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NOAH'S ARK

Animals in Danger



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The exploration of Africa sometimes has unusual twists. The menfolk of a Sudan village refused to become our bearers, regardless of what we were willing to pay them. Thereupon, their wives took the job.

Animals in danger

Television: nature's savior

No one had spoken for the past several minutes. The field rose to meet us and the airplane leveled off. We felt the landing gear make contact with the ground, and we shot past the landing lights before turning at the end of the strip. Suddenly, we seemed hardly to be moving as we taxied toward the terminal buildings at Le Bourget.

I had just completed my fifth round-the-world tour. In one of my aluminum boxes, I had eighteen cans of color film: the result of visits to the shops of traders in animals and animal hides which I had discovered on the basis of a few hints, much patience and, I must admit, sometimes incredible luck. We had been able to remove the mystery from the black market in alligator hides, from the traffic in tiger skins, from the poaching of panthers, the massacre of iguanas, and the illegal trade in ivory. There was the matter of trading in hundreds of thousands of birds: the thousands of birds that were killed so as to be stuffed and sold to tourists; the commerce in lumber and the authorized destruction of forests and jungles; the importing and exporting of wild animals. All the aspects of the shocking exploitation of nature of which we speak all too rarely.

We have been able to lay all our cards openly on the table as far as these problems are concerned. We are free agents. We do not own zoos, or preserves, or aquariums. We do not trade in wild animals. We have no forests to exploit. We do not have to make decisions on matters of hunting and fishing. We do not have to make an accounting to any government, and we have no commercial ties with any factory polluting the environment. We are free. Our only commitment is to our camera: to our photographs and our films. No panther has ever died from being photographed, even if he is the subject of a hundred pictures; but thousands of panthers have disappeared by being hunted a single time.

Everywhere in the world, the territory of the creatures with whom



I am holding about five thousand dollars in my hands. Rhinoceros horns are still greatly in demand.

we share the earth—the animals and plants—is shrinking under the impact of the human population explosion. Soon, we will be at the point of no return.

I had a close-combat instructor in the army who used to give an excellent bit of advice: "Use your mind first." In dealing with this problem as with all others, we must first use our minds. And common sense tells us that we must make use of the most effective means of informing people of the situation. In this sense, I earnestly believe that television will be the salvation of nature.

Occupational hazards

Going after pictures and films is fun—but only if you succeed in getting the pictures and films. And, as in doing anything that is worthwhile, there are risks that must be taken. The cameraman or the photographer, unlike the hunter, has no rifle to bring down an attacking animal. He has only his little black box. Even if he feels perfectly safe at the moment that he's shooting his pictures—as all great journalists say they do—what happens when you've finished the pictures is not always what you'd like.

Nadine and I were once on an expedition in the south of Ethiopia, along with our friends Yves and Françoise Coppens, a dozen other Europeans, and thirty Africans. We were living in huge tents under a blazing sun. Our mission was to try to find relics of our human ancestors—in this instance, human teeth.

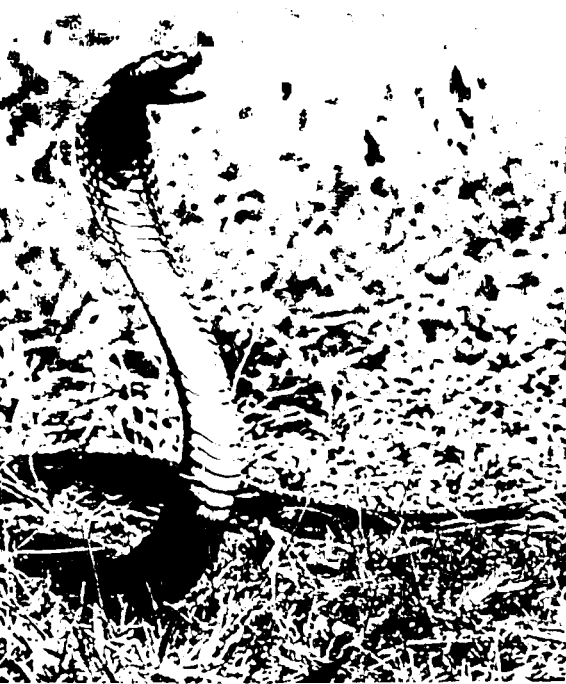
Our camp near the Omo River was at the edge of a plateau, in the middle of the bush. The winding river was about two miles away, as the



These two rhinoceroses have just emerged from their mud bath. They are in constant danger, night and day, of being killed for their horns. Kasiranga, in the north of India, is the last and most magnificent sanctuary of these animals.



The Mountain tapir is disappearing because of the great demand from zoos and because of the commercial exploitation of wild animals. This animal, tamed by a missionary, would inevitably be killed and eaten by jaguars if he were not locked in a cage every night.



A five-foot cobra can spit its venom a distance of over six feet. I got a spurt of venom in my eyes while shooting this picture, and was blind for three days and three nights. It's not an experience that I want to share with other cameramen.



crow flies. The rest of the region was parched by the sun and incredibly dusty. It would remain so until the rainy season.

On this particular day, some of the Africans were busy preparing the midday meal. Yves was seated at a large table loaded with fossils, trying to decipher some aspect of man's past. Nadine was checking our precious equipment. And Françoise was in her tent, brushing her teeth.

We heard a scream and I saw Françoise run out of the tent, holding a glass in one hand and her toothbrush in the other. "Hurry!" she shouted. "There's a huge snake in my tent!"

Knowing from experience that a "huge snake" is always a medium-sized snake, and that a "medium-sized snake" is always tiny, I was not in a terrible hurry to rescue Françoise. Nonetheless, when I reached the tent I caught a glimpse of about half the body of a snake of fair size—about five feet long—slithering between the tent and the nearby rocks.

There was no mystery about the snake's presence in our camp. A few days before, a naked shepherd from a neighboring tribe had arrived in our camp after walking twenty-five miles across the desert. He offered to exchange a young hare he was carrying—a frightened creature, with large eyes surrounded by immense lashes—for water and food. Françoise could not resist taking the animal. After the shepherd

had drunk five dippers of water and had taken enough food to last for the rest of his trek across the desert, the hare was given quarters in a box in the Coppens' tent, fed with a baby's bottle, and pampered and spoiled to within an inch of its life. Its presence, however, had attracted the snake.

Fortunately, I had time to grab a camera, and I was now standing about five feet away from the snake, clicking away at it.

I do not have a particular fondness for things that crawl, bite, and sometimes kill. But I do know something about snakes, and knowledge sometimes banishes revulsion. I knew that this was a cobra, and I watched as the snake raised the forward part of its body above the ground and spread its hood, following my every movement with its head. I continued to take pictures, drawing closer to the reptile but still remaining outside its attack zone.

Nadine and Françoise were watching. "Christian! Be careful," Nadine ordered.

Further away, the Africans were also watching. They were terrified.

"Get me a bag or something," I called out. "I want to catch it for James."*

Coppens' assistant, an excellent research man, took his courage in both hands and brought me a red plastic bucket. I took the bucket and turned back toward the snake. When I saw the cobra, a fraction of a second later, it had its mouth open. Almost simultaneously, I felt a liquid strike me in the eyes. It was a spitting cobra! At once, I felt a terrible burning sensation in both eyes.

"I can't see!" I shouted. "I'm blind!"

I felt hands on my arms, supporting me. Everything began to spin, and I stumbled backwards. Coppens' assistant caught me. "Don't worry," he said. "It's not serious. Come with me." There was a note of false optimism in his voice that I caught immediately. "The doctor's in the camp. Everything will be all right."

The camp was less than fifty yards away. I stumbled over the stones, holding my hands over my eyes. By then, I could not even open my eyes, and the pain was rapidly becoming unbearable.

"Somebody try to kill the snake," I suggested, "so that we'll know what kind of poison it is."

I could already imagine myself at the hospital. That was absurd, of

*James Ash, then director of the Snake Park at Nairobi.

Double page following: These Asian crocodiles will be converted into shoes and purses. They are no luckier than their Latin American cousins, who will be sold to tourists as souvenirs. These animals are skinned alive because "the skin comes off more easily."