

Published December 25th, 2019

Lafayette couple's passion: saving wild animals

By Diane Claytor



WildAid CEO Peter Knights, left, and his family, Charlotte (10), Julia (15) and wife, Corie, in Africa with one of their favorite animals. Photo provided

elephants, rhinos, whale sharks, giant manta rays, and beautiful cats."

Ask Corie Knights about her kids and the Lafayette mom pulls out her phone and proudly shows photos of her two beautiful daughters. She then scrolls through pictures and pulls up another one - only this one is of an elephant. (The screen saver on her phone, "one of my favorite pictures," she says, is an elephant kissing her younger daughter.) As she reveals the elephant necklace she wears everyday, it's obvious that, next to her family, Knights' passion is for those large, majestic animals.

As senior director of major gifts and events for WildAid, the global conservation organization that is leading the fight to end illegal wildlife trade, Knights has the extraordinary opportunity to live her passion everyday. While elephants may be one of the more important animals in the wild for Knights - "I just love them so much and am at peace and humbled when I am in their company," she says - her love for all wild animals is apparent. "For me," she stated in a recent interview, "being in the wild is my church. Many of the greatest moments of my life have been spent in the company of

Knights' love for animals started when she was a little girl growing up in Connecticut. Moving to Sausalito as a young woman, she would go to the Marine Mammal Center and, she remembers fondly, feed herring milkshakes to baby harbor seals in the middle of the night. But her real passion developed later - after she studied theater at the California Institute of the Arts and spent several successful years acting.

A trip to an African reserve and a ride in the back of a safari vehicle changed Knights' life. As she tells it, the matriarch of a pack of elephants walking in the bush moved out of the line, "came over to the car and just stood next to me. She was majestic. I was looking into her eyes, which were amazing. I had tears streaming down my face. We very peacefully stared at each other for a minute, maybe two, maybe three ... then she walked away, I felt this overwhelming sadness. I promised myself in that minute that I was going to do whatever I could to protect these magnificent animals." She has kept that promise.

The illegal wildlife trade is a multibillion-dollar global industry, driven predominantly by consumer demand. WildAid was founded by Knights' husband (and current WildAid CEO), Peter Knights, 20 years ago, with the sole purpose of protecting wildlife by reducing demand. The organization has 45 employees (20 in San Francisco) in 20 countries and a budget of more than \$10 million; monies come primarily from grants and donations, large and small. For the past four years, WildAid has received a perfect 100-point score from Charity Navigator (a major charity assessment organization) for financial transparency and efficiency, a number received by less than 1% of rated charities. Additionally, the Knights recently received "The Environmental Award of Excellence" for WildAid by the Lafayette City Council.

"We are the only organization in the world that focuses on ending the demand for endangered wildlife products," Knights explains. "We do this by producing massive public awareness campaigns, attracting A-list celebrity spokespeople, sporting icons and religious leaders to spread our messages: 'These are our animals. This is our heritage. Poaching steals from us all,' and 'When the buying stops, the killing can too.'"

WildAid achieves its mission to end illegal wildlife trade by leveraging more than \$230 million per year in pro bono media support to broadcast their ads to more than 300 million people primarily in Africa and Asia; celebrities that have spoken on WildAid's behalf include HRH Prince William, David Beckham, Yao Ming, Jackie Chan and Lupita Nyong'o. While, admittedly, they have a long way to go to remove demand and thus eliminate illegal poaching of wild animals, WildAid's campaigns are succeeding: shark fin imports are down 82%, the price of selling ivory is down by 80% and the price of selling rhino horns is down by 65%. "It's all about reducing the demand and bringing down the price," Knights states.

At a recent WildAid event, Academy Award winner Nyong'o spoke on the importance of WildAid. "What they're doing is making a huge difference in raising awareness on behalf of elephants, on behalf of wildlife, on behalf of human beings, as well. It's for our own good."

Knights has an unwavering commitment to making the world a better place and saving some of the most endangered species in the world. She repeatedly tells her children that "you never know where you're going to end up in life but if you have a passion, it will drive you where you should be."

For more information on WildAid or to donate to help save these wild animals, go to wildaid.org

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