

An Environmental Odyssey

By PATRICK CARR

“SOMETIMES I GET THIS picture in my head. I see the rate of destruction of the earth’s environment as a line climbing a graph, and our work to preserve nature as another line — at first far below the other, but climbing more steeply. I can’t see the whole picture though, and I wonder, ‘Will our line overtake the other somewhere off the graph beyond my vision?’”

This thoughtful question came as Mark Dubois considered the lessons and adventures of his recent trip around the world. Long a lover of rivers and other wild places, Mark was one of the founders of Friends of the River. While serving as FOR co-director in 1979, Mark dramatically displayed his dedication to preserving wild rivers through his personal attempt to halt the flooding of the Stanislaus River by hiding chained into its canyon.

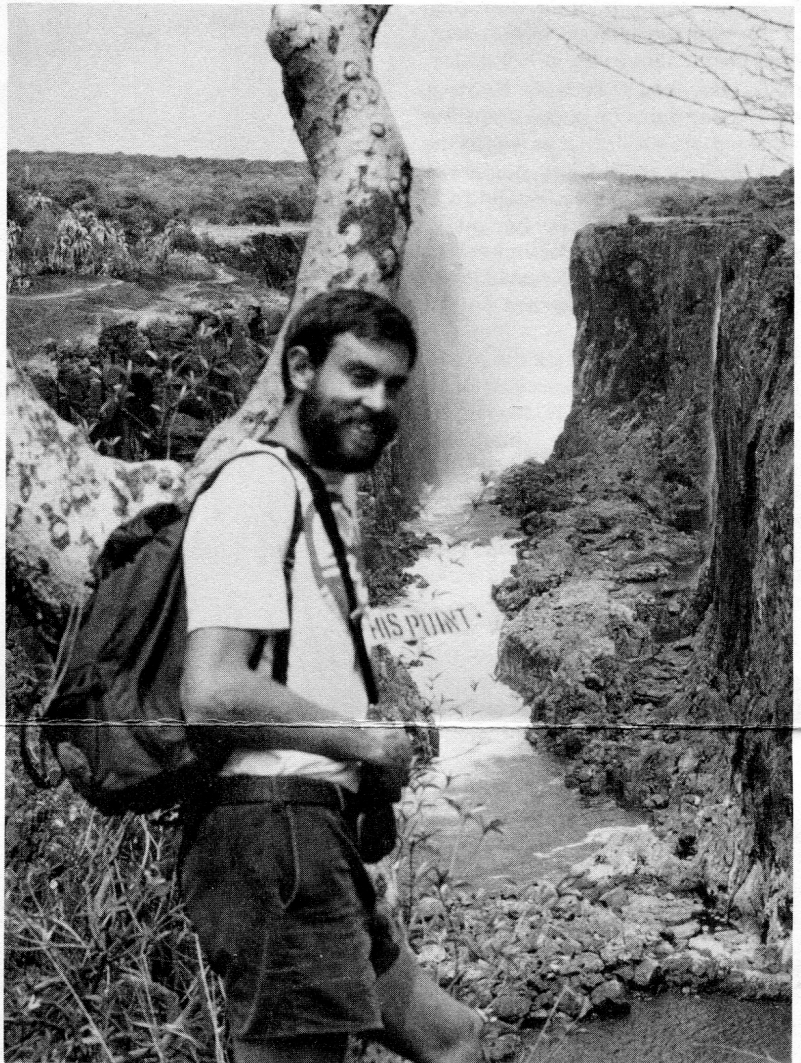
Mark married Sharon Negri in September, 1983, and soon after they left for ten months in Europe, East Africa, the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia, and China. Upon returning to California last August, Mark was invited to join musician Paul Winter on a trip to Siberia. It was an offer he couldn’t refuse.

I knew that a major purpose of these travels had been to examine the state of the environment, and of the environmental movement, in other countries. And I’d never known *anyone* who had been to Siberia. So I was filled with curiosity. To get the story, I visited Mark at his home in Sacramento. In the late 1970s this house had been the main office of Friends of the River and communal residence for many of its staff.

*Women and children in India
throw their arms around trees
to halt logging*

At 6’7” and 200 pounds, Mark immediately impresses people. But those who lived and worked with him at 401 San Miguel Way were most impressed by Mark’s dedication to the principle of “living lightly on the Earth.” “To save energy,” one former housemate/co-worker says, “Mark kept the heat off most of the time. When he’d go out, we’d say ‘Oh boy, we can get warm now’ and turn it up.” To about 60 degrees, anyway.

After Mark’s bear hug greeting, I found



Courtesy Sharon Negri

Mark Dubois at Victoria Falls in East Africa

the living room warmer than I’d expected. When I suggested moving to another room to avoid interruptions, Mark warned me it was cool in the rest of the house, “but it should be okay.” I grabbed a sweater.

If it was cold, it made no difference as soon as Mark began talking of his adventures: climbing Mt. Kenya, rafting the Zambezi River, and hiking through Asian rain forests. But his Siberia trip was even more fascinating.

“I’d always thought of Siberia as a vast wasteland, the place the czars sent their enemies,” he told me, “but it turned out to be an incredibly beautiful wilderness. Lake Baykal reminded me of the way Tahoe looked when I was young.” Mark explained that the mile-deep lake is the largest and deepest natural lake in the world and con-

tains 21% of the earth’s surface fresh water. “It was also the place that triggered the Soviet environmental movement.”

I wondered about this. Did the Soviets even have an environmental movement? “In the 1960s they were building some big factories along the shore of Lake Baykal. A lot of scientists opposed the development, but the factories were finished anyway. Within four months fish were dying, there was a big outcry, and they closed the plants.” Fish still thrive in Lake Baykal, and Mark watched villagers drinking directly from the lake, without filters or chemicals.

“They’ve had many of the same environmental problems we’ve had here in the U.S. But like us, they’ve also begun to establish wilderness areas and nature preserves.” Mark was surprised by the similarity of Rus-

sians to Americans. "Of all the countries we saw, people in the Soviet Union reminded me more of Americans than any other. You could take 100 people in Moscow, drop them on a street in New York, and nobody would know the difference — if it weren't for all those fur caps!"

Mark's experience in the Soviet Union was far more positive than I'd expected. But in other nations, the environment and the odds for its protection looked far worse. "In Thailand, biologists recently documented that 85% of the rain forests have been wiped out. We met a man there who spent the last 30 years trying to preserve land for wildlife habitat. We cried with him as he explained that in the one major preserve he had gotten established, the government plans to build a dam that would flood it and cut it in half." Even tribesmen in Thailand's remote highlands talked of no longer seeing wildlife that as children they had commonly found.

In India and China, the dramatic effects of overpopulation appalled Mark. "We took a train ride in India, and for a day and a half all we saw were tiny family gardens, each the size of this room. Likewise, China seemed like one endless rice paddy, with every available patch of land cultivated."

But at least people were eating in those countries. "East Africa was a real shock for my "California-Pollyanna" optimism. Kids with bloated bellies and people starving, it was hard for me to take." Mark talked of the ravages of slash-and-burn agriculture, of once-verdant plains now overgrazed to a stubble, and of farmers who gave up and simply quit trying to get a crop.

But throughout the Third World nations, Mark and Sharon also found hopeful signs. In Malaysia they learned of an active branch of Friends of the Earth that works closely with local consumer groups, and in Sri Lanka Mark found an American-educated activist who persuaded the government to distribute oxen and wood carts to farmers, instead of mechanized tools. "That's appropriate technology when they often can't afford fuel for a tractor."

Mark found that the problems facing Third World environmentalists are different and in many cases more severe than those of their American counterparts. In India, Mark met a man he considered "the most dynamic environmentalist" he met the whole trip. "He was curious about American environmentalists and asked why I do what I do. I told him 'In America, most of us live in cities and we're discovering that there's a magic in our remaining rivers and wildlands and we're trying to get back in touch with it before it's too late.'

"He listened and said 'In India, 90% of our people live on the land, and they're in touch with it. They live with nature. They know what the sun is doing every day, whether it's foggy or cloudy or hot, because they're right under it. The problem for them is having to



Courtesy Sharon Negri

A different kind of river trip for Mark

walk hours each day to the nearest water, or having to use dried cow dung for fuel because the trees have already been chopped down." With little short of survival at stake, the Indian environmental movement is growing rapidly: in the Himalayan foothills, women and children of the "Chitco Movement" throw their arms around trees to prevent loggers from felling them, and Mark told of "a dozen groups working on their local river issue" to protect themselves from being flooded by proposed dams.

"In the Western World, we talk about nature and the wilderness as if it's apart from us."

For Mark, the challenges of Third World environmentalism have important lessons for the movement in this country. "We in the Western world talk about nature and the wilderness as if it's apart from us. We don't have to think about where our water comes from when we turn on the tap, or about the forests that supply wood for our houses. There's no connection. But after having seen the ravaged state of so much of this

planet, and the poverty in which most of its people live, I feel we need to be very clear that environmentalism isn't *just for aestheticians* — *it's for survival*. And we need to learn how to explain that better. It's not 'Let's save *that*, over there — *that* is really us!'

"I feel that a big mistake environmentalists often make is in fighting the *bad guys*, whether it's the dam builders or the loggers or whoever. We need some sort of leap beyond that in the way we think about our relationship to the Earth and to each other. For example, I've bought wood for this house, and I didn't ask if that wood came from a clearcut — I just looked for the cheapest price. I'm convinced that we, as consumers of products made by those people we often fight, need to look at the choices that we make every day that affect our environment and work *with* those people toward a change.

"You know, in the years before this trip, the Stanislaus River kept me motivated with a certain feeling of panic, because its demise always looked so imminent. But this trip gave me that same feeling about our whole planet!"

The room's chill had finally caught up with me, and it seemed a fitting end to our talk. I wasn't sure I agreed with everything Mark had said, but later, while sitting at dinner with some friends, I kept thinking back to those last words. And I wondered, will those lines intersect somewhere off the graph, before it's too late? □