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# Vagabond with a vision

Mike Fay flew the equivalent of three times round the world to paint an aerial portrait of Africa, writes Tiara Walters

OPPIE KOPPIE: Mike Fay contemplates the landscape during his epic journey through the Congo River Basin

**I**T MUST have felt like a pathetic excuse for a piece of canvas, that tent. Especially after being walloped through the most insolent terrain the Congo River Basin could throw at it: brutal tropical bogs; morassed kokombe plains indifferent to the fraught blows of machetes; rainforests made passable only by the ancient movements of mammals on migration trails. All 3 200km of it. The tent believed it had paid its dues after boldly facing territory no other modern tent had braved before.

Yet here it was, defiantly pitched beside a harried road in the US capital, among a sea of Washingtonians going about their harried lives. It stood out like a sore thumb, and frankly, it was a little embarrassed.

Not so its owner, Dr J Michael Fay, unflagging Wildlife Conservation Society scientist and National Geographic explorer with Very Big Dreams. A vagabond with a vision, if you like. He may be quirky, but this Californian is no quack. You can't be if you seriously intend to save the planet.

In September 1999 Fay shot to Livingstonesque status when he bushwhacked clear across the Congo and Gabon in nothing more than shorts and sandals for his National Geographic "Megatransect". The slightly built scientist wore out two porter teams as he logged a ground-breaking record of the area's uncharted wildlife and examined the threats to its survival. Detractors accused him of pulling a media stunt. But back in Washington, DC — where he camped out on the street to escape the proletarian confines of his rented apartment — he raised more than \$100-million in conservation funds for the Congo Basin and sweet-talked President Omar Bongo of Gabon into declaring 13 national parks for the country. It was a spectacular coup, and it silenced the cynics.

I first met Fay in June 2004 as he was lolling about the Johannesburg headquarters of Nora Kreher's Bateleurs, a home-grown NGO that flies mercy missions for the environment. At a glance, an insouciant Fay didn't appear to me as if he were about to spearhead the biggest aerial conservation survey Africa had ever seen. His threadbare lime-green sweater was sporting a conspicuous but unselfconscious hole, and he'd spent the sub-zero night sleeping on the Bateleurs' lawn. I suspected that

he'd done it in that sweater. The next day, strapped into a '60s Cessna, Fay took off from the Swartkop Airforce Base on his grand adventure, wearing the same rumpled sweater.

Fortified with logistical support from the Bateleurs and backed by National Geographic and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), he dubbed his mission the "Africa MegaFlyover". His goal? To do for all of Africa what he had done for Gabon by tracing the extent of human influence across the continent's eco-regions and igniting long-term conservation strategies.

The MegaFlyover in fact had a serendipitous genesis during Fay's preparations for the Megatransect.

"In '96 I got myself a small plane and flew over the Congo Basin to create for my walk a

map based on the region's key spheres of human impact, as well as wildest forest blocks. It was as if I had one of those 'jet-packs' on my back," he says in a phone call from Washington, after the MegaFlyover.

He muses: "And then, lo! the guys from WCS came up with the Human Footprint Map, a composite model of public-domain data sets such as population density, land transformation, transport access, lights visible on satellite images. It was just like my map for the Megatransect, only it covered the whole world and gave every square kilometre of the planet a value for the weight of the human footprint!"

Published in 2002, the Human Footprint Map is the most complete digital chronicle of human exploitation of the planet. Not only did it

find that people had colonised 83% of the Earth's habitable surface, it also pinpointed 568 of the world's "Last of the Wild" areas. But it had a glaring shortcoming: it was based purely on public records — many of which were dated or plain inaccurate — and needed to be "ground-truthed" — "and this was when I decided to do the MegaFlyover", says Fay.

For seven straight months the MegaFlyover team chugged through the cerulean firmament over Africa in two fire-engine red, vintage Cessnas lovingly restored by support pilot and Austrian whizz kid Peter Ragg. Tracing clover-leaf patterns over 21 countries from Cape Town to Tangier, they flew suicidally low — at about 90m for 113 000km — the equivalent of three times around the globe.

Connected to a high-resolution digital camera mounted on Fay's plane, a GPS tracking device tagged photos taken every 20 seconds with latitude, longitude and altitude co-ordinates. A chain of 108 641 images was snapped, creating an unprecedented visual matrix of all 91 of Africa's ecosystems. The pictures were wired to the WCS's landscape-ecology lab in New York where a three-dimensional map of each African square kilometre's ability to sustain life is being drafted.

When the MegaFlyover duo weren't airborne, Fay interviewed locals and conservationists, held town meetings and lobbied ambassadors, government officials and media. At night the two slept in salt pans, on the bare desert sand, in Bedouin tents.

Predictably, Fay found the Last of the Wild to be an embattled order.

"Virtually none of Africa's truly wild anymore," he laments. "There are lots of places where wildlife survives, but in many cases poaching has slashed populations by half in just 20 years. Wildlife in unprotected areas is relatively rare. The human species has completely dominated the continent."

Throughout Africa Fay observed haunting examples of untenable agricultural practices, particularly in South Africa, where a history of inequitable land distribution has led to unsustainable human populations and cattle overgrazing in the ex-homelands.

In Tanzania's Katavi National Park he witnessed hundreds of massing hippos heaving and dying in shrinking mud shallows under the sizzling sun, their watery habitat



HERD MENTALITY: Appearing to Mike Fay 'like spots on a strawberry', a herd of 500 black lechwe dot the flood plains of the Banguela Swamps in Zambia.

Picture: J. MICHAEL FAY © 2005 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE



Picture: PETER AND HANNELORE RAGG © 2005 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE



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**LONE MALES:** Top, 'Not an elephant, hyena or lion could wake me after eight hours in the air,' says conservationist Mike Fay (above). Above, 'On the Echira River, we placed a camera trap near where elephant highways showed a river crossing. This moment came as an old male rose from his swim and broke the infrared beam'

siphoned by rice-paddy irrigation.

But, unpredictably, he says that Africa is not the world's armpit.

"When it comes to embracing sustainable development, Africa's way ahead of the US — and the rest of the world. Actually, there's just no comparison," he says. "While Africans have had a huge impact on their land, I just don't see the scale of eco-system collapse there that I see in the US."

In fact, predicts Fay, Southern Africa has spawned sophisticated models of sustainable development that could be harnessed to address the lightning decline of the Last of the Wild in the Sahel and Sahara — a type of "African-solutions-for-Africa" approach, which he has been studying for most of his 30-year tenure on the continent as a conservationist.

"South African National Parks is doing amazing things with wildlife, constantly expanding existing parks and creating new ones," he says "The thinking is also there in Angola, Mozambique and Kenya, and is spreading north." With officially more than 30% of their land protected — an extremely high count by global standards — Botswana, Zambia and Tanzania also elicit praise.

As the Cessnas sputtered into North Africa, his enthusiasm waned — if only temporarily.

"We found a 90% reduction of large mammals in the northern Central African Republic over just 20 years, and I was like, 'Damn, how did that happen in one of the greatest wildernesses left in Africa, where the human density is less than one person per square kilometre!'" seethes an incredulous Fay.

He hesitates for a second as the well-oiled gadgetry of his brain engages and scans what must be the most complete uber-mental map of the human footprint in Africa.

In a flash his mind has quantum leapt from North to Southern Africa and extrapolated a fascinating case-scenario of human-wildlife co-habitation:

"Let's look at arid Namibia where they've come up with inspiring community-driven land-use methods, and suggest that here we've got the same potential for habitability as in Niger — except that in Namibia we're not only dealing

with more people, but much more and healthier wildlife!" postulates Fay, who believes that *Homo sapiens'* environmental impact need not be an inevitably negative one. "How did they do that? Can we use the Nambians' experience elsewhere in similar situations?"

This week Fay presented his "CPR" conservation blueprint for Africa to the World Bank and later this month he will go before the US Congress, one of the major benefactors of the multimillion-dollar grant to the Congo Basin.

"We're also going to be hitting the United Nations and the European Union. I want to meet with Tony Blair and every single president in Africa. I'm confident that we're going to take this thing to another level. Africa's on everybody's lips at the moment."

Raised in Los Angeles in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, a five-year-old Fay braved daily treks up the rocky inclines just to escape the asphyxiating shroud of smog that sheathed the city. He now claims these hikes were so seminal that they shaped the course of his life.

But I counter that they may have fuelled his fixation with shunning civilisation more so than his drive to fight environmental injustice.

"Will you ever retire from conservation and take off into the wilderness as you had during the Megatransect?" I ask.

"I've been thinking about opening an autobody repair shop in Bayonne, New Jersey," comes the dry retort to a question I guess he's heard before.

"Or I might just go wandering about South Africa." He's evidently enjoying his role as stand-up comedian. His closing punch line leaves me in stitches:

"So, if one day you spot an unshaven bum on a bench in the Lowveld, take a good look — because it might be me," he says

When I finally stop chortling I realise that Dr Fay wasn't laughing at all.

● The Africa MegaFlyover is a joint undertaking by the Wildlife Conservation Society and the National Geographic Society, and is chronicled in the September 2005 issue of National Geographic magazine, which is devoted entirely to Africa

**'When it comes to sustainable development, Africa's way ahead of the rest of the world'**



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