



From South Wootton the frontline of nature

Many of us sympathise with the plight of Africa's endangered animals, but few would give up a successful career in New York to actively fight for their survival. KL magazine talks to John Steward.

The world's wildlife is in a truly perilous state. It's estimated by the International Union for Conservation of Nature that 41% of amphibians and 26% of mammals are currently threatened with extinction, and that the world's coral reefs (home to 25% of all marine species) could disappear by 2050.

The human responsibility for this can't be underestimated. No less than 1,215 rhinos were killed last year alone, and more than 100,000 elephants were killed in the four years between 2010-2014. The world's lion population is only 10% what it was 40 years ago, and by the time you've finished reading this feature, another elephant will have been killed.

It's something that concerns many of us, but one man from King's Lynn has taken a greater leap than most, ditching the corporate life to help protect endangered animals in Africa.

John Steward, who grew up in South Wootton was until recently working in the advertising industry in New York – but he couldn't stop thinking about a life-changing month-long trip he took to South Africa in 2012. Now, as the founder of the Wild Tomorrow Fund, which is based in New York, John and his close-knit team are doing their best (in incredibly difficult conditions) to

combat the disastrous effects of poaching.

John Steward attended King Edward VII School before studying Art and Graphic Design at the College of West Anglia and the College of Art in Great Yarmouth. "It was during the second year of my degree at The London Institute that I took part in an exchange program with a college in New York," he remembers, "and I immediately fell in love with the city's energy and its people."

John's been living in New York ever since, and was until early in 2015 the Executive Creative Director at Havas, the worldwide advertising agency. "I decided to leave the corporate world because of a trip I took back in 2012," explains John. "Advertising isn't the most altruistic of industries, and the older I got the more selfish I felt my lifestyle was."

John decided he wanted to start giving back – and knew it would be for the benefit of animals. "It was at North Wootton Primary School as a seven year old that I first discovered both my artistic abilities and my love of animals," he says.

In 2012, he came across Wildlife ACT, an organisation that monitors endangered species on a number of South African reserves.

“They use volunteers from around the world to help with the work and to fund their cause,” says John, “and I decided to take a month off to join them.”

It was a life-changing month. “Seeing animals in the world was awe-inspiring enough,” he says, “but witnessing and learning about the dire straits so many species such as rhinos, elephants and lions are facing at the hands of poachers completely angered and saddened me.”

John returned to Africa twice more, and came to the decision that he would dedicate his life to helping the planet’s threatened species and ecosystems. The official launch of John’s non-profit organization Wild Tomorrow Fund took place in New York on September 30th 2105 and the group hasn’t looked back since.

“We exist to give compassionate people around the world a way of fighting back against those who are poaching defenceless species to the point of extinction,” says John.

After three years of volunteering it was time for John and his team to move forward and create their own non-profit solely intending to ensure the world has a ‘wild tomorrow’ as John puts it.

“We wanted no administration costs, red tape or politics,” he says, “and we’ve been really successful in that. Our small size keeps our overheads low, and our donation process protects money from being wasted. Our personal relationship with the South African Parks department confirms that every penny gets to the animals.”

John’s small team consists of New York-based Directors Wendy Hapgood and Katy Hansen and ecologists Clinton Wright and Axel Hunnicutt, who are based in the area the organisation is trying to safeguard – KwaZulu-Natal to the east of South Africa.

“Our planet really has entered an extinction crisis and species are becoming extinct 1,000 times faster than any natural rate,” explains John. “This is no more evident than in South Africa, where some of our most iconic species like elephants, rhinos and lions are under the real and imminent threat of extinction.”

John explains that the reason lions are now being poached is that they’ve become a substitute for the tigers – which are now almost gone. But what are these animals being poached for?

“Perhaps the main reason for the explosion in poaching is the rising middle classes of Asia,” explains John. “China uses ivory for ornamentation, and they also use a host of other animals – such as lions and pangolins – in medicinal products. In Vietnam, rhino horn is used for medicine due to a completely mistaken belief that it’s a ‘cure-all’ material.”

Not only do these crimes against nature kill these beautiful creatures and upset delicate and fragile ecosystems, they also fund terrorist networks throughout Africa and the Middle East.

“It’s a growing and alarming trend,” says John. “As the lucrative animal parts make their way towards Asia, they’re bought and sold by criminal groups who use the profits to buy weapons.”

All of this has spurred John on to ensure Wild Tomorrow Fund makes a real impact – by raising funds to buy supplies and equipment for anti-poaching units and reserve managers, and by employing ecologists to work on the reserves themselves.

“This war on wildlife needs to be fought on every level,” John says. “We’re hoping to be able to work in Asia in the future, but for now we’re focusing on stopping the bloodshed in South Africa. We have to do something now – otherwise these magnificent species are gone forever. And by then it will be far too late.”



ABOVE: Helping attach a radio collar to this wild lion was a life-changing event for John Steward, whose past career in advertising has helped create the striking branding and advertising for the Wild Tomorrow Fund (right). “I find our acronym particularly appropriate when talking about animal loss,” he says.

PICTURES: JOHN STEWARD / WTF