

From tree kangaroos to snow leopards: connecting kids to the adventure of conservation

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I'd like to open this talk with a Buddhist koan: When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. And when I'm ready, take a look at who shows up!

(3 slides: mountain gorilla, tiger, tree kangaroo)

Animals are powerful teachers, and this is something children recognize instantly. It's a talent that, alas, many lose. When we lose that, what do we get? Pollution. Overpopulation. Deforestation. Species extinction. Bookstores full of self-help books for people who are utterly miserable and disconnected, because they are cut off from the life-giving fellowship of this sweet green world and the company of thousands of magnificent, surprising, wondrous species of creatures.

That's why I write for kids. That's why, with photographer Nic Bishop, I devised a series of nonfiction true science and adventure stories kids that actually transformed children's literature. These are the Scientists in the Field Series for Houghton Mifflin.

(cover of KAKAPO RESCUE)

They are books in which zoos have played a vital part. Let me tell you how this came to be.

I started out writing for adults—which I still do—and after I'd written four of them (the most recent at that time was on the man-eating tigers of Sundarbans who swim out after your boat like a dog chasing a car and get on board and eat you) I was invited to speak at a conference at the New England Aquarium.

There I met the person who would get me into writing children's books—and out of lots of trouble in various fixes I got myself into around the world: Nic Bishop.

(Nic, Sy, Joshua and Bonyepe in Papua New Guinea)

He could have been an ax murderer. He came up to me after my talk and asked me if I might want to travel the world with him and write kids books and he would take the pictures.

I'd always wanted to write for kids, because kids are our next conservationists. So I asked Nic to send me some photos. The minute I saw his photos, I agreed to work with him.

(Nic's frog face, insect face photos)

Nic wasn't one of the animal paparazzi. You can look into the faces of the creatures Nic photographs and see what they really are like--NOT what they look like when they're terrified, or frozen (which is how some photographers get shots of insects and reptiles, so they're too cold to move and can't run away) or even dead.

So what would be our first book? Friends suggested puppies or bunnies. But no. We did our first book on a pit in Manitoba seething with 18,000 snakes.

(Narcisse Snake dens photo)

People thought we'd gone mental. Parents would gross out. Teachers would shriek. Kids would need years of therapy to get over the horror of thinking about 18,000 snakes in a pit. And what were they all doing in the pit anyway?

Copulating. They get into these mating balls of a hundred snakes—often as many as 100 males and one female. The worst frat party you've ever been to. We knew adults would say “ew!” But we knew, too, what the kids would say: “cool!”

(happy kids with snakes)

This was in 1997, and most nonfiction kids books about animals were then little more than book reports. The snake: It's a reptile. It has scales. No legs, you know. This wasn't what we wanted to do at all. We wanted to tell the true adventure story of a real scientist, and how he was unraveling mysteries about these marvelous creatures—in a way that would benefit the animals.

We managed to clothe our outlandish idea in Science. We knew about this wonderful scientist Bob Mason

(photo of Bob holding red sided garter)

who was studying the world's largest aggregation of snakes to discover scientific mysteries about them. In our book we were not just going to present a whole bunch of facts about snakes. We told the real-life adventure story of how Bob—who as a kid loved animals but his teachers didn't think him too bright—managed to solve all these mysteries about why there were so many snakes here,

(Snakes photo)

how they found their way to the dens, and how they could tell who was a male and who was a female. And to find this out, we had to be there. So we went—and we had a ball. With **THE SNAKE SCIENTIST**,

(cover)

The Scientists in the Field series was born.

The next book Nic and I did together in our series was, from the standpoint of squeamish parents and teachers, even worse than The Snake Scientist. It was

(cover)

THE TARANTULA SCIENTIST. Our star for this book was hard to find. A number of people who study spiders unfortunately kill them, smoosh them, and study their juice. We have no interest in these people, other than hoping for their swift demise. The scientists I write about, like Bob, not only love science but love the individual animals they study.

What I care about most in selecting these heroes and heroines, is that they love and honor the animals they study. They want their study to benefit not only our kind, but their study subjects as well. I want our readers to love the animals too—and to learn some of the many ways they can put that love into action.

So the heroes of our stories are people like Sam Marshall.

(photo of Sam)

He was studying, among other tarantulas—of which there are 800 species—the largest of them all: The Goliath Bird Eater Tarantula.

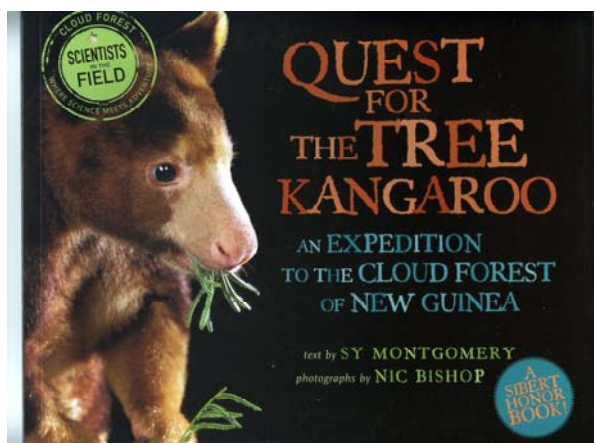
(photo)

This animal can weigh a quarter pound, and its hairy, outstretched legs could cover your face. The females can live 30 years. He calls these spiders Queens of the Jungle. They're beautiful, clean, fascinating animals. He points out that tarantulas live in silk-lined holes—regular Martha Stewarts. We also visited his spider lab in Hiram, Ohio—home of 500 tarantulas—who turn and orient to Sam when he opens the door.

And kids loved them.

(pic of happy kids with spider)

Our books are filled with great characters—some human, some more than human. We focus on charismatic animals, exotic locations, and most importantly, real narratives of what we actually saw happen in the field. Sometimes we have to wait for years for it all to come together. And that was the case with QUEST FOR THE TREE KANGAROO.



When it finally did come together, it was almost magical.

I met the heroine

(Lisa Dabek photo)

for QUEST FOR THE TREE KANGAROO at a zoo: I had come to Roger Williams Park zoo to give a talk on one of my adult books, JOURNEY OF THE PINK DOLPHINS. Lisa Dabek was in charge of the conservation lecture series there and offered to show me around the zoo. We never got further than the first animal we saw—a Matchie's tree kangaroo named Paul. I had a great scientist to focus on. I had a great critter and a fabulous location. Papua New Guinea:

(photo of mossy forest.)

A Lost World. A Stone Age Island. A Land Time Forgot. Mostly unexplored by outsiders until the middle of the 20th century. Here lives the most dangerous bird in the world—the cassowary. The world's largest butterfly, bigger than some parrots. And in a mossy forest clothed by clouds, kangaroos who actually live in trees.

(Tree kangaroo in tree.)

There could not be a better setting for a children's story. But the problem was Lisa never saw them. One day, though, she told me, she hoped to be able to radio collar some and in this way, discover what they did all day. Then we would have the narrative we needed for our book.

And then two years later—after Lisa had moved from Rhode Island to Seattle, from the Roger Williams Park zoo to the Woodland Park Zoo-I got the call: she was going to try to radio collar the tree kangaroos.

What an adventure.

(photo of plane, photo of Joshua)

What a way to turn kids on to science, to geography, to foreign language, to math, to physical fitness. In field science, you use all of this.

(men around fire)

We showed how researchers live in the field.

(Lisa showers in waterfall)

How do you take a shower?

In the field, you use everything you know. You use your heart and your head. You use the best of yourself. What great, true discoveries you can make on this adventure—not just about the tree kangaroos, but also about fortitude, about teamwork, and about how to make dreams come true.

One of aspects of conservation we like to highlight in our books is how our scientists work with the local people.

(Lisa with friend, Gosing)

These aren't the silly little brown people who need our help—we need theirs. They understand conservation—to the degree that

(PNG child at school)

in their school, the teachers consider teaching conservation as important as teaching math or language.

The people of Yawan and the surrounding villages formed the bulk of our team: To reach our field camp, some 44 people were coming up the 10,000 foot mountain with Lisa into the cloud forest to try to radio collar the tree kangaroos—crossing bridges like these—a hike that took us three long, muddy, slippery days.

(crossing scary bridge)

Our team included people from all over the world—PNG, England, Australia, New Zealand, the US—and not just scientists and trackers, but a team artist. A photographer. Teachers. A zookeeper. A veterinarian.

And we all came together because Lisa was pursuing an impossible dream, one many folks told her couldn't possibly work—

(Young tree roo gently restrained by many hands)

but it did.

And thanks to Lisa we discovered the next book in our series—again through a zoo. A number of zoos, including the Woodland Park Zoo, support the Snow Leopard Trust.

Our next adventure would take us to

(photo)

The Altai Mountains of the Great Gobi of Mongolia.

In search of the most elusive cat on the planet:
The snow leopard

(snow leopard photo)

There's a reason we titled the book **SAVING THE GHOST OF THE MOUNTAIN**:

(photo of cover)

Its cloudlike spotted coat makes it almost impossible to see. It survives in the harshest habitats on Earth: at altitudes too high for trees, with only half the oxygen we humans need to breathe easily. It slinks like a spirit behind a ridge. It lies in wait to pounce. It can sit so still it is invisible in plain sight. Its powers seem supernatural:

And we realized that even with our hero Tom McCarthy

(photo of Tom)

and his American and Mongolian team

(photo of Kim and Nadia)

we would almost certainly never see our quarry.

This book was in a way our most challenging yet. It was physically extremely demanding. But most difficult for me, as an author, was knowing we would almost certainly not get to see a snow leopard during our stay.

We saw many other wonders we shared with our readers:

the ancestors of the modern horse,

(photo)

the takhi—once extinct in the wild, now roaming free again thanks to zoos.

Bactrian camels--

(photo)

and marvelous people living according to the old ways, in tents made of wood and wool which they shift 2, 3, or 4 times a year, in order to pasture their livestock, like these
Yaks—

(yak photo)

the ancestors of oxen

When we “saw” snow leopards, it was through the local people’s eyes—through them and through Tom, who had radiocollared snow leopards in the past. The drama of our trip was interspersed with these people’s vivid stories. What was most memorable about each sighting was its brevity. This man,

(photo)

Gangur, told us that only once in his 78 years had he seen a snow leopard. He was passing a sharp cliff--and saw a snow leopard looking directly into his eyes. “His face was very calm,” he told us “and not angry. Not scared of anything—just peaceful and calm.”

(snow leopard photo)

At another time, Gangur might have shot the leopard. But because Gangur had been working with Tom and the Snow Leopard Trust, he left it alone.

Of course we would have loved to have seen a snow leopard on our 3 week expedition. But we never did. And that is perhaps one of the most important parts of the story—this story, and all the others we tell in our series. Our readers will probably never see a snow leopard outside of a zoo. Other than in a zoo, they will probably never see a tree kangaroo. They will almost certainly never see a kakapo—

(kakapo photo)

the subject of our latest book, a giant, flightless, nocturnal parrot of whom fewer than 90 survived when we did our research.

But that won't stop kids from loving these creatures. That won't stop them from caring about them. These animals are such powerful teachers; our scientists are such eloquent heroes; and their stories are just so compelling, you can't help but see that the world is far richer with tarantulas and snakes and kakapos and snow leopards and tree kangaroos in it.

(3 photos here)

That's what we hope to bring into the world with our books. To show kids the splendor of this surprising, sweet green world—and to show them their own power to protect it. Let me read to you from the last pages of the snow leopard book:

“Protecting an animal is like loving someone. It's not something you do and then finish, It's a long-term promise, honored over and over, one step at a time. Sort of like climbing those ridges, to find out where the next reads leads, and the next one...and perhaps it's best that way—because the commitment, and the adventure, continues.”

Thank you.



Note: You can read more about Nic and Sy's Scientists in the Field books at Sy's webpage, authorwire.com (including excerpts from her field journals in Papua New Guinea and Mongolia, if you click on these books under "All Sy's Books") or Nic's webpage, Nicbishop.com (including many of his spectacular photos.) All our books can be ordered on Amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com, Houghton Mifflin Publishers or at bookstores.