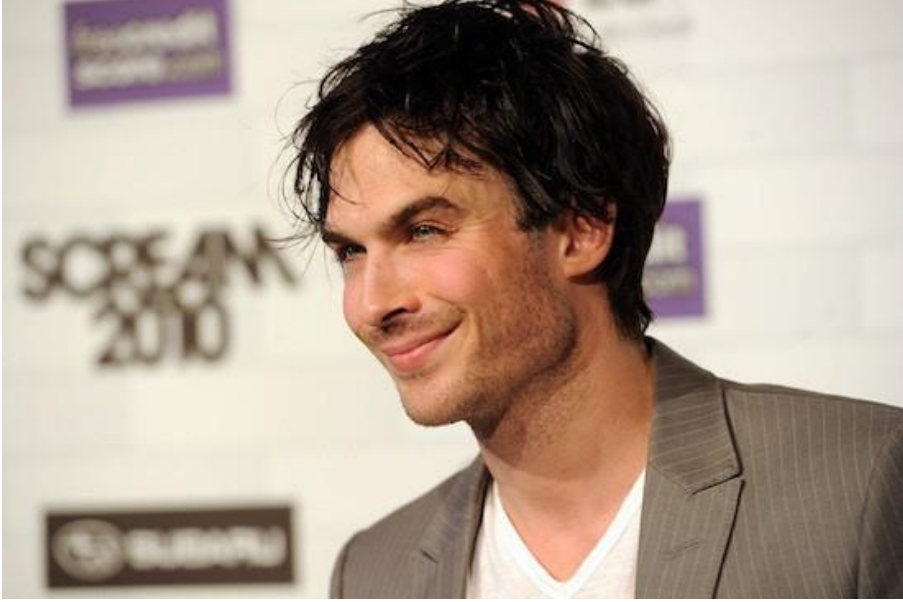


The Ian Somerhalder Foundation: 'Vampire Diaries' star seeks to inspire and empower 'Generation Extinction'

BY CARINA MACKENZIE (HTTP://ZAP2IT.COM/AUTHOR/CARINA-MACKENZIE/) AT 12:11 AM ON NOV 30, 2010



The first time I spoke with **“The Vampire Diaries”** (<http://tvlistings.zap2it.com/tv/the-vampire-diaries/EP01158752>) star **Ian Somerhalder** (<http://people.zap2it.com/p/ian-somerhalder/173409>), he was still reeling from the shock of B.P.’s oil rig, the Deepwater Horizon, exploding off the coast of his Louisiana home. At the time, he was somewhat reluctant to use his celebrity as a platform for a cause. “I never wanted to be one of those actors with a political agenda,” he told me.

The Ian Somerhalder Foundation (<http://www.isfoundation.com/>). The Foundation, which has applied for official 501(c)(3) status from the IRS, seeks to educate youth on a global level to put the power of change in the hands of the young generation. “There’s Generation X. There’s Generation Y. This generation is Generation Extinction,” Somerhalder tells me, calling from his home in Atlanta as he feeds his beloved cats. “This generation holds that in their hands – the responsibility of it, and the power to change it. They have the ability to make the changes for themselves and for their environment. It’s pretty badass, if you think about how much they can do.” The IS Foundation’s main focus, as Somerhalder explains, is habitat – meaning preserving and restoring the flora and fauna essential to the planet’s biodiversity.

“We’re getting involved with what Conservation International is doing,” says Somerhalder. “They were really the inspiration of this whole thing. Without biodiversity everything falls apart, and we’re destroying it. By preserving it and helping to recreate it, and helping stop deforestation and start reforestation, this is what I mean by habitat.” Conservation International focuses not only on protecting forests, but on developing ecotourism to what Somerhalder calls “hotspots” like rainforests and the Galapagos Islands. They’re encouraging tourists to travel responsibly, help protect the wildlife they are visiting and contribute to the communities and ecosystems instead of detracting from them. “It’s a collaborative spirit. This is about educating and empowering people globally, especially the youth, to start acting now and understand that their environment and they have to start learning how to protect it. Education is going to be our greatest tool,” Somerhalder says. “Kids are fed up with the way the environment is being treated by people in power. We just have to give them the education and the tools to do something about it, and they will.” He plans to work in collaboration with both Conservation International and Pew Charitable Trusts to encourage kids. “We’re going to be able to put together contests and really cool educational trips for schools, whether it’s underprivileged or even over-privileged kids, rural or urban areas,” he explains. “I’m so stoked about this.” Somerhalder is a veritable font of information when it comes to his cause. It’s clear that his passion for the environment isn’t about self-promotion. “With the loss of all the rainforest habitat, all the deforestation, we lose about one essential drug per year. Did you know that there’s a pit viper in Brazil whose venom cures Type 2 Diabetes?” he says excitedly. “It can be extracted in the most insanely humane way, and it literally cures the disease. You don’t even have to kill the pit viper. You don’t even have to hurt it. But its habitat is being destroyed, and we’re going to lose that resource. The rain forest is destroyed at 80,000 acres per day. It’s unbelievably difficult to stop that.” Creating ecotourism builds the financial stability of poverty-stricken areas around these wildlife hotspots, which decreases their need for deforestation to stimulate the economy. Somerhalder has always been passionate about domestic animals and **recently hosted a benefit dinner** (<http://blog.zap2it.com/frominsidethebox/2010/09/vampire-diaries-ian-somerhalder-on-romance-bromance-and-changing-the-world.html>) for his hometown humane society. The Foundation, however, gives Somerhalder an even broader reach for his cause. It will help to fund the continued research of species-specific oral sterilization drugs for domestic animals which will decrease the need for expensive and painful spay and neuter surgeries. “We can not adopt our way out of the problem,” says Somerhalder, whose cats are rescues. “Why can’t we create more stringent spay and neuter laws and why can’t we finish research on species-specific oral sterilization drugs? If they can make them, we can give them to communities all over the world and mobilize groups of people that will go out and basically administer these drugs to stray animals all over the world, whether it’s in Rio de Janeiro or Romania or Dayton, Ohio, and distribute these drugs. It’s not going to hurt the animals, but it’ll be affordable prevention for them to procreate. Maybe in 10 to 20 years we won’t have to be so conservative.” He makes an interesting point about the tax money being funneled into the humane societies, whose practices are often cruel because that money still isn’t enough to provide for good conditions for the animals or for humane euthanization. “What I want to do is go to government bodies and say listen, City of New York, City of Los Angeles, City of Chicago, podunk Louisiana – whatever. You spend billions and billions of dollars a year on humane societies. It’s terrible,” Somerhalder explains. “Could you imagine all of that money that goes to humane societies – that goes to sadness and pain – could you imagine all that money going to education? Going to food for hungry people? There’s so many other places that money could be spent rather than the animal shelters and the cruelty that goes on within them. If you talk to people who run animal shelters, they would give their right arm to have to find another job.” Somerhalder will also be contributing to corporations – both profit and nonprofit – to fund applications and sources for green energy, like **Go Green Mobile Power** (<http://blog.zap2it.com/pop2it/2010/06/ian-somerhalder-plans-to-turn-vampire-diaries-set-green-with-new-mobile-power-company.html>) and the **National Resource Defense Council**. In the end, though, his focus remains on motivating and enabling his young fans to find their own place in the movement for change. “It’s the principle that this whole foundation is based on. It’s going to be a lot of work, but at the end of the day, it’s so worth it. It’s going to be linking kids globally. There are things that we’re working on where we’ll be able to literally broadcast lessons via satellite from a school in Toronto, Canada or Atlanta, Georgia to a shoddy school in East Africa. The possibilities are endless,” he says. The Foundation is, of course, in its earliest stages, and in order to get it running, Somerhalder has a suggestion for those of you looking to send him a gift for his Dec. 8 birthday. “I have the sweetest fans in the world, and they’re so loyal, they love to send me gifts,” he says. “People are always asking me what I want for my birthday, but really, the best thing people can do is just help me get this thing off the ground.” As Somerhalder is turning 32 this year – “I don’t know how the hell that happened,” he laughs – a donation of \$32 goes a long way. (It’s also less costly than a bottle of wine and shipping to the Warner Bros lot, for the record.) “I don’t want to be the guy who sets up fantasy dinners and asks a bunch of rich people for money,” says Somerhalder. “I just don’t know that world, I don’t relate to it, and I don’t want to. It’s so much easier for a million people to donate a little tiny bit, then to get 100 people to donate a lot. What’s really exciting for me in the inspiration realm, is to see kids, people who are going through a rough time or people who have found a tough spot they can’t get out of – to see them become inspired again. It’s the best feeling in the world.” So how can you help? Visit **ISFoundation.com** (<http://www.isfoundation.com/>) to find out how you can donate to the birthday campaign. If you’re not in the position to donate or if you’re looking for other ways to help, follow **@IS_Foundation** (http://www.twitter.com/IS_Foundation) and **@iansomerhalde** (<http://www.twitter.com/iansomerhalde>) on Twitter and spread the word by telling your friends, blogging, and Facebooking about the cause. Join the revolution for a greener, brighter future!