

GENTRY



THE HOLIDAY ISSUE

The Franti family believes in the power of giving back.

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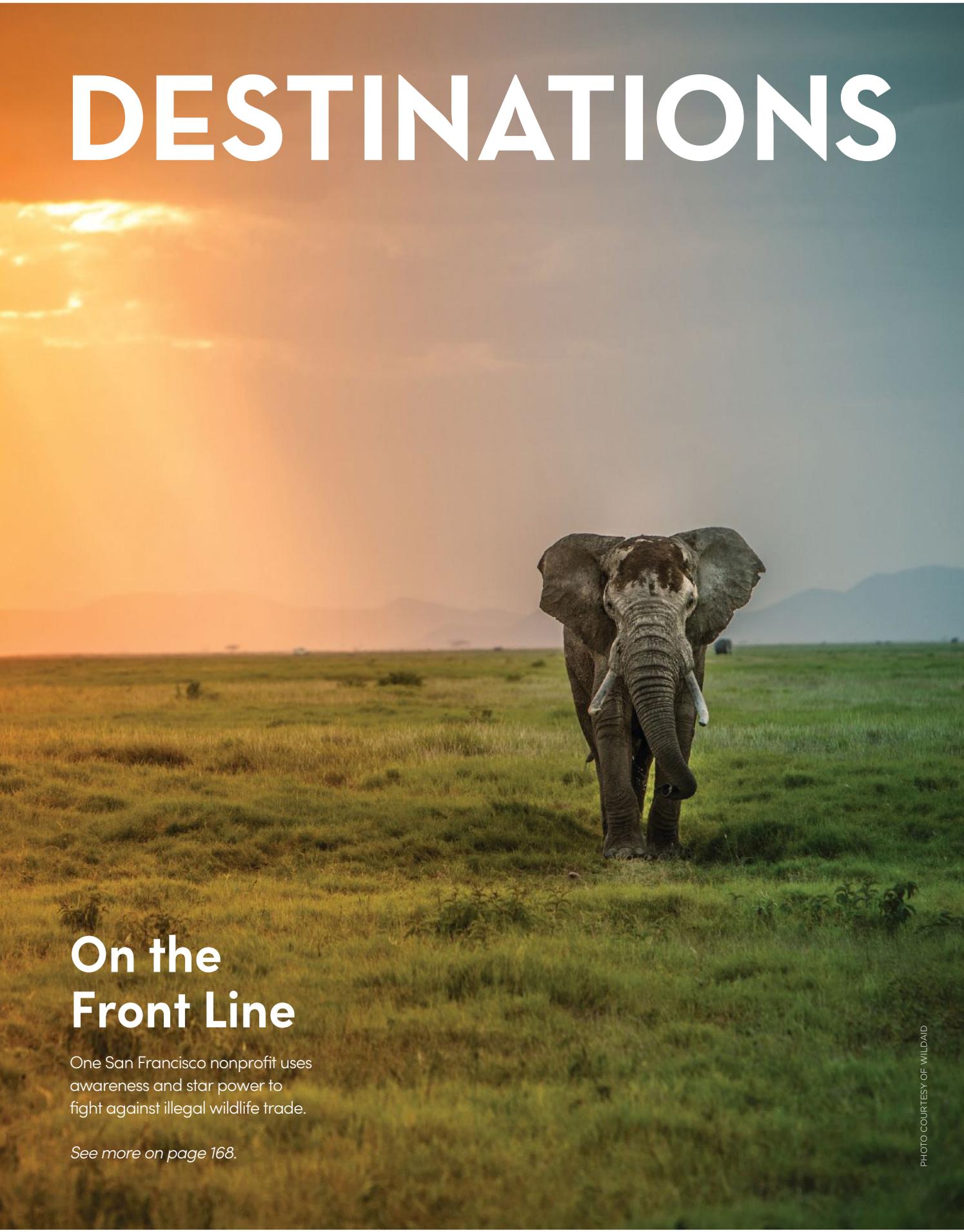
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On the Front Line

One San Francisco nonprofit uses awareness and star power to fight against illegal wildlife trade.

See more on page 168.

A herd of elephants is seen in a savanna landscape at sunset. The sky is filled with dark, heavy clouds, with a bright glow of light breaking through near the horizon. The elephants are of various sizes, including a small calf. In the foreground, the metal railing and part of a safari vehicle are visible, suggesting the viewer is on a tour. The overall mood is somber and urgent.

THE FIGHT OF THEIR LIVES

As the war against the illegal wildlife trade rages on, one San Francisco nonprofit strives to keep endangered species safe through awareness and star power.

WRITTEN BY CORRY COOK



PHOTO BY KRISTIAN SCHMIDT

AMBOSELI ELEPHANT RESEARCH PROJECT

Lupita Nyong'o with
WildAid and elephants



Criminal, corrupt, and cruel, the illegal wildlife trade is a multi-billion-dollar global industry largely driven by consumer demand in expanding economies. Some animals, such as birds, reptiles, and primates, are captured live so that they can be kept or sold as exotic pets. Other animals, many of them endangered, are killed for their commercial value as food, jewelry, décor, or traditional medicine. Their only hope? People who are driven to do something about it.

San Francisco's Corie and Peter Knights, and the entire team at WildAid, are wholly committed to protecting wildlife and reducing demand. For the past four years, the organization has been given a perfect 100-point score from Charity Navigator for financial transparency and efficiency; less than 1% of rated charities achieve this score. Co-founded in 2000 by Peter Knights, WildAid is one of San Francisco's finest examples of local action creating global impact.

Dreaming about saving the world in 2020? The impact-driven couple shares key lessons and challenges in their fight to end the illegal wildlife trade in our lifetimes.

BELIEVE YOU CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

After graduating from the London School of Economics, British-born Peter first worked on wildlife trafficking as an investigator and campaigner for the Environmental Investigation Agency. He specialized in global on-site investigations and campaigning against the trade in wild birds for pets, as well as consumption of endangered species in traditional Chinese medicine, such as bear gallbladder, rhino horn, and tiger bone.

"As human populations approach 8 billion and beyond, we've decimated most populations of large wildlife, from the ocean's sharks to the savannah's elephants," notes Peter, who serves as WildAid's CEO. "We're taking over their land and impacting them through climate change and pollution. On top of it all, we're also still killing them to trade in their body parts. Enough is enough."

"The ivory tusks of African elephants are carved into trinkets or display pieces," adds Corie, the Senior Director of WildAid's Major Gifts/Events. "Meanwhile no one has ever heard of pangolins, the most trafficked wild mammal in the world. They are small anteaters whose scales are ground into powder or put into medicine, which is then used to treat ailments like rheumatism or promote lactation in new mothers. All eight species of pangolins are endangered and unless we stop the illegal trade they will be extinct in the next decade."

DON'T BE AFRAID TO BE DIFFERENT

There are many reasons for poaching. Individuals and communities behind these acts are often poor, lacking access to employment and opportunities. Often, there is also a lack of awareness of how local wildlife can support a community through tourism dollars. Peter explains, "Having carried out numerous investigations across Asia, I had discovered that many consumers of these products had no idea where they were coming from."

Rather than fighting the fight on the ground, increasing awareness and changing perception are at the heart of WildAid's effort. Corie shares, "Our approach is not about boots on the ground, which is critically important, but it's about addressing public perception and the economic





Julia Knights shows children from Maasai village in Amboseli her photos of them.



Lupita Nyong'o at the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust

PHOTOS BY KRISTIAN SCHMIDT

forces behind the illegal wildlife trade. While everyone else was focusing on the supply side, we dared to ask, what if you can reduce the demand for these products?"

From its offices in San Francisco, WildAid runs a sophisticated and intelligent global operation. "We chose San Francisco for the culture of caring and proximity to Silicon Valley's entrepreneurs and thought leaders who have a passion for wildlife and the environment, says Peter. "And as one of the most environmentally progressive cities in the U.S., it was a natural fit and in line with our mission."

"We asked a top advertising agency to use the best Western advertising techniques to persuade people not to buy, and we approached top stars to carry the message," Corie says. "Jackie Chan was our first ambassador and since then we've recruited more than 100 icons to carry our message: 'When the buying stops, the killing can too.'"

Today WildAid works in more 20 countries and has over 45 full-time staff, and a \$15-million budget. WildAid leverages more than \$200 million annually in pro-bono media support from global media partners, as well as the reach of celebrity ambassadors such as Yao Ming, Jackie Chan, Leonardo DiCaprio, Danai Gurira, and Lupita Nyong'o, WildAid's campaigns reach up 300 million people each year to affect behavior change. Peter explains, "The organization works to stigmatize the use of wildlife products, particularly in Asia, where a ballooning middle class can afford these products. These campaigns help to reduce consumer demand, and there are signs this approach coupled with enforcement is working."

In addition to its consistent nonprofit oversight accolades, WildAid's approach is

tracking remarkable progress: Shark fin imports to China are down 80%, and consumption is down 82% since 2011. The Galapagos, where officials were once seizing up to 10,000 fins at a time, is now home to the densest shark population in the world. Rhino horn prices are down by 50% in Vietnam and China, and ivory prices are down by almost 70% in Hong Kong and China since WildAid campaigns have launched. "We have a long way to go," shares Corie, "yet we see WildAid is making a difference."

TRULY CARE AND CONNECT

For the Knights and many working at, and contributing to, WildAid, deep appreciation and emotional connection also drives devotion. "My passion first became purpose on a trip to Swaziland with Peter in 2000 before WildAid began," remembers Corie. "I looked deeply into the eyes of the majestic African elephant before me. He had wandered away from the herd and approached our jeep. We were face to face. I was moved to tears."

While WildAid, other organizations, and individual governments have made huge gains in conservation, the fight against illegal wildlife trafficking is far from over, and wars cost money.

Across Africa, for instance, up to 25,000 elephants are killed annually for their ivory, with militant groups and international criminal syndicates profiting from the trade. Meanwhile, pangolin poaching and smuggling continues unabated, and thrives in hotspots like Nigeria and Cameroon. Sharks, meanwhile, are living a silent crisis; at least 63 million and as many as 273 million sharks are killed each year in commercial fisheries, according to Pew Charitable Trusts, mostly due to the demand for

“The thought of losing a species, extinction, our children’s children seeing wildlife only contained in zoos... it drives us 24/7.”



Corie and Peter Knights

fins and other parts.

The entire WildAid operation operates on grants from foundations and individual gifts – and many of those funds arrive thanks to Corie’s tireless work. “As the chief fundraiser for individual giving for WildAid, and as a mom and wife, I put a lot of pressure on myself. I want to do my best in every role. I try to balance my time, but as they say in this industry, conservation is a lifestyle. I spend quite a bit of my time thinking about WildAid, our partners on the ground, and the potential of our impact if we just keep working harder,” she says.

“One of the biggest misconceptions about WildAid is that, while we are blessed to work with such great celebrity ambassadors, many believe they give more than their time and passion in the form of money,” she continues. “But we actually depend on donations to keep our effective and efficient programs going. We have to be nimble and creative.”

Under Corie’s direction, one of the ways the nonprofit raises money is by bringing its donors on safaris to Africa and South America. WildAid provides an immersive experience in which guests witness conservation challenges firsthand, visiting partner projects and learning from local

conservation experts. “These aren’t your typical safari tours,” Corie says proudly. “In 2020, Peter and I will be leading two VIP experiential trips. We like to embody this principal in our expedition trips. Peter and I bring our community directly to the root of our mission, where they can experience first-hand the impact WildAid achieves. Join us on safari in South Africa in the summer of 2020 or set sail on WildAid’s Passion with us for an eight-day journey through the unique ecosystems of Ecuador’s Galapagos Islands.”

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

Peter emotes, “We are literally racing against time, every minute of every day, just trying to keep dozens of endangered or vulnerable species’ numbers on earth stable or on the rise. The thought of losing a species, extinction, our children’s children seeing wildlife only contained in zoos... it drives us 24/7.”

For Corie, the very idea of her children having a future without wildlife is what keeps her awake at night. “Peter and I are lucky enough to have two daughters, Julia (15) and Charlotte (10). I think about what kind of world they will grow up in,” she continues. “There are 1.8 billion people on

the continent of Africa right now and that number is expected to double by 2050. What will happen to all of these majestic animals if human populations expand to that degree? We will most certainly not see elephants walking their ancient paths and corridors. The great migration will be wiped out.”

When it comes to the daily onslaught of heartbreaking facts and figures related to the illegal wildlife trade, hope and the good life in the Bay Area are key to the Knights’ perseverance. So too is transparency and their fight to make the world a better place for future generations. Peter explains, “It is important to us that our daughters see our efforts and understand the gravity of the challenge.” No surprise both girls long to contribute. “Peter’s favorite is sharks. Charlotte and I love elephants. Julia is obsessed with whale sharks,” Corie shares. “We are a family that loves all animals and that is reflected in WildAid’s commitment to save some of the most endangered species in the world.” Now that’s protecting the herd. ●

In the spirit of giving, please consider donating to WildAid.

Visit: www.wildaid.org/donate.



PHOTO BY SHAWN HENDRICKS FOR WILDAID

Corie and Peter Knights
Swim with Whale Sharks in
Mexico on WildAid's Whale
Shark Trip