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THIS WAY FORWARD: George Schaller in northeast Afghanistan's Pamir Mountains

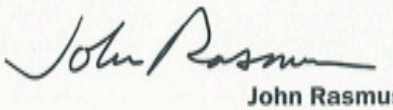
Life to the Fullest

In his 50-year career, wildlife biologist George Schaller has helped save some of Earth's most famous creatures: mountain gorillas, giant pandas, snow leopards, and Serengeti lions. Schaller calls these species "charismatic megafauna," a term that means, roughly, "big animals that people love." As writer Scott Wallace explains in "The Megafauna Man" (page 66), this mouthful of a concept lies at the heart of Schaller's approach to conservation. By focusing on large, captivating animals, Schaller has had remarkable success inspiring people to protect entire ecosystems.

For this, our annual Best of Adventure issue, we offer a new take on charismatic megafauna: namely, 13 larger-than-life individuals (Schaller among them) whose feats in conservation, exploration, and humanitarian aid will inspire you to achieve greatness yourself. Dan Mazur sacrificed his summit bid on Everest to save a man's life at 28,000 feet; Bruce Beehler discovered more than 40 unknown-to-science species in New Guinea; Colin Angus and Julie Wafaei, our Adventurers of the Year, became the first team to circumnavigate the globe traveling only under their own power. Accounts of these outsize accomplishments begin on page 54 ("They Did It!") and are followed by "Gear & Trends" (page 75), our yearly report on the state of adventure, with all the latest information you need to get out and start making history yourself.

These 13 larger-than-life individuals will inspire you to achieve greatness.

Making history—or rather, rewriting it—was exactly what author John Haslett intended eight years ago when he launched his balsa-wood raft, the *Manteño II,* into the Pacific. Haslett planned to re-create the ancient journeys of indigenous Ecuadorians to Mexico, but he and his crew soon found themselves stuck in a terrifyingly still expanse of ocean off the coast of Panama. The sea-snake-and-shark-filled tale of their escape, "Trapped in The Gyre," begins on page 44. You won't be able to put it down.



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THE MEGAFAUNA MAN

After 50 years of fighting to save the world's endangered creatures, George Schaller has got it down to a science. But in Afghanistan—home to the Marco Polo sheep—the biologist must contend with murky tribal politics and rogue opium dealers. **Scott Wallace** reports from the wild.

Photography by Beth Wald

Lifetime Achievement ➡ GEORGE SCHALLER

The armed men came out of nowhere. There were a half dozen of them—ghostly silhouettes emerging from the driving snow with AK-47s slung on their shoulders. George Schaller, the world's most influential naturalist, stopped in his tracks and took stock of the group. From a distance he could make out tattered battle fatigues beneath their khaki woolen wraps; they were leading a cluster of shaggy, long-horned yaks. + "Who could this be?" he wondered aloud, his voice registering both curiosity and apprehension. + Out here in the rugged Wakhan corridor of northeastern Afghanistan, there were only a few possibilities. The strangers

hastening toward us were either gun-totting Islamic extremists, thieves trolling for targets of opportunity, or—we hoped—government soldiers on border patrol.

"Salaam aleikum!—Peace be with you!" yelled our guide, Sarfraz Khan, with an exaggerated wave meant to put the approaching men at ease. "George," he lowered his voice, "maybe you have the letter from the commander?"

Schaller nodded and reached into his rucksack for a note of safe conduct he'd received from a local warlord. With it, we could operate with a modicum of freedom and security in these forbidden lands. Without it, we faced a troubling and uncertain fate.

But before Schaller could produce the letter, Sarfraz's furrowed brow gave way to a broad, flashing smile. He had spotted an old friend in the group. "Border patrol!" Sarfraz shouted, rushing forward to greet the oncoming soldiers. Schaller and I exchanged looks of relief: We were safe.

HARD SCIENCE: Schaller fashions a tentside bath. Opposite, clockwise from top left: The sheep first spotted by Marco Polo in 1273; the herd retreats into the Pamirs; consulting with village leaders in Sarhad, Afghanistan; negotiating safe passage with an Afghan patrol on the Chinese border.

At 73, the German-born scientist stands tall and slim, with deep-set hazel eyes and a small hawkish nose. He keeps his salt-and-pepper hair neatly combed and, even out in the wild, manages a clean-shaven appearance every morning. We had been hiking up to eight hours a day at elevations above 14,000 feet for more than a week, and he never seemed to tire.

Amid embraces between the soldiers and our Afghan guides and porters, Schaller located the hand-scrawled letter and passed it to a gaunt, bewhiskered man who identified himself as the ranking officer. What were we doing out here? the soldier asked, eyeing our group of a dozen donkeys, half as many Wakhi porters, and three foreigners—Schaller, photographer Beth Wald, and myself. Outsiders rarely visit the Wakhan (also called Vakhan) corridor, a narrow mountainous strip that projects like a crooked finger for 190 miles between Tajikistan and Pakistan to China. "Searching for Marco Polo sheep," Schaller replied. We'd left the last road over a week earlier, heading for the Little Pamir, on the northern edge of the Hindu Kush, and then on to the Wakhan Mountains.

The officer frowned. This was no place for an unarmed research party, he said. When he arrived at his base in a few days, he'd send some soldiers to escort us to the Little Pamir. Schaller bowed and pressed his hand to his heart, a customary gesture of respect and deference, and we took our leave. It was only August, but already snow had started to blow through the mountains.

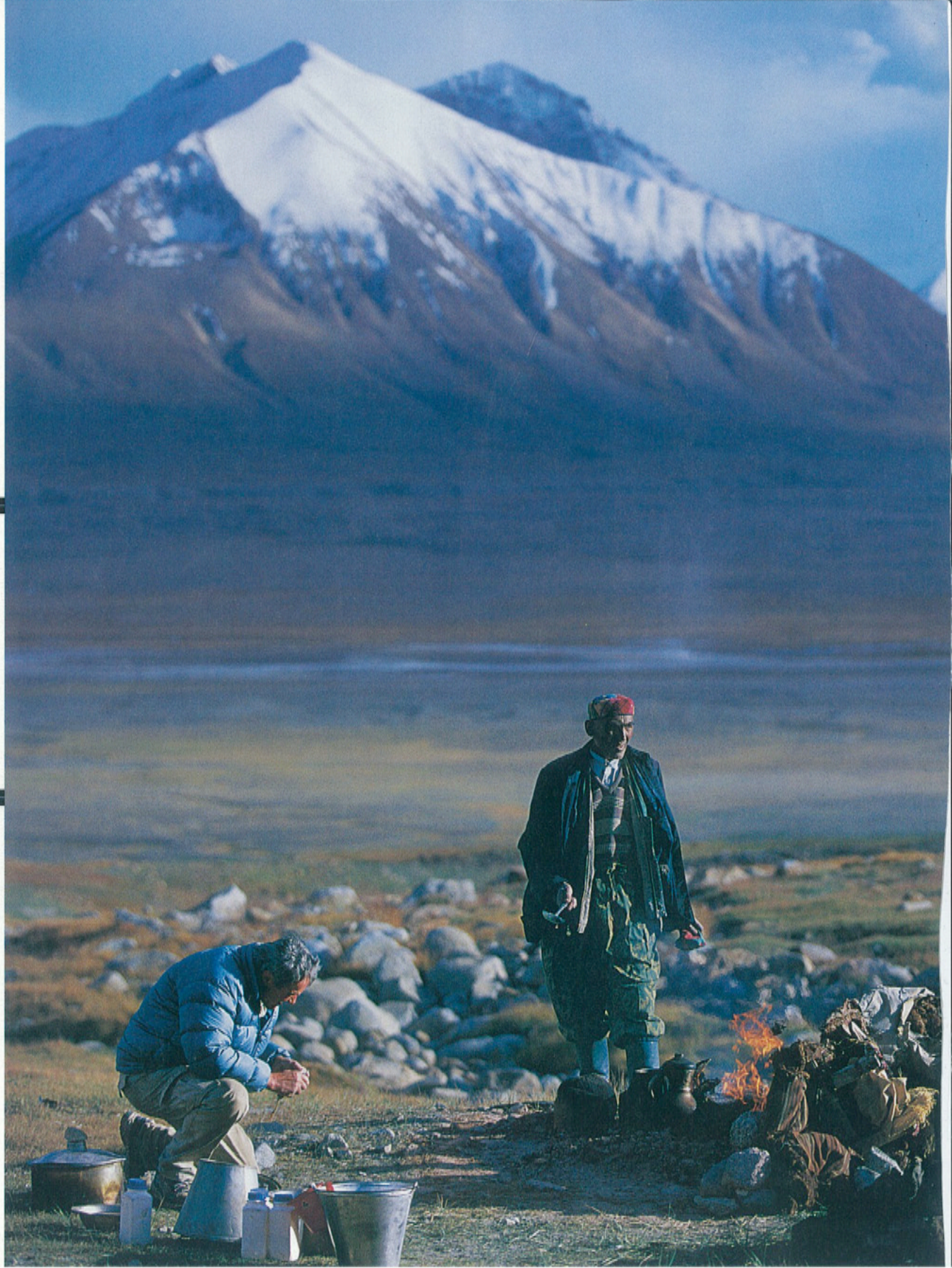
SCHALLER HAD COME TO THIS REMOTE CORNER of the western Himalaya in pursuit of perhaps the most ambitious project of his 50-year career: the creation of an international peace park in a vortex of strife that stretches across parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, and Tajikistan. The proposed park's most celebrated inhabitants are dwindling herds of Marco Polo sheep—the world's largest and most magnificent wild sheep, which share the labyrinthine, windswept valleys of the Wakhan corridor with nomadic communities of Wakhi and Kyrgyz herders. Known for their spiraling horns that measure up to six feet long, the sheep have become a mythical trophy for international hunters and a rare source of meat for the impoverished Wakhi and Kyrgyz nomads. "The Marco Polo is a beautiful animal," Schaller asserted when we set out. "It has as much right to exist as we do."

As he has done with other so-called "charismatic megafauna"—animals such as jaguars and snow leopards, which can capture the public imagination through their startling beauty alone—Schaller intends to use the Marco Polo sheep as a symbol, a flagship species, to galvanize support for the protection of the entire habitat. "So you're fighting not just for the sheep but for the whole environment, all the plants and animals in this area," he told me. "My focus is on the sheep, because it's the most conspicuous animal here."

It's a strategy that Schaller, the vice president of science and exploration at the Wildlife Conservation Society, has employed again and again to become perhaps the greatest force for conservation in more than a century. "He is one of the finest field biologists of our time," says writer Peter Matthiessen, whose 1979 National Book Award–winning classic *The Snow Leopard* depicts Schaller as the intensely private, indefatigable "GS" during their shared trek through the Himalaya. "He pioneered the practice of turning regions of field research into wildlife parks and preserves."

Schaller's work as a biologist includes the first studies of mountain gorillas in central Africa (which later served as a field manual for Dian Fossey), lions in the Serengeti, giant pandas in China's Wolong Mountains, snow leopards in Nepal, and chiru (antelope) in Tibet. His conservation efforts led to the protection of large stretches of the Amazon and the Pantanal in Brazil, the Hindu Kush in Pakistan, and upland forests in Southeast Asia, as well as Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Tibet's massive Chang Tang Wildlife Preserve—in total, more than 20 parks and preserves worldwide.

For the two years leading up to this trip into the Afghan Pamir, Schaller worked on the far side of the Amu Darya river in Tajikistan, lobbying officials and tour operators to share fees from foreign trophy hunters with local herdsmen. Thirty-one years before that, he convinced Pakistan's then president Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to create Khunjerab National Park on the Wakhan Mountains' southern flank. And for the past 20 years, he has spent more time in China than he has at home in Connecticut, much of it on the highland steppes of Tibet and Xinjiang, across the Wakhan's eastern frontier, where he pushed the Chinese to establish the second largest



protected area in the world, the 115,500-square-mile Chang Tang preserve. If he could convince Kabul to get on board, support for his 20,000-square-mile International Pamir Peace Park would reach critical mass.

But Afghan officials couldn't justify sanctioning the preserve until they had reliable census data. How many Marco Polo sheep lived in the Wakhan? What was their range? What threats did they face? No one had attempted a thorough study here for 30 years. That was why Schaller had come to Afghanistan. Over the next two months, he planned to survey some 500 miles of the Wahkan region—on foot.

If the mission seemed to border on the absurd—searching for an elusive animal in a country beset by armed conflict and on the verge of its first democratic elections—Schaller was not the least bit deterred. "If you waited for the world to be quiet," he said, "you'd end up staying at home."

A BOMB HAD ROCKED THE PROVINCIAL capital of Fayzabad the night before Schaller, Wald, and I arrived there in mid-August of 2004. We immediately hired a pair of decrepit vans and drove down a washed-out road to Sarhadd, a Wakhi village of stone huts set beneath the towering Hindu Kush. There we picked up guides and pack animals and followed an ancient caravan route into the mountains. This part of Afghanistan was George Schaller's kind of place—rugged, wild, lost in time, where a herd of lumbering yaks could suddenly emerge from the vast emptiness and vanish into it again.

"I think I was misplaced by 150 years," he told me, with a reference to the era of the great scientist-explorers, such as Charles Darwin, Alexander von Humboldt, and Alfred Russel Wallace. "It's far more satisfying to me to be in a remote area, traveling slowly on foot or in a caravan. You look around, you see things, smell things."

A week after leaving the road in Sarhadd, we arrived in the broad central valley of the Little Pamir and, on its northern edge, a Kyrgyz encampment. A wedding was in progress, and the celebration resembled a medieval carnival: Boys led prancing horses through the crowd and girls cupped their hands to their mouths, whispering secrets. Children snatched at banknotes tossed into the breeze by the hosts of the feast. Out on the dusty steppe, horsemen jostled over a stuffed goat hide in a game of *buzkashi,* Afghanistan's free-for-all version of polo.

Schaller waited discreetly off to the side. A pep talk on conservation might have seemed a bit ill-timed at a wedding party. But with so many of the Pamirs' inhabitants gathered in one place, he couldn't afford to let the moment slip away. He suspected that the Kyrgyz, migratory herders who keep sheep, goats, and yaks, were hunting Marco Polo sheep for food.

> "I think I was misplaced by 150 years," Schaller told me. "It's far more satisfying to me to be in a remote area, traveling slowly on foot. You look around, you see things, smell things."

As the feast wound down and the bride and groom disappeared into the nuptial yurt, Schaller stepped forward to address the men. Their high cheekbones and Siberian-style fur hats suggested a distant time of Mongol hordes and omnipotent khans.

CULTURE MAVENS From top: Nomadic Kyrgyz women in traditional dress; Kyrgyz men engage in the polo-like game of *buzkashi,* which uses a goat hide instead of a ball. Opposite: Schaller helps to prepare dinner in the shadow of the Pamirs.

"We come here because we've heard about the legendary generosity of the Kyrgyz people," Schaller began. "Last year I had the hospitality of the Kyrgyz across the border in Tajikistan." He paused to allow Sarfraz, an ethnic Wakhi from Pakistan, to translate his words into Dari, the lingua franca of the Wakhan's distinct ethnicities. "Many foreign hunters are coming to Tajikistan. They spend $25,000 to shoot a Marco Polo sheep. But local communities get nothing." A volley of disgruntled murmurs arose from the crowd.

"Some day soon, foreign hunters may come here to hunt Marco Polo sheep," he said. "If that happens, the Kyrgyz people must benefit." The men nodded approval. "Foreigners will spend big money to hunt, but only if there are big Marco Polo sheep with big horns." He let that sink in before making his final pitch. "That means the Kyrgyz people must protect the sheep so they can grow big, and you can make money from them." The meeting concluded with a hearty round of applause.

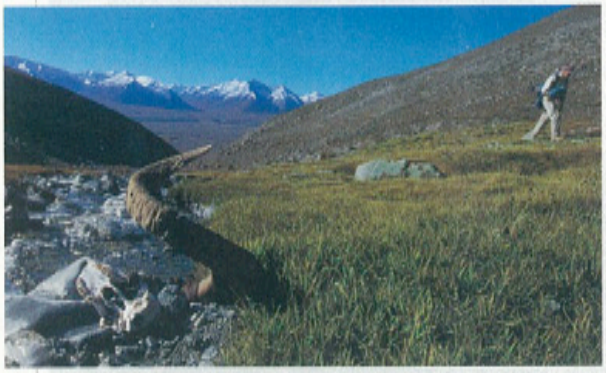
Though Schaller is no fan of trophy hunting, he is a pragmatist. If controlled hunting and tourism can bring income to the struggling Kyrgyz, it might provide them incentive to protect Marco Polo sheep from a slow slide toward extinction. "Conservation depends on the goodwill of the locals," he said. "You've got to get them involved, so they have a stake in the outcome."

A WEEK AFTER THE KYRGYZ WEDDING CELEBRATION, in the pitch-dark of the predawn, I was awakened by a cheery voice outside my tent. "Scott, I'm leaving in ten minutes!" Schaller called. I looked at the blue glow of my watch face: 4:30 a.m. When I emerged from my tent a few minutes later, the biologist had already eaten his breakfast of tea and chapati and was on his way up the valley for the day's survey. A

brilliant sliver of moon dangled above the dark ridge, and Jupiter shone like a luminescent boulder in the sky.

Two hours later I caught up to Schaller at the entrance to a narrow canyon. It was the kind of austere, post-apocalyptic landscape I had grown used to over the past three weeks—jagged cliffs, barren slopes, a cobalt blue sky overhead. The sun was just clearing the mountaintops, melting the ice crust off the rocks in a nearby stream. I was panting and nearly doubled over. "At least you're getting to see what old-fashioned natural history is all about," he said.

For more than a half century Schaller's career has been defined by a single quality: impatience—an impatience to get into the field to collect data, an impatience to prove himself through his work, and an impatience to save the world's most imperiled species and landscapes. It is a characteristic that has not softened in the 30 years since he traveled the Himalaya with Matthiessen: "[Schaller] will not really be at ease until he reaches the land of the blue sheep and the snow leopard," Matthiessen wrote in *The Snow Leopard*.



LONE RANGER: Schaller, who prefers to work alone in the field, hikes past the skull of a Marco Polo sheep in the Little Pamir.

But Schaller's impatience is borne of more than just a passion for collecting data. After years in the field, he has developed a near-cosmic connection with the landscapes he protects, and he feels most himself when out in the wilderness. "Most men enjoy adventure, they want to conquer something, and in the mountains a biologist can become an explorer in the physical realm as well as the intellectual one," he wrote in *Mountain Monarchs,* his 1977 study of Himalayan sheep and goats. "Research among the ranges affords the purest pleasure I know, one which goes beyond the collecting of facts to one that becomes a quest to appraise our values and look for our place in eternity."

IT WAS TYPICAL OF SCHALLER to be the first to break camp in the chill of early morning and to head out on his own across the desert steppe. "I don't like people on my heels," he said one day when I asked if I could join him. "It makes me feel rushed, and I begin to miss things." But sometimes Schaller's penchant for solitude was ill-advised, like the morning he slung his backpack onto his shoulders and vanished into the desert steppe without a word.

Several hours later, when he failed to appear and our caravan continued to lumber toward China, Wald and I scaled a nearby slope for a vantage point. The great expanse of the Wakhan spread before us motionless, save dappled shadows thrown from the clouds that drifted overhead. In the distance, snow *(Continued on page 108)*

A 50-YEAR BATTLE

OVER THE COURSE OF HIS CAREER, field biologist George Schaller has developed a unique strategy for protecting the world's great wilderness areas: Focus on an ecosystem's most captivating species—the "charismatic megafauna"—and let the animal garner support for the protection of the landscape at large. ***—Ryan Bradley***

GORILLAS OF THE VIRUNGA
In 1959 a 26-year-old Schaller traveled to central Africa to live among the mountain gorillas. During his two-year study, he eluded Watusi invaders, dodged poachers, and wrote *The Year of the Gorilla* (University of Chicago Press). The book inspired a generation of naturalists (Dian Fossey among them) and led to the creation of Virunga National Park.

LIONS OF THE SERENGETI
From 1966 to 1969 George Schaller, his wife, Kay, and their two sons lived in Tanzania's Serengeti while Schaller conducted the first study of the cats' movements and social behavior. His 1973 National Book Award–winning account, *The Serengeti Lion* (University of Chicago Press), improved wildlife-management practices the world over.

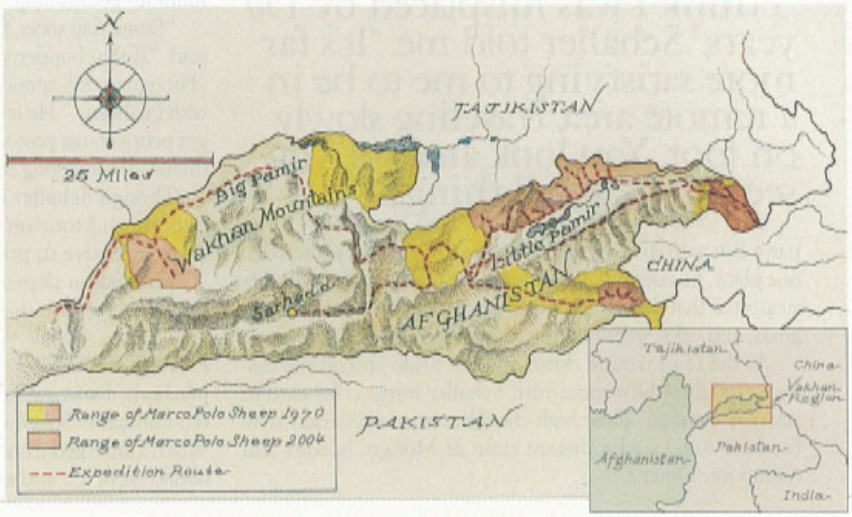
SNOW LEOPARDS OF THE HIMALAYA
Schaller's quest to study and protect the elusive cat was memorialized in Peter Matthiessen's 1979 National Book Award–winning travelogue *The Snow Leopard*. Five years later, drawing on Schaller's field research, the Nepalese government created 1,737-square-mile Shey-Phoksundo National Park.

PANDAS OF THE WOLONG
In 1980, as the first Westerner to study the rare and beloved animal, Schaller debunked the notion that panda populations were suffering as a result of periodic bamboo die-offs. Instead, he said, the popularity of the species, which led to its frequent capture, was the greater danger. Today the number of wild pandas has increased by 45 percent.

CHIRU OF THE TIBETAN PLATEAU
In the 1980s, while exploring China's Chang Tang region—home to the chiru (Tibetan antelope)—Schaller gave hunters a card that said: "All beings tremble at punishment, to all, life is dear. Comparing others to oneself, one should neither kill nor cause to kill." His efforts led to a 115,500-square-mile reserve.

MARCO POLO SHEEP OF THE PAMIR
Schaller's latest project, a peace park encompassing parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, and Tajikistan, will protect 20,000 square miles of prime Marco Polo sheep habitat. Though the idea for the park has existed for a century, Schaller's wildlife surveys in the Pamirs will play an instrumental role in the park's creation.

ILLUSTRATIONS AND MAP BY LASZLO KUBINYI



WATCH A VIDEO OF GEORGE SCHALLER talking about the future of conservation, along with clips from the field, at *www.ngadventure.com.*

THE MEGAFAUNA MAN

(Continued from page 72)

fell in diaphanous curtains. Wald and I were stumped: A man in his 70s was out there alone, the temperature had plunged severely, and a rescue attempt amounted to a needle-in-a-haystack proposition. Fortunately, however, after scouting for most of the day, we found Schaller atop a dusty rise just before sunset. He seemed shaken.

A few hours earlier, he told us, he'd been surprised by three "disreputable looking" men who emerged from a deep gully. As they came into view, Schaller noticed they had no cargo—a suspicious way to travel in such a far-flung place. Forgoing the customary Muslim greetings, the group asked Schaller if he was alone and motioned toward his pockets and the binoculars strung around his neck. Schaller assessed the situation: He was at least a few miles away from the caravan. If something should happen, no one would hear his calls for help. His only way out, he decided, was a quick retreat. As the men inched closer, Schaller replied that, in fact, he was traveling with a "very big group" and, before they had a chance to respond, he scrambled away across a steep talus slide.

As Schaller told us the story, he seemed, perhaps for the first time since we'd entered the wilderness, unsure of himself.

Later that night, as we rested by the fire after dinner, the same trio of men turned up in our camp and wedged themselves in among the group. Schaller discreetly pointed them out, and Sarfraz nodded gravely. "They sell *afim,*" Sarfraz whispered. "Opium dealers." The night proceeded without incident, but still Schaller seethed with anger. "I had good reason to be suspicious," he said. "These people are stealing the future of the Kyrgyz people."

"GEORGE, LOOK," WHISPERED MOHAMMED Saqid, one of our guides, pointing toward a line of dots moving across a large snowfield high above us. "Marco Polo!"

After four weeks on the trail, we had reached the peaks marking the border of China at the far end of the Little Pamir. Along the way, we'd passed through several Kyrgyz camps scattered throughout the valley, each consisting of a half dozen large felt yurts. When we arrived at a settlement, Schaller would endear himself to the children, handing out candy and blowing up balloons to squeals of delight. Only then would he ask the adults where we might find Marco Polo sheep. The answers were usually vague—deliberately so, Schaller suspected. We'd seen a few small herds from a distance, but as soon as they caught a whiff of us, they would bound away across slides of black shale. To Schaller that meant the animals were probably under continuous fire from the Kyrgyz herders, a fact they would not be keen to share with nosy strangers.

But now some 25 males were scattered in the snow just above us like dull brown rocks. As he scribbled notes, Schaller passed me his binoculars for a look. It was the first time I'd seen Marco Polo sheep from close enough to make out their flared horns silhouetted black against the snow. Some faced up the slope; others had turned down. They seemed paralyzed with indecision—afraid to move into deeper snow on the mountain crest, but equally fearful of us. "Well, they're not the smartest animals in the world," Schaller said with a chuckle. They were magnificent creatures, some the size of donkeys, but after watching their confused dance for a few more minutes Schaller suggested we head back toward camp, some three hours away on foot.

Over the previous several weeks, our meals had been drab affairs—rice or noodles flavored with onion and Tabasco and prepared by Saqid over the dung fire. But a few days after sighting the sheep, we returned to camp to find a pot full of meat, a gift from a shepherd encamped in a stone hovel down the slope. Saqid mixed the meat in with tomato paste and rice, and we devoured the slow-simmered stew, all the while pondering its provenance. Was it yak? Ibex? It was far more tasty and tender than any of the lamb we'd been offered. Only the next morning did we learn the truth: We'd had a dinner befitting Marco Polo himself.

"I would have eaten it anyway," Schaller was quick to say. "It had already been killed, no point to it going to waste." What about having one shot to order? I asked. It was meant as a joke, but Schaller didn't laugh. "Up here, I wouldn't have even a *hare* shot to order."

BY THE END OF SEPTEMBER WE HAD EXPLORED 13 valleys in the Little Pamir, recording 549 Marco Polo sheep, about half of the estimated population in the Afghan Pamir.

The national election had gone off peacefully and Schaller had briefed officials in Kabul about his findings in the Wakhan region. The next step: to bring together representatives from all four countries to discuss the peace park concept, a process Schaller began this fall and expects to finish by early 2007.

When we parted ways at Dubai International Airport, I was eager to get home to see my family. But Schaller was going in the opposite direction, boarding a plane for Ürümqi, China, to reconnect with acquaintances and promote the park. Later he'd stop in Tajikistan for further talks, risking a Thanksgiving away from home.

As Schaller ambled away across the shimmering tarmac, I thought back to a morning early in the trek, when I asked him how long he could maintain this breakneck pace.

"I don't know," he replied. "I think I'll keep on walking until I just fall apart." ▲