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Anthony W. Morris

Ryhiner caught a female Sumatran rhino such as the one above, but never got a male.

The last animal catcher

TV film will highlight life of Swiss adventurer

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By Joe Amarante
Register Television Editor

Anthony Morris stepped out of a time capsule recently, returning to New Haven after 25 years.

He was struck by all the construction, the panhandlers, the drugs and prostitution.

"It's not shocking, but it is disheartening," said the 46-year-old Santa Monica, Calif., resident.

Morris, returning to Yale University for his 25th reunion, is immersed in another changing-environment story these days. He and his Swiss cousin are making a TV documentary on Swiss adventurer Peter "Pief" Ryhiner, whose life and death serves as a metaphor for what's happening globally to the environment.

Despite Ryhiner's single-handed capture of thousands of live animals (for zoos, mostly), you won't find him

in any reference books. "He didn't fit in any category," said Morris. "He was a self-taught maverick."

The film, tentatively titled "Pief — the Last Animal Catcher," will be shown on European TV and public TV here, if all goes as planned. Two-thirds of the film is funded, by such groups as the Swiss Broadcasting System, but Morris is still hunting for the final third, about \$100,000.

That's peanuts for an entertainment film's funding in Los Angeles County, where Morris lives with his wife and 5-year-old son. But it's big bucks to raise for an independent filmmaker working on a documentary.

Morris is actually a part-time filmmaker. His vocation is architecture. Film has been a mistress of his since he wandered the Yale campus with a camera and a cynical view of the Ivy League in the early '60s.

After graduating with a languages degree in '64, he went to the University of Southern California to study filmmaking in a class that included George "Star Wars" Lucas.

"I decided to go into *real* films, which is why I'm not a millionaire," he said in an interview over a sparkling water at Kavanagh's on Chapel Street recently.

In 1969 he got a call to work on a documentary series called "Montage" that ran only on NBC-owned stations. He drove to Cleveland where the series would be based, and while he was in the interview his car was completely looted. So he's been surprised by cities before.

After working on that series, Morris went to architecture school, and now works for a Japanese construction

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'Pief' brought 'em back alive

Peter "Pief" Ryhiner was an eccentric character, no doubt about that.

The Saturday Evening Post told this story about him in 1964:

On the night that he was advanced \$40,000 by a zoo to bring back a male and female of the extremely rare *sumatrensis* rhino, his second wife was giving birth to their first child. He didn't stay long enough to find out the sex of the child. He left during delivery.

"You must try to understand how I feel about rhinos; it seemed proper to go as soon as possible," he told the Post later.

Possessed may be a better word than eccentric. But "Pief" was a hero to Swiss schoolchildren, a media-made legend for a time and an adventurer whose life was ultimately forfeited to the winds of political and ecological change.

He was the last great animal catcher. He caught 138 Indian elephants, 62 tigers, 72 leopards, 32 black panthers, 25 orangutans, five Indian rhinos, 260 poisonous snakes and 300 crocodiles, accord-

ing to a team that will tell his story on film.

"He never killed his catches," said filmmaker Anthony Morris. "It was humane capture. He was one of the first to use tranquilizers on game."

Ryhiner, born in 1920 to a wealthy Swiss family, was always crazy about animals. His '50s ex-

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Yale graduate Anthony Morris is making a TV documentary about Peter "Pief" Ryhiner.



TV: Documentary tracks tracker

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firm in Monterey Park, Calif. But he says he still has "East Coast sensibility, which doesn't leave you out in Lotus Land."

He talks rapidly about animals running away from logging companies that are plowing the forests, about the slash-and-burn ruination of Brazilian rain forests, about rhinoceroses.

"Who cares about rhinos? Well, if you take the web of animal life and start knocking species off, there's no end to it."

He said the five species of rhinos in the world are endangered.

"It's a shocking story, what's happened so fast to animals," Morris said. "I never felt so shaky about a lot of things as I do now about the environment."

Morris and his cousin, Michael Wildbolz-Haynes, decided that the story of "Pief" Ryhiner was not only a rich and adventurous one — Ryhiner's exploits were the subject of headlines and newsreels in the U.S. and Europe — but a tragic one. Ryhiner killed himself in 1975 at the age of 55, feeling left behind in a world of organized poaching and environmental neglect.

"'Out of Africa' was a story about an age that's gone," said Morris. "This is a story about a man who lived in an age that's gone. It's a perfect story to tell."

The documentary will include rare footage shot by Ryhiner on his expeditions. One clip will show Ryhiner's celebrated capture of "Betina," a rare Sumatran rhino. (This "triumph" was also his only failure because he never captured a male Sumatran rhino for the female.)

Morris will go to the Sumatran rain forest (in Indonesia) in August, he said, to shoot part of Ryhiner's legacy — a joint expedition of zoos and the Sumatra Land Trust to capture five pair of Sumatran rhinos for breeding.

The film will also include interviews with Ryhiner's sister, his first wife, zookeepers who have benefited from his catches and a horn dealer in Singapore (many Asians mistakenly believe that ground horn powder is an aphrodisiac).

Morris is as passionate about documentaries these days as he is about the environment. He sees the media as an educational tool, and wishes it wasn't so difficult to raise funds for documentaries in America.

"They (the films) are like babies. Yes, they can become monsters, but the other night I saw 'The Thin Blue Line.' Look what that film did. It got an innocent man off death row. Documentaries do make a difference in the world."

'Pief': World passed adventurer by

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peditions would bring excitement to the post-war generation; he brought back live trophies of his exploits, in hopes they could be bred to enhance their survival.

"We live now in a big-business age," said Morris. "This was a solitary man who went out and captured more animals and exotic species than anyone ever did."

Times changed radically in Ryhiner's business by the end of the '60s, and Pief's colonial mentality no longer worked as well for him in Asian countries. Zoos became stocked, breeding their own animals. Big-business enterprises took over the remaining demand.

His last animal-catching expedition ended in failure when he was unable to deliver a pair of Sumatran rhinos, catching only a female.

In his later years, Ryhiner was reduced to hiring himself out as a curious attraction for African safaris, part of the tourist trade he detested.

In 1975, he went to the side of beautiful Lake Neuchatel in Switzerland and killed himself with an overdose of pills. This robust conquerer of nature found the "civilized" world too hostile.

"The modern age passed him by," said Morris.

— Joe Amarante