**What is claimed is:**

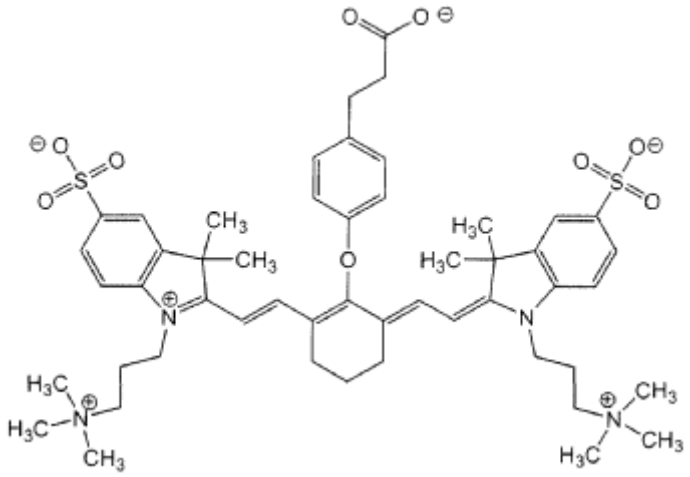
1. A method of imaging tissue or cells, the method comprising:

(a) contacting the tissue or cells with an imaging agent comprising a dye;

(b) irradiating the tissue or cells at a wavelength absorbed by the dye;

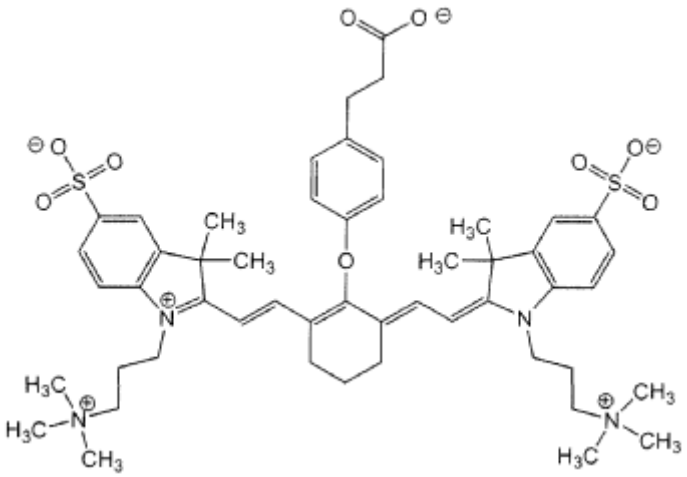
(c) detecting an optical signal from the irradiated tissue or cells, wherein the signal-to-background ratio of the detected optical signal is at least about 1.1, thereby imaging the tissue or cells;

wherein the dye has the formula X:



or an ester thereof, which permits covalent conjugation of the fluorophore to targeting ligands.

2. A dye, having the formula X:



X

or an ester, an acid, a salt, or a combination of an acid or a salt, thereof, which permits covalent conjugation of the fluorophore to targeting ligands.

3. The dye of claim 2, wherein the ester is a N-hydroxysuccinimide ester.

4. The dye of claim 2, wherein the dye is a salt, an acid, or a combination of a salt and an acid.

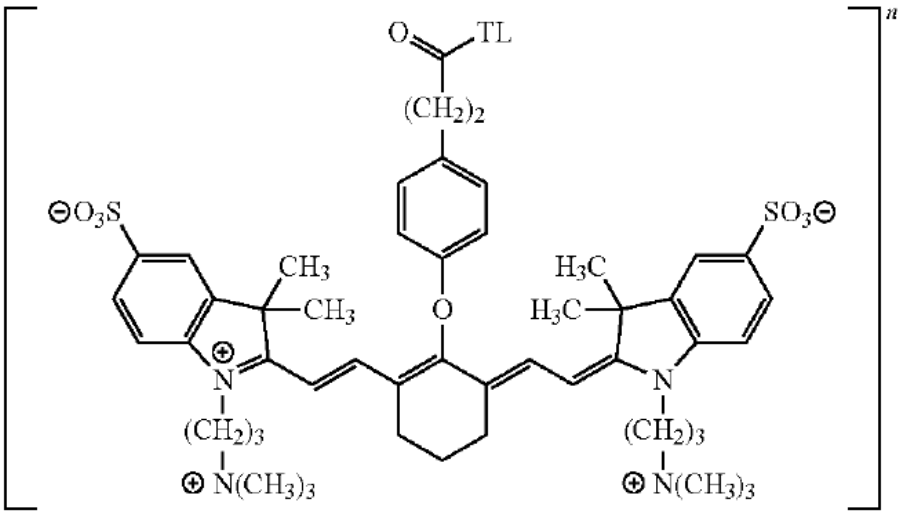
5. A method of imaging tissue or cells, the method comprising:

(a) contacting the tissue or cells with an imaging agent comprising a conjugate of a dye;

(b) irradiating the tissue or cells at a wavelength absorbed by the conjugate;

(c) detecting an optical signal from the irradiated tissue or cells, wherein the signal-to-background ratio of the detected optical signal is at least about 1.1, thereby imaging the tissue or cells;

wherein the conjugate has the formula VII:

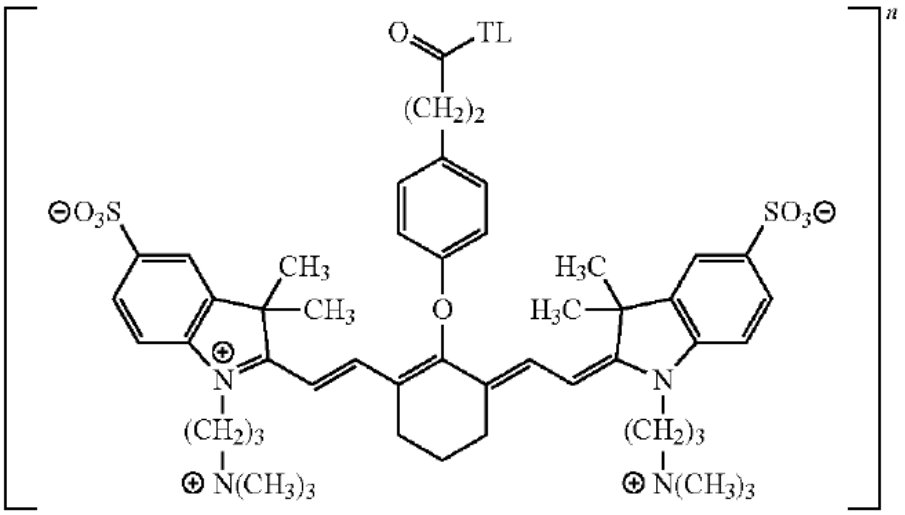


VII

wherein n is 0, +1, or -1; and

TL is a targeting ligand.

6. A conjugate having the formula VII:



VII

wherein n is 0, +1, or -1; and

TL is a targeting ligand.

7. An imaging agent comprising the conjugate of claim 6 which is characterized as having detectable fluorescence with a signal-to-background ratio of at least about 1.1.