



Stephen Van Mil

Believe it or not, celebrity vets have been around for decades. Back in the '80s, Dr. Stephen Van Mil spent 14 years as the resident vet on the *Today* show, fast earning a reputation as Channel 9's animal expert with appearances on *60 Minutes* and *A Current Affair*. Van Mil likes to joke that he "fell into" the role, as he did documentary making in the 1990s. His first animal doco, *White Lions – King of Kings*, was filmed in conjunction with Animal Planet; he's since produced a handful more including *Elephant Wars* and the award-winning *The Last Trimate*, the latter of which starred Mel Gibson as the narrator. The project saw Van Mil exploring the heart of Indonesian Borneo, in turn inspiring a series of annual eco-tours to visit orangutans in Kalimantan. It also saw Van Mil "fall" into a relationship with Gibson's Icon Films, which he will work with in producing *The Drowner*, one of Australia's most talked-about up-and-coming movies. And this time, with an AU\$60-million budget, he's planning to be very strategic.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR ECO-TOURS THROUGH BORNEO.

The tours also happened by accident – they started as a way to offset the cost of the documentaries and reward investors and turned into something much bigger and more popular. I made a promise that I would run them every year, and in 2012 I'll run two back-to-back tours. It takes a bit of time to get to central Kalimantan, where we stay at an eco-lodge in Tanjung Puting National Park. There are dedicated orangutan feeding stations here, but we also cruise up river and walk into the jungle to visit the animals in the wild. At the Camp Leakey research station we check out proboscis monkeys and macaws, hornbills and kingfishers as well as visiting the Orangutan Care Centre, home to medical facilities for the animals. A visit here changes the lives of some people, which is so important. If I can get 20 people passionate and spreading the word... we will really start to make a difference. We already are: part of the fee from the eco-tours and

also from my documentaries is given back to the Care Centre.

HOW DID YOU MOVE FROM MAKING DOCUMENTARIES TO FEATURE FILMS?

Developing my relationship with Mel Gibson really got me into commercial films. I was chatting with the author of *The Drowner* (Robert Drewe) one day and he mentioned the rights were available. I contacted Gibson and he was immediately interested. The tax rules changed around the same time, making it extremely favourable to make feature films but not so favourable to make documentaries. Sadly, I think that killed it for international documentaries – they're more of a side interest for now. I enjoy feature films just as much as docos, but at the end of the day, feature films pay the bills, that's reality.

THE DROWNER LOOKS LIKE IT'S GOT SOME BIG NAMES ATTACHED TO IT?

Indeed. John Collee of *Happy Feet* fame has written the script and we've just secured Fred Schepisi (*Roxanne*, *Six Degrees of Separation*, *Evil Angels*) to direct the film. We've also been in talks with the likes of Geoffrey Rush, Cate Blanchett, Liam Neeson and James McAvoy to star in the movie. We're hoping to get all the actors signed on this year, with filming to start soon after that.

WHAT ARE YOUR IMPRESSIONS OF THE AUSTRALIAN MOVIE SCENE AT THE MOMENT?

The movie scene in Australia is extremely healthy – for the first time in ages you have U.S. filmmakers wanting to make movies here, and we're starting to see some great products as a result. More than that, we're starting to see top Australian actors return home to be involved in films. It's very exciting.

OTHER PROJECTS ON THE CARDS?

My film company Impian has a number of projects on its slate, including *Shallows*, an adaptation of Tim Winton's novel by the same name. It will also be based in Perth, so it looks like I'm here to stay! •