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NICK NICHOLS'S WILD LIFE

By Conor Risch, July 25, 2017



In *A Wild Life*, the new “visual biography” of wildlife and conservation photojournalist Michael “Nick” Nichols, Melissa Harris, a former editor-in-chief and current editor-at-large of *Aperture Magazine*, unpacks Nichols’s career with intimacy, humor and nuanced understanding of her subject’s place in the world of professional photography. Through interviews with Nichols and his family members, and many editors, writers, scientists, peers and others he worked with, Harris tells Nichols’s story from his difficult childhood in Alabama through his retirement in 2015 after completing his last major project for *National Geographic*—a special issue celebrating the centennial of *Yellowstone National Park*. Harris pays close attention to Nichols’s evolution from an adventure photographer who, early on, understood “our fantasies of discovering magical worlds, of traveling through time, of communicating with wild animals,” to a brilliant storyteller and advocate for the rights of animals, whose work, she writes, is distinguished “in part from that of other photographers working in the wild by its narrative strength and evocative character portrayals.”

Nichols started his career shooting adventure travel stories for *GEO*. A major project on mountain gorillas in Rwanda changed the course of his life, leading to his first book, *Gorilla: Struggle for Survival in the Virungas*. After that work, he told Harris, “I wanted to only do projects that mattered, and that could build on themselves—become books, or be in some way expanded.” Nichols connected with primatologist Jane Goodall, working on major stories about chimpanzees for *National Geographic*, which was finally giving him assignments after his many attempts. (When Nichols first approached the magazine, the director of photography Bob Gilka suggested he become an attorney, and remained unimpressed even after *Magnum* inducted Nichols.) It was from Goodall, Harris writes, that Nichols learned that individual characters (animals) are vital to storytelling. Nichols went on to become a staff photographer for *National Geographic*. He created major bodies of work about tigers in India, and about some of the last wild places on Earth, among many other stories, as part of a long-term partnership with conservationist Mike Fay.

Thanks to the details it provides about how Nichols developed his visual strategies for projects and his understanding of photographers’ ethics; his recollections of collaborations with writers, scientists and editors; and tales of blackwater fever, tiger charges and army ant invasions, Harris’s biography will appeal to all photographers—not just those interested in wildlife and conservation. An exhibition of Nichols’s work is also on view at the *Philadelphia Museum of Art* until September 17