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Steve Mandel, Santa Cruz County Stories: Award-winning photographer rescues endangered Asiatic Lions

Santa Cruz Sentinel By Tara Leonard

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Steve Mandel's award-winning photograph of ring-tailed lemurs will be included in a show at the Smithsonian's natural History Museum in Washington (Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel)

It all started with a tree kangaroo.

In 2007 Steve Mandel went to Australia with his 15-year-old son, Alex, where they visited the Atherton Tablelands, the last remnants of a rainforest once teeming with rare, exotic animals.

"Standing on a hill that used to be in the middle of the rainforest, if you looked 360 degrees around, all you saw was little green grass all the way to the blue horizon, where they had chopped down the forest 40 years ago for forestry and cattle grazing," Mandel recalled.

"There was a tiny tree kangaroo, which is near extinction, alone in an isolated tree, and our guide said he didn't know how it got out there but it would probably die.

"I'll never forget that moment," the Soquel resident continued. "It sickened me that humans could do that to the planet. Because of that tree kangaroo I decided to dedicate all of my discretionary time to wildlife conservation."

Upon returning to the U.S. Mandel, a communications consultant and accomplished photographer who had previously focused on astrophotography, launched himself into wildlife photography, taking courses and studying with renowned photographers including Santa Cruz's Frans Lanting and Stanford University biology professor Susan McConnell.

Then in 2008, Mandel took his first business trip to India, where he fell in love with the endangered Asiatic lions of the Gir pronounced "gear" Forest in Gujarat. One of seven sub-species of lions, *Panthera leo persica* are

smaller and lighter than their African counterparts. By 1900, hunting and habitat destruction had reduced this majestic species to a mere dozen animals. By 2008, conservation efforts had gradually increased those numbers, but one critical threat remained -- more than 12,000 open pit wells built by local farmers, which created a drowning hazard for animals and humans alike.

In response, Mandel started the Lions of Gir Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to the construction of barricades around the wells. Collaborating with an India-based nonprofit called the Wildlife Conservation Trust, Mandel has already raised enough money to barricade 2,000 wells while providing local villagers with employment. There are now about 475 of the lions remaining in the wild, according to Mandel.

Today he travels the world, using his award-winning wildlife photography to raise awareness and inspire action for conservation. His captivating image of lemurs in Madagascar was recently selected for display in the Smithsonian Natural History Museum, a broad platform

for engaging public support [www.naturesbestphotography.com].

"Photos create a personal connection with people and get them thinking about the plight of wild animals worldwide," Mandel said. "It would be a shame not to have wild lions, mountain gorillas, or orangutans, and only see them in a zoo. But that's the direction we're going in. It's heartbreaking. This is a small, tangible thing I can do, to make one little dent in one little place in the world."

GETTING TO KNOW

Steve Mandel

Day job: Mandel is founder of Mandel Communications Inc, a management communications firm based in Capitola with 55 employees worldwide.

Family: Wife Carol and sons ages 40, 24 and 20. 'We're a family of photographers, but Carol is much better than me. She's an artist. I have to really work at it.'

Published works: 'Light in the Sky,' a book of astronomical images, and 'Effective Presentation Skills,' a guide for business professionals. Mandel's articles and photographs have appeared in astronomy magazines, The New York Times, Forbes, on NASA websites, and in numerous scientific publications.

Next photography trip: 'I'm going to a sloth sanctuary in Costa Rica. When you see these little things you just fall in love.'

Camera of choice: 'I use Canon professional equipment because I like its user interface and functionality. That being said, Nikon professional gear is just as good.'

Advice for budding wildlife photographers: 'Become really well-grounded in the basics of photography, study animal behavior so you can visualize your shots based on what the animal is most likely to do, and develop patience if you don't have any.' Signs a lion is getting anxious and you should back off: If its tail twitches and its ears stand up.

What other countries can learn from India: Lions occasionally take grazing cattle, but the Indian government is good about reimbursing farmers for their loss. In Kenya, for instance, they don't reimburse very well, so farmers kill lions to protect the herd.

How you can help: Buy photos or make a tax-deductible contribution. A well barricade can be built for as little as \$150.

For more information:

The Lions of Gir Foundation: www.lionsofgir.com

The Wildlife Conservation Trust: www.asiaticlion.org

Steve Mandel Photography: www.mandelphoto.com