

NOVEMBER 2005

Smithsonian

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE

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~ ED BEARSS BY ADAM GOODHEART ~ TIM BERNERS-LEE BY TOM STANDAGE ~
WENDELL BERRY BY PAUL TRACHTMAN ~ MARGARET BURBIDGE BY MARCIA
BARTUSIAK ~ JANIS CARTER BY DOUGLAS FOSTER ~ CHUCK CLOSE BY ARTHUR C.
DANTO ~ JOHN DOBSON BY DON MOSER ~ RENÉE FLEMING BY STEPHEN HASTINGS
~ BILL GATES BY JIMMY CARTER ~ FRANK GEHRY BY ROBERT DUFFY ~ ANDY
GOLDSWORTHY BY ARTHUR LUBOW ~ D.A. HENDERSON BY ROBIN MARANTZ HENIG
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LANGRIDGE BY TERENCE MONMONEY ~ RICHARD LEAKEY BY VIRGINIA MORELL ~
MARK LEHNER BY ALEXANDER STILLE ~ ANNIE LEBOVITZ BY SARAH BOXER ~ MAYA
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TOM PIAZZA ~ ROBERT MOSES BY NEIL HENRY ~ JANE MT. PLEASANT BY GARY PAUL
NABHAN ~ DOUGLAS OWSLEY BY AARON ELKINS ~ GORDON PARKS BY ROY ROWAN
~ MARK PLOTKIN BY ELIZABETH ROYTE ~ SALLY RIDE BY K.C. COLE ~ CLYDE
ROPER BY RICHARD ELLIS ~ DAPHNE SHELDRIK BY DOUGLAS CHADWICK ~ STEVEN
SPIELBERG BY KENNETH TURAN ~ JULIE TAYMOR BY EDWARD ROTHSTEIN ~ JAMES
WATSON BY HORACE FREELAND JUDSON ~ EDWARD O. WILSON BY ROBERT WRIGHT

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I would hate to imply that it's only Bill's intellect and business sensibilities that drive his philanthropy. It's his heart.

—JIMMY CARTER ON BILL GATES (BELOW), PAGE 36



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Mark Plotkin

An ethnobotanist takes up the cause of rain forest conservation / **BY ELIZABETH ROYTE**

MARK PLOTKIN first stepped into the Amazon jungle in 1978. A college dropout working at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, he had been invited to join an expedition to search for a rare crocodilian. By the time *SMITHSONIAN* reporter Donald Dale Jackson caught up with him in the Suriname rain forest a decade later, the 33-year-old scientist, now a Tufts PhD, was documenting the Tirio Indians' use of medicinal plants and was well on his way to becoming one of the nation's best-known ethnobotanists and conservation activists. Since that story appeared, in 1989, says the intrepid—some might even call him gonzo—plant explorer, “a lot has happened.”

Today, he says, “indigenous wisdom is appreciated in ways it wasn't before. There's an interest in other religions, in spirituality, organic gardening, crop diversity, rain forest conservation, human rights. It's all intermingled.” As evidence of ethnobotany's new status, he cites a *Wall Street Journal* cartoon in which a man pushes his way through gawkers at an accident scene, hollering, “Let me through, I'm an herbalist!”

From his very first visits to indigenous villages, Plotkin understood that shamans—tribal elders who use plants for healing—were actually the rain forest's most endangered species. Not only were tropical forests and their medicinal plants falling to the rancher's torch, miner's pick, or farmer's plow, but shamanic wisdom itself was disappearing as younger tribal members, seduced by Western culture, lost interest in their own traditions. In 1993, Plotkin published *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice*, a chronicle of his own swashbuckling adventures in the jungle as well as a call to preserve nature's pharmacopeia, with its untapped promise for curing disease. Now in its 25th printing, *Tales* has been translated into five languages and has been adapted into a video, audiotape, children's book and IMAX film.

Convinced that rain forest conservation wasn't going to succeed without the full participation of indigenous people, in 1995 Plotkin and his wife, Liliana Madrigal, founded the Amazon Conservation Team (ACT) to create such partnerships. “Our approach is bottom up,” he



Plotkin (in Suriname, with Amashina, a Tirio shaman, in 2005) believes that "indigenous wisdom is appreciated in ways it wasn't before."

says. "Tribes come to us. They want to protect their forest, culture, system of healing. They want clean water, job opportunities, ethno-education."

It's a tall order for a \$3 million operation working out of a second-floor walk-up located above a kebab shop in Arlington, Virginia. Still, ACT has mounted a highly successful flagship program, Shamans and Apprentices, which helps healers share medicinal knowledge with tribal members of the next generation. So far, shamans have trained 70 apprentices in Suriname and Colombia. ACT has also established clinics in southern Suriname run by tribal healers using traditional medicines and has taught 18 tribes in Suriname and Brazil

"The first time I came here I thought I'd found paradise. I still think it's as close as we're apt to get."

—MARK PLOTKIN, SMITHSONIAN, FEBRUARY 1989

how to use Global Positioning Systems to map some 29.5 million acres—a major step toward more effective management of their ancestral lands.

Plotkin dismisses both "pinheads who say extinction is natural" and critics who ask why he won't publish the chemical compositions of beneficial plants. "They are the Indians' secrets: Why should I publish them?" He is especially proud of an effort he undertook as a graduate student: creating, translating and handing over to the Tirio a handbook on

their own medicinal plants. (Before then, the tribe had only one other book written in their language: the Bible.)

In his spare time, Plotkin has been writing a field guide to the lianas (climbing vines) of Suriname and developing an ethnobotanical explanation for why jazz originated in his native New Orleans. (It has to do with the arrival of marijuana in that port city.)

As media focus has shifted, rain forest conservation no longer generates the headlines it once did. "But there is a direct link between environmental degradation and political uncertainty," Plotkin insists. "Look at Haiti and Rwanda. They're overpopulated, their forests are gone and they're politically unstable. The world is an ever-smaller place. Environmental protection everywhere concerns us, because of potential medicines in plants and animals, climate change, the impact of pollution, human misery. So I ardently reject the idea that the rain forest has had its day."

He pauses to consider his personal trajectory, recalling his mentor Richard Evans Schultes, the renowned Harvard ethnobotanist. Plotkin's epiphany took place at a Schultes slide show of indigenous people. "It was blowguns, botanical potions, healing in the spirit realm," says Plotkin. "And I thought, 'How cool is that?' It really got the blood of a 19-year-old racing." He pauses, perhaps considering his recent 50th birthday, then adds, "You know, it's racing still." ●