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A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER REFLECTS ON A LIFE
IN THE WILD

By Kayla Randall, January 11, 2018



Seventeen years ago, a hippopotamus family slowly wandered down a white sand beach on the western coast of Gabon and **Michael “Nick” Nichols** followed them with his camera lens. He was on a long photography assignment for *National Geographic*, traveling more than 2,000 miles from the Republic of the Congo to Gabon with explorer **Michael Fay** and writer **David Quammen**, and would walk the beach in the mornings looking for animals.

Soon, the heavy hippos got into the Atlantic Ocean and began to surf the waves. This serves a purpose, Nichols says, as they walk from their lagoon to the ocean in the mornings and use the waves to carry them down a few miles where they can feed on new grass at night.

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“It’s 4 a.m., we’re trying to get the surfing hippos coming up out of the surf,” Nichols said in his easy Southern drawl during a video diary at the time. “It’s very, very difficult to see them. But they symbolize something in my photography, too. Because I go after things that are unseen.”

Nichols ran back and forth on the beach, trying to get precise shots that would illustrate his goal of “trying to tell a story that might make people care about nature, and nature being wild.”

He succeeded. His surfing hippo photo was selected as one of *TIME*’s 100 Most Influential Images of All Time in 2016.

Nichols, 65, hails from Muscle Shoals in northern Alabama, near the Tennessee River. His mother raised three children with a fourth grade education. While playing as a child, he’d create his own fantasy worlds. “A forest behind the house would be the jungles of Africa. That, I think, led to where I went.”

The first time he picked up a camera in a college introductory photography course, he became enamored with the medium and knew he wanted to pursue it as a career. “I borrowed [a camera] that was on my shoulder for the rest of my life,” he says. That same semester, in 1972, he was drafted into the Army. He was able to keep up his skills during his service, however: His military identification card labeled him an official U.S. Army photographer. “Somehow, he persuaded them to hand him a camera instead of a gun,” Quammen said at a recent event. Quammen once asked Nichols what he would have done with his life had he been born long before the creation of photography. Nichols responded: “Well, I’d be in jail, I guess.”

In the Army, Nichols was depressed. He was stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, looking for a creative outlet. He began exploring and photographing the state’s caves on the weekends. It was on these excursions that he taught himself about lighting and the functional techniques required to be a professional photographer. After completing three years of military service, he left the Army in 1975.

He started submitting his portfolio to National Geographic and received only rejection letters in return. But German educational magazine *Geo*, launched in 1976, was looking for reliable photographers stateside and came across his cave work. They were impressed, assigning him a cave story to photograph in 1978, which they published in 1979. He kept working for them, photographing dangerous river expeditions, rappelling off mountains in the Arctic. He went to caves all over the country, from Georgia to New Mexico. “People talk about danger, I never thought about danger, I just wanted to get pictures,” he says.

For the next ten years, he’d publish photos in *Rolling Stone*, *Audubon*, and *Esquire*. In 1989, he finally broke through with *National Geographic*, when the magazine asked him to return to New Mexico to photograph Lechuguilla Cave. He continued freelancing for the magazine for years. In 1996, he was hired as a staff photographer and after that, he never worked anywhere else, retiring from his official duties as editor at large for photography in 2015.

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These days, he can look back on his career and all of the things he's done with the perspective he couldn't have when he was in the thick of it all. Nichols' images for *National Geographic* are full of movement, brutality, and enduring life. Some are just as challenging to look at as they were to take. Some required him to venture into dense forests that no human had ever entered, others to get intimate with elephants and witness chimpanzees be tortured in the name of science. These challenges, he says, are a way to make people care.

Using camera traps—remotely activated cameras with motion sensors—and every manner of lens, he's photographed **Jane Goodall's** work and interactions with chimpanzees. He's captured suffering chimps as scientists experiment on them, and chimps encountering humans for the first time as thousands of insects swirled around him. He's gotten pictures of lowland gorillas, lions and tigers with their cubs, bears taking baths, herds of hundreds of elephants, owls with talons larger than human hands, the wilds of Yellowstone, and giant 3,200-year-old trees.

He now understands that his photos can help save the Earth and combat its human-accelerated destruction.

"Wild' is an idea," he says. "We don't understand it, but we've got it in us. A lot of our behaviors are driven by that. So, that's what the animals taught me. The planet is just not intact without the wild. And we've got to help keep it wild, we don't want to tame it. Tame is so boring. The unpredictability of the wild is so special."

In every project, he's sure to not aggravate or harm the animals in any way. "If an animal told me it didn't like what I was doing, I stopped doing it." Once he realized that elephants hated camera flashes, he never used flashes again near them.

His work with *National Geographic* has brought about real change. Photos and data from his 2,000 mile trek through central and western Africa, on which he photographed the surfing hippos, were shared with Gabon's president Omar Bongo, who was shocked to learn that all this natural beauty existed in his own country. This led to the creation of 13 national parks in Gabon, and brought significant U.S. funding to the Congo Basin.

"The most important thing in conservation is land, and that's why what Fay and I did is so important, because we actually saved land," Nichols says now.

His last international assignment sent him to Tanzania's Serengeti plains in 2012. He had always dreamed of doing a photo project on Serengeti lions and entering their world. Using a robotic camera, he did, getting up close with several prides. He shot 200,000 pictures of the lions. *National Geographic* cut that down to about 13, he says.

But failures have also stuck with him and he's learned from them. When he was on his final assignment at Yellowstone National Park from 2014 to 2015, he wanted to capture specific images of wolf packs. They didn't let him, though, and avoided the areas where the cameras were set up. Nichols accepted the failure because the animals were wild, and the wild didn't belong to him. "They defeated me completely. We learned that they are that wary, and it was cool to know that. Failure can sometimes be very positive."

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Now he and his wife **Reba**, who have two adult sons, live in Sugar Hollow, Virginia, near Charlottesville and are, fittingly, still surrounded by nature. Instead of lions and tigers, he's fallen in love with owls and the occasional bear, and recently got an iPhone X to take photos of his Australian cattle dog, **Thermal**. He sets simple camera traps on his land to try and capture the elusive coywolf. He'll never stop being a photographer.

In all his adventures traversing the globe, his pictures haven't come without a cost. By the time he got to the lion project, his body, he says, was starting to break. He's contracted malaria more than 20 times, dealt with bouts of blackwater fever, and had five knee surgeries.

"It was what I begged for in life," he says. "Once I had it, I just took it all the way, all the time. Now that I reflect on it, it was incredible to see all that. It does change you."

For 40 years, he never stopped chasing adventure. Today, he's trying to slow down. His photos currently adorn the walls of the National Geographic Museum on 17th Street NW in a new exhibit called *Wild: Michael Nichols*. It's a celebration of his career and the nearly 30 photo assignments that have become storied images at the publication. He's documented wildlife so well that each step of the exhibit is referred to as its own "room." There's a lion room, an elephant room, a chimpanzee room. The incredible photos on display represent everywhere he's been. But where he's going next, he doesn't know.

"I'm just taking care of my family and my life around me, and enjoying the world around me," he says. "Maybe someday I'll have another project that I want to do, but I don't know what it is right now. I'm trying to put that National Geographic guy to bed, but that doesn't mean I'm going to die and not be a photographer."