

Q & A with Mark McDannald, the filmmaker behind *Ofir*

How did you meet Ofir?

My brother Dave met Ofir in Kenya in 2000. They became fast friends and spent many adventures in Africa together. Dave was there at the birth of LAGA and he filmed a good portion of the stuff that ended up in the documentary. I finally met Ofir in 2008; when he was in DC to address the World Bank, he stayed with me and my family in Baltimore for Christmas. He was already a fan of some of my films and when he came back to the US the following winter he asked me if I'd be interested in trying to do something with his tapes.

How does LAGA operate in the field?

They run investigations with undercover agents who locate players in the trade of endangered species. An operations unit, working with the police and officers of the ministry, carries out arrests in sting operations while fighting corruption during the arrests. Then, they reach the court, where corruption is worst. Their lawyers track cases through to prosecution to minimize opportunities for lawyers and judges to take bribes. Finally, a media unit publicizes results, helps to criminalize the bushmeat trade, and steers people toward other businesses, broadcasting that the web of corruption can be beaten.

How did Ofir get into this line of work?

Ofir has been an explorer and an adventurer since he could walk. His passion was always Africa and he'd go as often as could, embarking on fantastical journeys as he crossed remote African lands by camel, on a horse, and in dugout canoes, while living with exotic tribes and struggling against nature at its rawest: charging elephants, hyenas, flash floods, and the need to eat river algae and snails to stay alive. He almost died in a bus crash in Nigeria. He traveled from places of extreme beauty to those of the darkest horror: the war zones of Sierra Leone and Liberia. Ofir began to work as a photojournalist in order to expose his shocking encounters with war victims and child soldiers. His experiences forged in him a resolution to become an activist and to fight for justice. Jane Goodall's prediction that the extinction of apes in the wild is imminent resonated with Ofir. He came to write an article about the bushmeat trade and the heroes on the frontlines fighting to stop the race to extinction, but what he found was that no one was doing anything. After he saved an orphaned chimp from the house of a poacher he decided that he was the man for the job, and LAGA was born.

What's Ofir doing now?

He's arresting wildlife criminals. His organization is ten years old now and they've prosecuted more than 900 wildlife traffickers. LAGA has established sister organizations in Republic of Congo, Gabon, C.A.R., and Guinea, with plans to spread into DRC, Chad and Nigeria. He addressed EU parliament earlier this year, he had the Cameroon army at his disposal for an elephant operation last year, and LAGA has dismantled trafficking rings led by government officials and military personnel. "It is dangerous work," admits Ofir, who in Congo arrested an ivory dealer whose son was a warlord. But the fight for animals is really a fight against functionless and corrupt government." His methods continue to change the landscape of endangered species protection.

Describe the dire prospect that apes, elephants and other African animals are facing?

Of the two million chimpanzees that lived in Africa in 1900, only about 150,000 are thought to remain. But that number is probably way too high. Sadly, Ofir has stopped seeing gorillas in LAGA's operations in Cameroon and Gabon. There are still chimpanzee orphans, chimp meat, heads, hands, that they seize in raids. But they're not seeing any gorillas or parts of gorillas. Their numbers have plummeted. And elephants across Africa may be extinct outside of national parks within just a few years. Last year the entire elephant population in the north of Cameroon was lost to a small army of rebels from Sudan. They had done the same in Chad and Central African Republic. To stop this kind of slaughter, they need resources that even the Cameroonian army does not have. The rebels ship the ivory out and use the funds to buy weapons. Much of the ivory recovered in sting operations is bound for Asia where demand is strong.

What does the future hold for LAGA?

LAGA is an experiment. It's a kind of field for innovation. Everything they do is different. The finances are different. The way they work with donors, work with governments—everything is different. They measure everything they do—the number of arrests, number of prosecutions, number of articles published—so that donors have a measurable standard to determine if they are doing their work. In the past it was nearly impossible to know whether NGOs were doing anything they claimed to be doing. LAGA wanted to change that.

LAGA is about more than animals. Every person on the team arrives as a dependent activist, that is, they work through LAGA. The goal is to energize and educate the team on the power of activism so that they take on their own initiatives and become independent activists. Ofir wants them to leave LAGA and become activists who are

independent from him, fighting their own fights. People from LAGA have gone on to found all sorts of organizations. And this is happening at the sister branches in Gabon and Congo. This is what makes Ofir proudest because it means that his impact will outlast him and that the activists they spawn in the future can have nothing to do with him.

What can I do to help?

The LAGA Family is less than a dozen activists. It's an NGO without a single vehicle. In a world of multi-nationals among the conservation industry giants, LAGA is proud to be small and slim. If you click on the 'Donate Now' button on the LAGA website it tells you to give your time, not your money. Whether you want to help his organization or do something in your own back yard, Ofir preaches activism. Instead of using your dollars, use your time.

Why is no director credited on the film?

There really wasn't one. I ended up with about sixty unlabeled miniDV tapes and the footage was all over the place; there was little cohesion from one tape to the next, with a handful of exceptions. I had quite a bit of hidden footage that was filmed with a shoulder bag camera, its purpose was that of legal evidence. A lot of Ofir's footage of himself was used to explain the hidden footage to supporters, as there were always gaps. For the most part, there was never really a documentary in mind as things were being filmed, and what limited direction Ofir did give was not good; I had to cut around it. Ofir didn't think that the tapes held much promise and I don't think he actually expected me to take on the task, and once he handed off the tapes he really didn't influence the film at all. The entire structure of the film came together during the editing process, and Ofir does not believe that he should be credited as the director. I'm not sure the tag fits what I did, either.

What was your approach to putting this film together?

The first step was just to make sure there was a film somewhere inside all the footage, and while I watched it upload I decided that it was worth my time to keep going. I started with the best footage, the gorilla segment which was shot by my brother, to whom I'd fortunately just given a crash course in camera. The hidden footage proved to be the most difficult; it was shot with a shoulder bag and more often than not had a problem with the audio, the video or both. The content was also all over the place. It has an interesting feel, though, and I had to find a way to fit it in. Most of the footage was problematic for one reason or another, and I had almost no coverage for any scene.

Any time Ofir filmed himself he was constantly looking at the camera to check his frame; it was a real mess. I like puzzles, though, and editing a film like this is just like putting a giant puzzle together; it's just that there's no picture showing you what to do and you have to make all the pieces yourself.

How are Future, Kita and Life today?

All three are doing very well in their adulthood.