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HOW DO YOU PHOTOGRAPH WILD LIONS? BE AS BORING AS POSSIBLE.

By James Estrin, June 7, 2017

Michael "Nick" Nichols has been photographing wildlife for four decades, mostly for National Geographic. Now, Aperture Foundation has published "A Wild Life: A Visual Biography of Photographer Michael Nichols" by Melissa Harris. Mr. Nichols spoke with James Estrin about his life with gorillas, elephants and lions. Their conversation has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Q. Are you a wildlife photographer?

A. I'm a wild person [laughs]. I never liked that term because my heroes were photojournalists — Eugene Richards, Gilles Peress and Alex Webb — who were my contemporaries. I just always wanted to be a photojournalist of the natural world.

I like lots of different kinds of photography. But personally, I'm very comfortable in the wild — with lions or elephants or gorillas. When I found that I could actually make a difference publishing stories about it, then I was on top of the world.

Q. Your photographs have the kind of intimacy photojournalists seek.

A. That was what I was always after. I made a decision to be intimate and intense.

Q. How do you become intimate with a gorilla?

A. It's about body language. It's all non-verbal. A gorilla, a lion or an elephant — it's about just watching them.
It's not like I can walk into a situation and be intimate. I really have to put in the time. And I don't get bored with it. I'm actually comfortable sitting there for hours, days, weeks and months.
If you say to a gorilla, with your body language, 'Okay you're the king, I'm just your servant,' then they have no reason to care that you're there.

Some of us put out energy that says 'Hey I'm here! Pay attention to me!' If you're on a safari in Africa, most people get impatient after five minutes. Well, the elephants don't calm down for 45 minutes. So it's only in the second hour sitting with a group of elephants that you start to see into their world, and you start to see they're doing all these sentient things that we reserve for ourselves.

With lions, if I really focus, I could know what they were going to do next. They would give me little clues, and those little clues could lead me to pictures.

I'm really paying attention to group dynamics.

Q. You spent months with a group of gorillas. Did you know them? Did they know you?

A. Yes, but you're not interacting. You're just a fly on the wall. I would never allow myself to interact.

If you become part of the situation, it does become dangerous because you can become a foil in an animal's political climb. Earlier in my career, I got tossed through the air by a gorilla. He wasn't the No. 1 gorilla, and he didn't try to hurt me. He just threw me through the air to show off to all the girls.

At some point I decided I am not going to interact anymore, I'm going to get them to forget about my being there. And that's what we were able to do with the lions by just being as boring as possible.

Q. What is the essence of being a gorilla, of being a lion?

A. If you're a gorilla, that's in you.

Male lions kill cubs because if they find the female that has those cubs, she will go into estrus the next day and she'll mate with the very lion that killed her cubs.

So, the essence is driven by Darwin.

I can see clearly the natural world working itself out. And it does not have morality in it, it's driven by the environment, by food and by reproduction. But it's not emotional.

This is really about the essence of wildness, and wildness was something I started trying to look for. I realized that so much of the world is tame, and we actually want it to be tame. We're much more comfortable not knowing that a lion's going to kill all the babies. We want them to be a little more cute and fuzzy. I just never had any of that emotional attachment.

Q. You have also spent time photographing zoo animals. Is a gorilla still a gorilla when they are in a zoo?

A. No, unfortunately. It's a facsimile. It's a model.

For me, once it's out of the wild it's another creature. Now, we have what I call urban gorillas. This is not a wild male silverback anymore. He's a beast under our care, and he's going to have aberrant behaviors because he's not free.

Q. Why is it important that animals be wild?

A. I don't think the world is right unless it has wild elephants, wild lions and wild gorillas and, in fact, wild ants and wild butterflies and all those things that make up the web of life.

There's no doubt, I've concentrated on the megafauna that are very charismatic, because what really counts out of my work is that you can save land and wild habitat with these pictures.

I just think that everything deserves a chance. Everything.

Q. You didn't start off advocating for wild animals, but today you are.

A. I evolved. I did grow up looking at National Geographic and reading about Dian Fossey and Jane Goodall.

As soon as I picked up a camera, I knew that this was what I was going to do. But I didn't decide to be a wildlife photographer, or an adventure photographer — just that I would be a photographer.

Charles Moore was the first photographer I met. He photographed all the Civil Rights turmoil that was happening when I was a kid in Alabama, and his work made a difference in the world.

Later, I went on rafting and caving expeditions for GEO magazine. Then Philip Jones Griffiths put out the word that Magnum was interested in me. They were hardcore, driven and socially conscious, and it got under my skin. Philip Jones Griffiths especially wasn't going to tolerate me not evolving from being an adventure photographer. That's when I did the gorillas, and it was like a bell went off. I said this is my next step as a photographer. The gorillas changed my life when I did a book on them with Aperture.

I still get frustrated with my colleagues who just take assignments their whole career. And I know that that's my own bent, to be so driven, and that everybody can't be the way that I am, a nutcase. But I want people to have a mission. I think it makes photography so much more interesting when you're driven to do something like that instead of driven just to be published or get an assignment.

I just kept it going for 40 years. Until I finally just ran out of gas a couple years ago.

Q. Why do you think you're comfortable in the wild?

A. I grew up in the woods in Alabama, and I was exploring the Amazon in my fantasies long before I ever got near the Amazon.

When I hooked up with (the conservationist) Mike Fay, I did 15 years with him in the toughest environments. But I was totally comfortable. Everybody else thinks it's so awful to be covered with bugs and have all those diseases, but I'm really at ease sleeping in these environments.

The thing that could hurt me the most was my own drive. I just didn't have any way to temper it. So I'd work myself into becoming really sick and spend months in bed. But that was because I believed so much in what I was doing and I convinced myself that "wild" matters.

Q. You went to Ndoki in the Republic of the Congo looking for chimpanzees that had never encountered humans.

A. I did that with Fay in the early '90s when he found that untouched area.

We use the word naïve for those chimps because they literally acted as if we were from another planet. They're the top dog out there in that forest, and then they see another two-legged creature. They went crazy with curiosity, did a lot of really wild displaying and called all the other chimps in to see us.

A chimpanzee that's in a zoo is not the same thing as a chimpanzee in that forest. A chimpanzee in captivity is literally like a man in an insane asylum. They are just completely demeaned. It really is about dignity.

Q. Let's talk about the ethics of affecting a situation in the wild.

A. When I started, it was the heyday of chrome, and it had all these limitations. Even my style of photography, of using flash at dusk while dialing flash down to find that mix, came out of the limitations of transparency film.

But as I kept experiencing the natural world, I realized that the flash just wasn't cool and that I had been scaring elephants with it.

When I switched to digital photography, I could work in really low light and get rid of some of my habits that were a little more invasive, so I wasn't inserting myself into the picture.

But tigers especially taught me don't take from your subject. Because I made some serious mistakes along the way. Things I'm willing to talk about in public. Melissa talks about these cases in the book. I realized finally through the tigers that I should take what they give you. I was working for the only publication on earth that could give you enough time, so I had no excuse to be pushing my subjects.

In the 1990's, wildlife photographers were being busted for using captive animals to represent wild animals and even adding zebras in photographs. My feeling is, if you did something, don't hide it. You have to have courage.

I tried to disclose everything along the way. If I did anything weird, I felt I had to tell the editor of the National Geographic while I was showing the pictures.

Q. Give me an example.

A. I once used a dog in a cage to try attracting a leopard. Because the hunter had told me that if you want to get a picture of a leopard, just put a dog in a cage and he'll scream and the leopard will come to eat him, and then you can shoot it.

And I figured I can do a camera trap in front of a cage in the jungle so the dog won't get eaten, and this'll all be okay. That's the way I rationalized it.

So the pygmies I was working with brought a three-legged dog from the village, and we put her in the cage. We tied her off so she wouldn't get eaten, and we went home to our base feeling terrible. The next day we go back to get her and she's gone. The little tether's hanging right outside the cage but there's no blood or fur or anything. She had walked 30 kilometers back to the village.

Well, then I decided to try a goat. The only predator that matters in the Ndoki forest is a leopard. So we had to have a photo of this invisible ghost. So the next day they bring an adorable baby goat, and I said "We're not doing this."

We ended up using a traditional camera trap, and I sprayed leopard urine on the trail. I got this picture where the leopard's face is cropped; the eye was hidden under the Kodachrome mount when we opened it up. So it became a very cool, serendipitous picture that I had gone through this ethical crisis to get.

Q. So what's important is being respectful?

A. Yes. It is about honoring your subject.

By the time I got to the lions in 2011, I was totally in sync. I spent 11 months with them over a two-year period, and I did everything with them, with what they were willing to give me. It made for a very peaceful coexistence. I wasn't going to let them lose a meal because I was taking pictures.

Q. So what have you learned in these four decades of photographing wildlife?

A. That we as humans need to really understand that this "wild" concept is central to our well-being.

When I was in Magnum, people would say I cared more about animals than people, more about gorillas than the genocide in Rwanda. Those are cheap, easy shots to take at somebody like me. And I don't feel that way at all. I'm really a humanist. I just believe that these creatures are miracles.

We totally underestimate that world. We judge it by our own measure. These creatures are geniuses. But it's just different — they're not civilized, they don't have morality.

They deserve to be there, and they deserve to be wild.

I can't understand why we think we're so highly evolved yet we can't respect nature on its terms. We have to alter it. And what I'm hell bent on communicating is it's good enough as it is, can't we just try to let it be what it is?