortune rather than talent or insight. If you attribute success solely to being good at something, you might overlook the real reasons things worked out.

Being strategic about where you invest your time and energy is critical—focusing on areas where you can have the most impact. In Mongabay's case, that means prioritizing the places where our work can make a real difference. Beyond that, I operate on the principle that people generally have goodwill, so I try to build things on a foundation of trust. If you do that, people are more likely to reciprocate. Listening more than talking is also important, as is fostering open communication in an organization.

Another big one is limiting assumptions, especially about people—assumptions can put you on the wrong foot from the start. I also avoid micromanagement. I give people a lot of autonomy, set them up for success, and if they want advice, they can ask for it. I don't like receiving unsolicited advice, so I don't offer it unsolicited either. And finally, one of the biggest things is finding people who are passionate about their work and giving them a reason to stay passionate about it.

Ashley Hopkinson: One thing you said that stood out to me was about trust. How has trust played a role in your work? How important is trust in those relationships, and what do you think has been its value in the work you do?

Rhett Butler: I start with a default of trust until there's a reason to reassess. The challenge we've faced is that some partners haven't ultimately been trustworthy, so it's important to recognize when to draw a line—there are limits to trust. Within the organization, the default is to trust people to do what they need to do and give them a lot of flexibility. If they get off track, then it's about having a conversation rather than micromanaging. Overall, trust is essential because it's much easier to operate from a foundation of trust than from a foundation of distrust. If you assume you can't trust people, it makes everything much harder.

I always say, *never trust a funder until the money's in the bank*—something I've learned from experience. I like to believe that a funder will follow through on a grant, but until the money actually arrives, I can't assume it's going to happen. Too many funders back out, delay payments, or change terms at the last minute. I realize that might contradict some of my own principles about trust, but it's really about experience and risk management.

Ashley Hopkinson: The work you do centers communities, but what bold shifts are needed to better amplify the voices of those most affected?

Rhett Butler: Yes. In journalism, there's a long-standing issue often called parachute journalism—or, in some cases, extractive journalism—where a reporter, usually from the U.S. or a major city, comes in for a few days, covers a story, and then leaves. The problem is that they have the luxury of leaving, while the local sources they rely on don't have that same option. The reporting that comes out of these situations can have serious consequences for the community, sometimes even putting people's lives at risk. Journalism as a whole needs to do a better job of considering not just the safety of journalists and contributors but also the safety of sources. At Mongabay, we're very aware of this and have protocols in place to try to address it. We're not perfect, but we're making an effort—which, I think, is more than what's standard in the industry.

Ashley Hopkinson: Well, thank you. I appreciate your time

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist and editor based in New Orleans, Louisiana. She has reported and led coverage on education, immigration, health, social justice and the arts for 15 years in U.S. newsrooms. She's worked for The Associated Press Bureau and the USA

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** This interview has been edited and condensed.*