An interview with Mark Cawardine

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, an active and outspoken conservationist, an award-winning writer, a TV and radio presenter, a widely published photographer, a magazine columnist and a conservation consultant. He co-presented both the original radio series of *Last Chance to See*, with the late Douglas Adams, and the recent TV series with Stephen Fry.

Mark will be talking to Friends on 9 July.

Welcome to Eden. You've been here before, I believe. What were your impressions? Is there more that Eden could be doing to help animals as opposed to plants?

Thank you. It's great to be back – I love it here. I find Eden a very inspiring place – if I lived in Cornwall I'd come here all the time and sit in the rainforest to gather my thoughts. It would be great for writer's block! Seriously, I think it's a wonderful, awe-inspiring place for people who don't necessarily get the chance to travel to get a feel for some of the world's most spectacular habitats.

And, in somewhere like the Rainforest Biome, you get to visit no fewer than three different continents in one go. As far as helping animals is concerned, at the end of the day it's all about habitat - when the habitat goes, the animals go too, so habitat protection is fundamental to conservation.

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The recent Last Chance to See series with Stephen Fry was a follow-up to the original series made with the late Douglas Adams some 20 years ago. Has the accelerating pace of climate change made a big difference since then? On the whole it's the plight of humans in the face of climate change rather than that of animals that gets most of the attention.

A great many things have changed in 20 years and I was shocked, in particular, by the phenomenal amount of rainforest destruction in places such as Madagascar and Borneo. Seeing the impact of climate change was a lot more difficult, though, because it is so much more insidious. If you think the science and politics behind global warming are complicated, it's hard to imagine just how subtle, unpredictable and downright whimsical many of its impacts are likely to be on wildlife.

Hikes in temperature may lead to an increase in the number of female sea turtles relative to males, for example, while increasing levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are likely to reduce the nutritional quality of eucalyptus leaves eaten by koalas. But actually witnessing these impacts on a short visit are almost impossible. And that, of course, is one of the problems.

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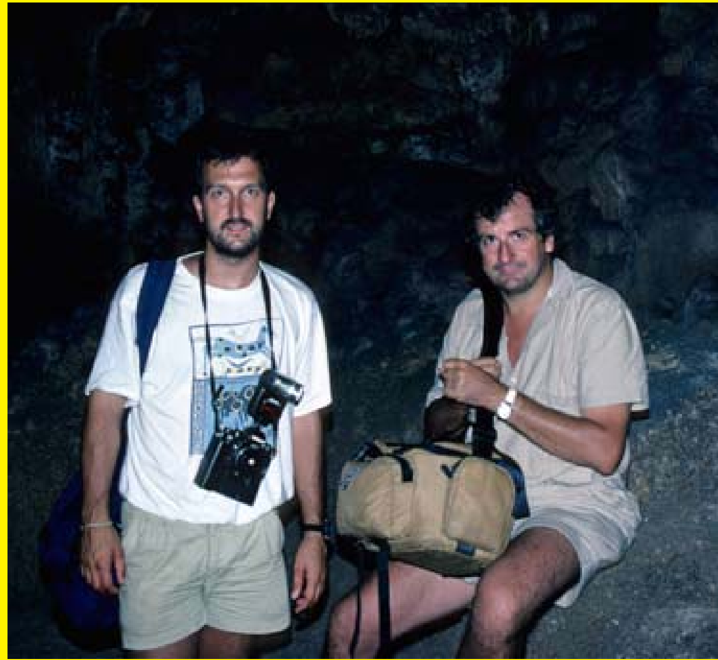
The most obvious difference between the new series and the original, apart from a different funny man, was that the original was on the radio. I couldn't help thinking sometimes that all the extra stuff – establishing shots, sending the crew ahead to film your plane landing or your boat docking and so on – must be incredibly time-consuming and tedious. Is there a better way?

Making television versus radio is certainly a very different experience – not better or worse, just different. There are more people involved, for a start, and a lot more planning and preparation and waiting around (especially if you are one of the presenters). But the benefit of doing television, of course, is that it reaches a much wider audience. The biggest difference between the two journeys, though, was more a result of communications and ease of travel.

When we did the original journey 20 years ago, there was no email and there were no mobile phones - so all the organising had to be done by telex and by booking landline phone calls hours or even days in advance. It was much, much harder as a result. And, when we got to each location, it took a lot longer to travel from A to B than it does now.



From, left to right: Mark and Stephen in Madagascar; Mark and Douglas Adams during the original series; Mark with new friend.

You became an Internet sensation because the kakapo tried to mate with your head in *Last Chance to See*. Apart from 3m hits on YouTube, and possibly the scars, have there been any lasting consequences of going viral?

Mmmm. Not so much for me (although Stephen Fry now calls me the Kakapo Porn Star and I often get people stopping me in the street to ask if the scars have healed) but it certainly has for Sirocco, the infamous kakapo. Have a look at his new website (www.spokesbird.com) and you'll see what I mean. He is probably the most famous animal/person in New Zealand now and is fronting efforts to raise money and awareness for a whole range of conservation projects. He even has about 5,000 friends on Facebook. So he's putting his new-found fame to very good use.

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There were a couple of times when I was watching the series when I worried that it was going to be our last chance to see Stephen Fry as well. Is he fitter than he looks?

He's certainly a lot fitter now than he was! By his own admission, he didn't cope all that well with all the strenuous hiking etc during the first couple of shoots. So he decided to do something about it and, being Stephen, he did something about it pretty fast! He lost six stone, no less, during filming and started a daily exercise regime which he continues to this day. I think he looks and feels a lot better for it. I have to say I was very impressed that he continued with the series at all after the first shoot in the Amazon. It was pretty gruelling by any standards and, of course, he fell and broke his arm very badly in three places just two weeks into the trip. Lesser men would have given up there and then, but he willingly and enthusiastically came back for more.

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You have devoted many years to publicising the threats to wildlife. One of the unintended consequences of this (and I'm not pointing the finger at you in particular!) is the massive increase in global ecotourism. In one of your BBC Wildlife columns you mentioned a lone nesting albatross in the Galapagos surrounded by no fewer than 3 tourist groups. This is clearly undesirable. What's the solution?

That's a huge question! And I have to admit I do feel partly responsible, because I write and talk about wonderful wildlife in exotic places. But I think it's a matter of compromise and balance. Too many unregulated tourists clearly cause serious problems in many parts of the world, yet it's important to allow – even encourage – people to get out there and enjoy wildlife. It's good for the soul and it's good for conservation by making people passionate about the subject. The trick is to keep numbers small and disturbance to a minimum, to make sure that the experiences are educational so that the tourists return home inspired and better informed, to involve local people and local businesses so that they benefit and thus have a vested interest in protecting the local wildlife and wild places and, finally, to make sure some of the money is ploughed back into conservation. There are indeed a number examples around the world – mountain gorillas in central Africa is the most obvious one that comes to mind – where the animals wouldn't be there at all without responsible tourism.

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You've got up close to animals in places and circumstances the rest of us can only dream of. *Last Chance to See* did a brilliant job of communicating your continuing joy and excitement at what you do see. Is there one encounter that means more to you than any other? Is there one encounter you're still desperate to have?

Gosh! I don't know where to start! I never look at an animal and think 'Oh, it's only a so-and-so' and always get great pleasure from watching any wildlife anywhere in the world. But if I had to name a few highlights, I would certainly include doing aerial surveys of blue whales in Mexico, diving with great white sharks in South Africa, rubbing shoulders with wild mountain gorillas in Uganda and snorkelling with spotted dolphins in the Bahamas. But there are a great many others. How about watching eight million fruit bats leaving their roost at dusk in Zambia? That was pretty impressive.

Or photographing Amazon river dolphins underwater in the Amazon. And I love watching foxes from my lounge window in Bristol! As far as new encounters are concerned, I would love to see a Javan rhino – there are none left in zoos and only a few dozen secretive individuals hanging on by a thread in the wild.

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Your new TV series is a behind-the-scenes look at the Natural History Museum. Can you tell us something about it? I imagine the staff contains creatures who are just as rare and exotic as anything we met on LCTS.

I couldn't believe my luck when I was asked to be one of the presenters on Museum of Life – to be paid to rummage around one of my favourite institutions in the whole world was a dream come true. There are no fewer than 70 million specimens in the museum – from every realm of life and all corners of the globe – and I could easily spend a lifetime there and still come out wanting to see more. What's on public display is just the tip of the iceberg, of course, because there's an incredible treasure trove behind the scenes. And, as you suggest, one of the other great pleasures was to work with some of the 350 scientists beavering away on all kinds of research projects with relevance to everything from conservation and medicine to agriculture and forensic science. They include many world experts and they are all incredibly passionate about their subjects. The idea of the series is to bring together these three parallel worlds: the specimens on public display, the wealth of stuff behind the scenes and the often groundbreaking scientific work.

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On a personal level, once we've watched the programmes, or listened to your lecture, what should we do?

Another big question! I could talk about this all day and there are endless possibilities. But there's one simple thing everyone can do – and that's to pick a subject you feel passionately about, whether it be protecting rhinos in Africa or saving rainforests in Central America, and then support an organisation working on that subject.

I'm a great believer in the smaller organisations that are specialists in their particular fields – in my experience, the staff are utterly dedicated and knowledgeable and more money tends to go directly to conservation in the field. You can help by raising funds, supporting campaigns, or lending your time to do anything from stuffing envelopes or giving lectures to digging ditches on nature reserves.

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To buy tickets for Mark Carwardine's talk see booking form on p.46.