

Living locally, acting globally for our **WILDLIFE**

North Shore veterinarian and documentary filmmaker Stephen Van Mil speaks to Jane Igoe about the need to highlight conservation and species preservation not only at home, but internationally.



It's been billed as a story about the 'biggest secret in the ocean' and it's just the sort of assignment that has lower North Shore documentary filmmaker, Stephen Van Mil, on the edge of his seat, and brimming with enthusiasm.

The whale shark, as Mr Van Mil puts it, is "an old fish - but not just any old fish" - it's the biggest in the ocean and in a natural habitat can live for a staggering 150 years. The whale shark is the focus of much new research and now Mr Van Mil and a group of global researchers and scientists are committed to exploring its marine home off Western Australia, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia and the Galapagos Islands, to discover more about this species which grows to a reputed 18 metres and can weigh 20 tonnes.

The project, a documentary entitled *Big Fish*, is near completion and is being filmed in seven countries in collaboration with Mr Van Mil's documentary film company, Animal Media.

For Stephen Van Mil, filmmaking is a journey that has taken him on many global odysseys over the past decade - from the Indonesian rainforests to Africa, to tell the stories of our most endangered animals and to bring their plight to the notice of his global audience.

"We still have about 300 football fields of forest being destroyed every hour in Indonesia," he tells *North Shore Living*. "It breaks my heart to see what's happening, and through the work of Animal Media with the documentaries, it's an opportunity to reach a very wide global

audience. We need to get everyone converted," he maintains.

The *Big Fish* documentary will add to his list of award-winning projects, including the highly acclaimed *King of Kings - The White Lions of Africa* for the Discovery Network, which was the first documentary ever to profile the rare and mystical white lions.

In 2007, in conjunction with Fork Films, he produced *Saving Orangutans* and then co-directed and co-wrote *The Last Trimite*, which is a beautiful and heart-wrenching investigation into the plight of the Indonesian orangutans and the conservation work of a passionate and esteemed scientist, Dr Birute Galdikas.

Growing up in Perth, Stephen Van Mil recognised from an early age his love of animals would form the basis of a lifelong career and passion. He earned his degree in Veterinary Science from Murdoch University in Perth, before heading east to Sydney.

By 1991, he had built up three veterinary practices in Sydney and launched his broadcasting and media career as the Nine Network's 'vet in residence'. During a 13-year period with the television network, he presented hundreds of stories about animals, ranging from domestic pets to larger more exotic animals around the world.

"I would read voraciously, and we started going on location to get more meat on the bones, then we started travelling, documenting and packaging the stories. I started focusing the stories more towards exotic animals and conservation issues and I



guess I wanted to have more control over what I was achieving," he says.

Since then, Mr Van Mil has taken his camera crew and his enthusiasm to the four corners of the earth - to rainforests, the peaks of Africa and the great oceans of the world. He lives in Mosman and plans each new adventure from Sydney's North Shore.

For the documentary *The Last Trimate*, he teamed up with Perth mining billionaire Andrew Forrest and Australian and Oscar-winning director Mel Gibson, who narrated the story.

Another documentary, *Animal Pepper*, looks at what happens when elephants and humans compete for land and the same space, just to survive.

Also, his company Animal Media has been involved in a project where chilli peppers are planted on the outskirts of villages in India. The peppers act as a repellent for the elephants.

"Elephants hate chilli peppers," he tells *North Shore Living*. "When the peppers are grown outside the village they act as a deterrent for the elephant herds. The crops of spice can be sold by the local inhabitants to form another level of economic growth and income for them," he says.

"I'm still so passionate about telling the stories and raising awareness about conservation"

Stephen Van Mil

The project has also been instigated in Africa, where the same problems exist with elephants encroaching into villages because of habitat loss and urbanisation. He says the documentary is "a fiery tale about the fight for land, water and food between two of the most powerful creatures on earth."

Each year, he runs 'eco-tours', with an emphasis on conservation and animal preservation to places like Africa, South America and South East Asia.

"In January, I organised for eminent surgeon Charlie Teo and his family to visit the orangutans in Kalimantan in Indonesia. They were completely moved and inspired by the experience, so I'm hoping their visit will help raise the profile and plight of the animals and make a big difference to our continued fundraising and conservation work," he confirms.

"Getting Mr Teo involved has been a very positive and significant development."

The eco-tours have been a way for Mr Van Mil to offset the cost of the documentaries he makes and to provide people who are raising money for the animal projects a way of seeing what is needed at the coalface.

In Kalimantan, visitors stay in an eco-lodge in Tanjung Puting National Park where there are orangutan feeding stations, and then cruise up the river and walk into the jungle to visit the animals in the wild. At another landmark area - the Camp Leakey research station - he takes the visitors to see the proboscis monkeys, macaws, hornbills and kingfishers, and the orangutan care centre, which is home to medical facilities for the animals.

IN FOCUS

In addition, he has made a move into feature films, including a number of projects in Western Australia, most notably the forthcoming film *The Drowner*, in collaboration with Andrew Forrest and Mel Gibson.

In July this year, Mr Van Mil was given an alumni award by Murdoch University recognising his work and contribution to conservation and his animal projects.

Although he now finds much of his time is spent outside of Sydney, or overseas, he loves to return to his historic cottage on Middle Head Road, near Chowder Bay, where much of his inspiration has been initiated.

With Animal Media dedicated to conservation, he says he is still committed to showcasing "our wonderful world of animals" across the globe. **N**



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Indoor Outdoor Living for all Occasions from Dickson Avenue

Retail sales have taken a tumble recently with the department stores being hardest hit. However one savvy local retailer, Dickson Avenue, is bucking the trend and for one of its owners, Maxi Bell, the store's success is down to two things very close to her heart – good old-fashioned customer service and supreme quality.

"I believe there are a few things that set Dickson Avenue apart," says Maxi. "Great customer service is about having great people. Staff that are well-trained, sincerely interested in serving the customer and are knowledgeable about their product or service. Secondly, customers find it easy to do business with us because our processes and procedures are seamless. Whether that is custom-making a particular piece of furniture or making it easy for customers to view our products. Our customers also feel that we know a bit about them and their preferences."

Since 2006, Dickson Avenue has been selling an eclectic range of imported fine outdoor and indoor furniture as well as homewares and accessories for all occasions. Maxi's business partner oversees the manufacturing process to the highest levels of quality and craftsmanship. All products undergo rigorous design and pre-sale quality control testing prior to display.

"I am proud to say that Dickson Avenue has Sydney's largest selection of quality all-season, year-round designer furniture in Sydney's largest most inviting showroom," says Maxi. "We confidently provide a three year warranty against manufacturing defects, over and above normal wear and tear, or colour fading as a result of normal weather and temperature extremes."

At Dickson Avenue you will also discover their value is as impressive as their



quality - high end design without the high end price.

"We pride ourselves on our ability to offer durable indoor and outdoor furniture that is more affordable than its appearance suggests," Maxi smiles.

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