

Quest/77

NOVEMBER / DECEMBER

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TWO DOLLARS

WHO'S TOO RICH?

Wealth Addiction
by Philip Slater

Irish Art's U.S. Debut

Training for the 1980 Olympics

Genetic Engineering—
Benefits & Breakthroughs



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SPECIAL SECTION:

The Human Memory

PROFESSOR OF WONDERMENT

What's it like to be a porpoise?

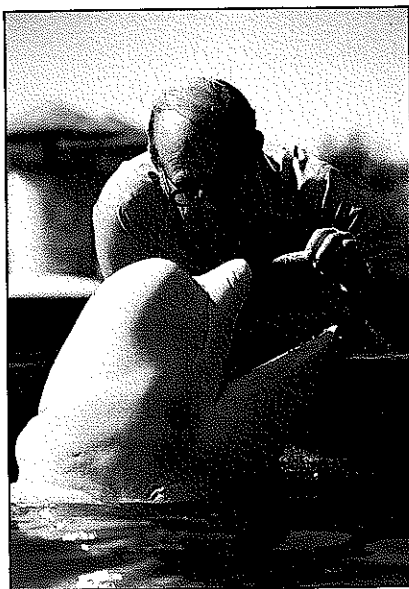
ANNIE GOTTLIEB

It is late afternoon on a high oak ridge near Santa Cruz. The air is filled with the sound of horseshoes, clanging and thumping, and with good, hungry smells—chunks of lamb from the professor's herd, bubbling in two iron kettles over a lively wood fire. The occasion is a meeting between the professor and his honors seniors in environmental studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. They're supposed to plan a fifth-year study program. But so far this looks more like a party than a meeting. Clear-faced kids in country clothes are loading a table with homemade apple pie and brownies. Somebody strums a guitar, dogs dance in the sun, there is teasing laughter over by the horseshoe pit.

The distinguished professor has just missed a toss. With a good-humored oath, Kenneth S. Norris stumps off toward the long, low house that sprawls in an embracing arc on the seaward side of the ridge. He doesn't look like a professor: he's a stocky, fiftyish man dressed in baggy green pants and an old plaid shirt, his sleeves rolled above powerful, suntanned forearms. He doesn't look remotely like the personage I have come to meet: an eminent scientist, deputy director of UCSC's Center for Coastal Marine Studies, and a frequent adviser to government commissions on the environment. Instead, he looks—to my delight—like a gruff and amiable contractor, or maybe a commercial fisherman. I think at once of Frank Brocato.

In his popular book *The Porpoise Watcher* (Norton, 1974), Norris writes with warm admiration of Brocato—this wondrously competent Sicilian fisherman, who took him specimen-collecting in the early 1950s when he was the novice curator of Marineland of the Pacific, the second oceanarium in the world. No trace remains of the skinny, scared, formal young scholar who applied for that job in a spotless new suit, fresh out of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography and “filled with trepidation about how little I knew.” During the past 25 years, Ken Norris has grown into his own description of Frank Brocato: “a wily professional, a prodigious worker... one of those rare people who could have been a success at virtually any

ANNIE GOTTLIEB, the editor of *Elima*, a literary magazine, is currently writing a novel about whales. She wrote the whale article in the July/August issue of *Quest*/77.



occupation that opportunity allowed.”

Norris is a man who waylays opportunities, mastering not one occupation but many. He has been, among other things, trainer and friend to porpoises; pioneer cetologist; prober of the minute ecologies of lizards, burrowing snakes, and tide-pool fishes; student of dunes and protector of deserts; inventor and impromptu engineer. To his own work or his ability to inspire others, we owe much of what little we know about cetaceans (dolphins, porpoises, whales). He made the first precise test of porpoise sonar, conducted some of the earliest field studies of

cetacean social behavior, designed much of the gear that is now standard for capturing and studying cetaceans. He is responsible for much of what little we have in the way of rational environmental policy. He has clambered around inside a dead sperm whale's head to investigate its sound-production mechanism, skinned lizards down to their toes to find out why they change color, had himself towed through schools of wild Hawaiian porpoises in an underwater observation chamber dubbed the “Semisubmersible Seasick Machine,” and argued before the Bureau of Land Management for a comprehensive desert management and preservation plan, and before Congress for the wilderness bill.

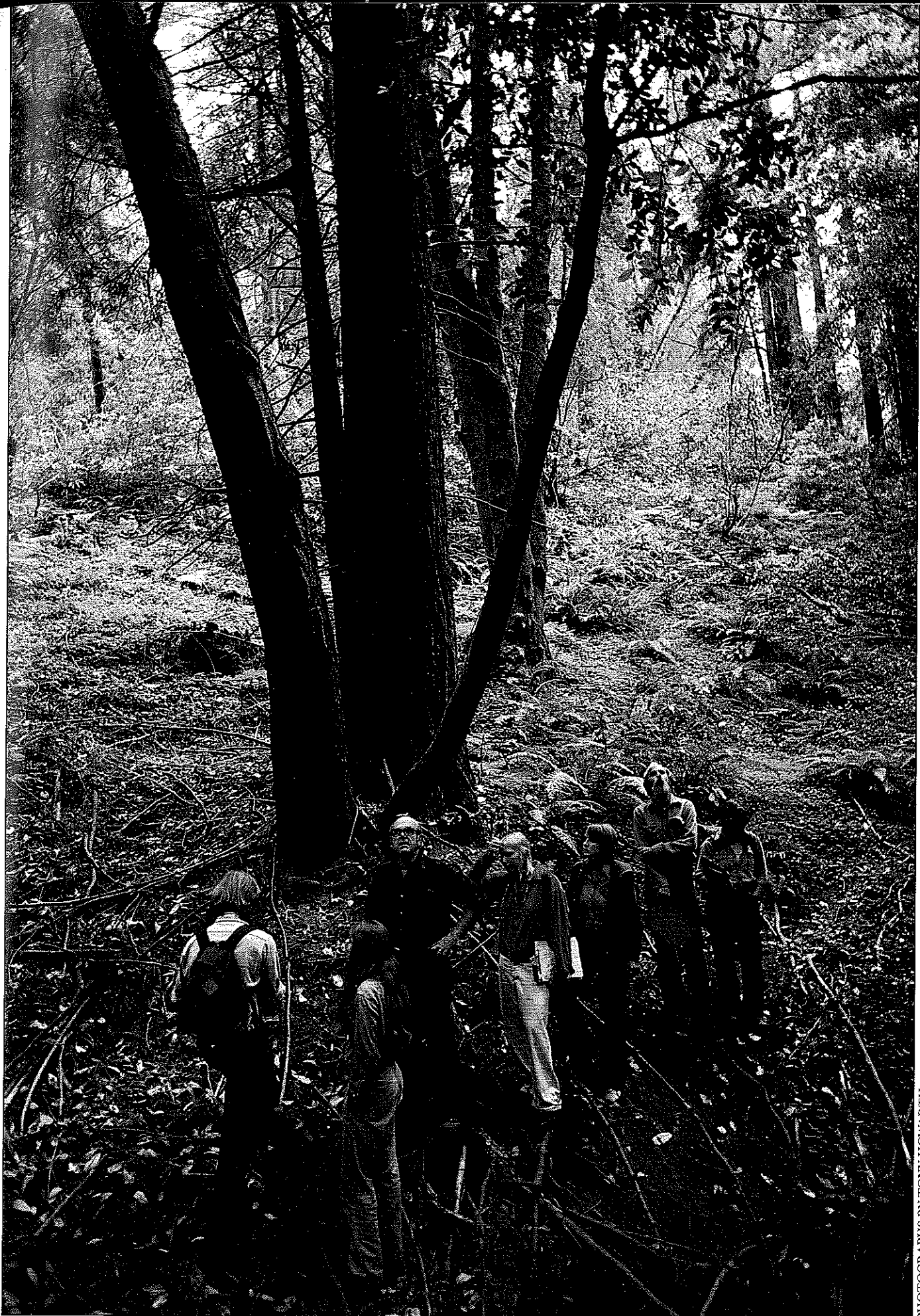
He has been a design consultant to oceanariums in San Diego, Hawaii, and Hong Kong, a member of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission, and a mediator between the forces for environmental protection and exploitation—as in the recent controversy over porpoise deaths in tuna seiners' nets, during which he went to sea for a month on the fishing boat *Elizabeth C.J.* to observe the behavior of both porpoises and fishermen. Add to these: indefatigable fund raiser, teacher—formerly at UCLA, currently chairman of environmental studies at Santa Cruz—sensitive writer, amateur artist, and matchless raconteur.

Norris goes on doing and being many of these things at once, as I learned with astonishment when I tried to arrange our first meeting. I asked for his schedule (*see box*), which he describes as one of “desperateness.”

What kind of man is this, rambling around the fire, his expression quizzical and chronically pleased, stirring the

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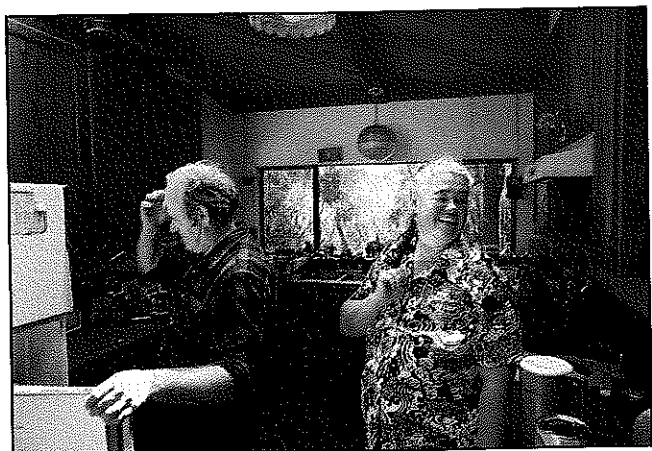
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY HOWARTH

stew and kidding his students, so unobtrusively but unmistakably the center of this gathering? I am looking for clues to what might have given him such uninhibited access to his capacities. In an age of specialization, most of us tend to identify ourselves by what we do: "I am a scientist, an artist, a teacher, an engineer." Ken Norris escapes such diminishing definition, and I suspect it is because his identity is not in question: he is what he is, himself, something versatile, vital, and unnameable, and the energy for whatever he does flows freely from that source. His philosophy seems to be: if something offers itself to be done, you do it. If you don't know how to do it, you learn how by doing it, whether it's catching a pilot whale on the open sea, building an oceanarium exhibit, or shearing your own sheep.

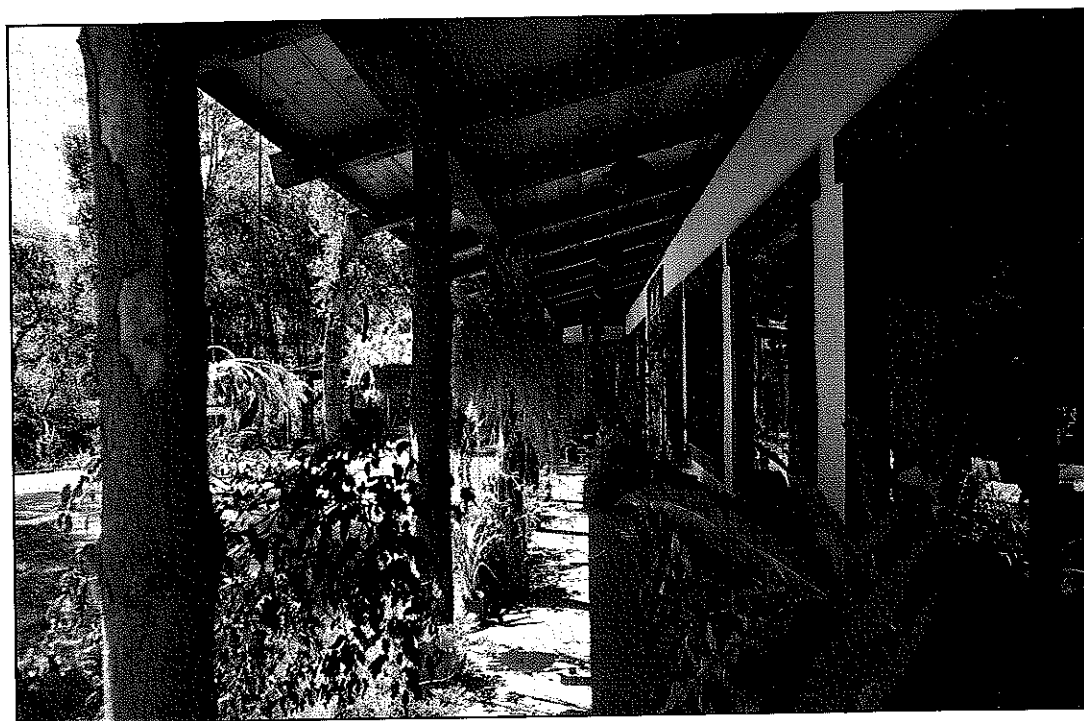
"Ken's a great do-it-yourselfer," says Phyllis Norris—a quietly substantial, welcoming presence, her eyes and mouth crescents of calm laughter. The three out of four Norris children who live at home look like her. "His attitude is, why get someone else to do something for you if you can do it yourself? He'll shear the sheep with a book in one hand or someone reading him directions. Two hours later the shears are dull and the sheep half done. We have



patient sheep. We also have scalloped sheep." The whole family helps deliver the lambs, but it is Ken who slaughters them. "As a family," Phyllis says, "we're all grateful that Ken is willing to do this." She also tells me that they can't prevent a pair of hawks from preying on their guinea-fowl chicks, and somehow the two images merge in my mind: Ken and lamb, hawk and chick: forces of nature. An education for a naturalist's children.

Over coffee in the kitchen, with its tangle of plants and great panels of glass set in the ceiling, Phyllis tells me that she and Ken and the children designed this house in 1973, living in a trailer on the 35-acre site to oversee its construction. The house is spacious and graceful, yet the feel of it is cozy, cluttered, and exciting—part attic, part menagerie, a child's dream. I wander about, taking inventory of a fraction of Ken's beloved "junk": three tiny wild birds' eggs in a jar lid, wind chimes, a gray parrot clambering in a huge cage, two massive whale vertebrae mounted over the brick fireplace, a wall collage of a harbor scene made by Ken out of wood scraps collected in Chile, Indian masks and baskets and pottery, a staring, four-foot wood-carved alligator, a case of rare beetles, old prints of marine mammals with many curious anatomical distortions, open books (*Microclimates*, *Lads Before the Wind*) and a double-sight microscope on the table, to which Ken's at-home children—Nancy, 21, Barbara, 19, Dick, 17—may at any moment bring an unidentified blossom. In one window, an abstract dolphin leaps in a panel of stained glass; it is obvious that the maker's hand intimately knew the lines of a dolphin's body, and indeed, she is Norris's oldest daughter, Susan, 23, now a violin maker in Portland, who helped him train porpoises in Hawaii when she was 10. The kitchen window is an airy cage for finches, lovebirds, and quail, with a dovecote for homing pigeons built in above it. The cooing and wing-thunder of their comings and goings form a constant background to the talk outside by the fire.

The students perch attentively on logs as Ken outlines the proposed field studies in new university reserves in the Granite Mountains and the Mojave Desert. He has been a



"The world is systemic, not linear, and all things in the world are related as parts of a system."



“You have to focus down and down on details until you arrive at a whole new understanding of the conditions of life for a given organism.”



primary architect of the University of California Natural Land and Water Reserves System, a 10-year-old statewide plan to preserve wild environments for study and teaching, and the current plan is pure Norris: the students will learn by doing, “for cheap,” essential base-line studies for the Bureau of Land Management. And now, I watch as Ken’s clarity and seriousness emerge from beneath the baggy costume, the curmudgeon’s sense of fun. It is not an abrupt shift: scientific rigor is introduced so gently that it seems no more than a sharpening of the spirit of play. “It’s an important thing to do, but I don’t know how on earth we’re gonna do it. . . . I’m concerned that what you see and what goes down on paper is right. It’s a mark of professionalism to spell the Latin names right. . . . Be careful to indicate what you do and do not know. That’s the nature of professionalism. That’s the whole bag. The minute you start fakin’ it, we’ve had it.”

A wily professional, indeed. While Ken seems genuinely at home among these kids, I sense that he is also a master of appropriate disguise, who knows his audience. He is in extraordinary, open control of his relations with people—a mixture of warm perception and cool purpose that must perplex anyone exclusively ruled by either the heart or the head. I’ve been on the receiving end of it myself. Tickled

by Ken’s poker-faced tale about a pretentious colleague, I realize only tardily that I have been scanned as neatly as a porpoise sizes up a fish: What kind of journalist am I? Will my presence be harmonious or intrusive on the Sierra field trip on which I am to accompany Ken’s class?

This “control” has an utterly different quality from the rigidity of the authoritarian; it seems to stem from that same nameless certainty about himself that makes Ken so undefinable and vital. With little evident need for the self-image to which most of us devote so much anxious attention, he is free to be remarkably aware of others. “One of Ken’s amazing qualities,” says a student who has worked closely with him, “is that he tunes in to everyone on their own wavelength. Not only is he able to be tuned in to 25 different intellects at once, but he’s aware of the emotional state of everyone in the class.” Yet he never loses sight of his own purposes, which seem to be governed to a rare degree by a detached and constructive intelligence.



It’s a kind of benign manipulation—in the case of his students, a *loving* manipulation, calculated to open their attention and put them in direct contact with nature. In the literature of the East it’s called “compassion,” a word which has a certain salutary ruthlessness, shorn of the sentimentality we invest in it. Ken reminds me of a cagey old Zen master.

If this quality makes him an exceptional teacher, it is also the secret of his success as a program initiator, fund raiser, and environmental diplomat. “I can speak to congressmen and university administrators, I understand and sympathize with fishermen,” he told me. “I understand businessmen because I’ve been in business [as a design consultant]. I guess there’s a bit of the salesman involved. It requires a communications exchange, trying to understand the constraints on others, the systems they’re in. It’s a route to accomplishing what you think is important. I’ve been on the board of the state Bureau of Land Management as an environmental education member, and I’ve seen how agencies like that get every special-use group fighting each other—planning by decibels, that is, who yells the loudest. That’s why compromises don’t come.”

Compromise is one of those words Ken Norris uses that

"Is that a digger pine?
The cones look too small.
Which is the boy and which is the girl,
or don't they do that?"

may not endear him to impassioned environmentalists, but that make him one of their most effective allies. *Management* is another. The sea otter is a "depleted" species, with 1,500 to 2,000 left living in the rocky harbors and kelp beds along the southern California coast. Agile swimmers and dexterous shell-crackers with winsome faces, they are frequently shot by abalone and sea-urchin fishermen, whose livelihood competes with the otters' diet. Ken is a member of Friends of the Sea Otter and an active intermediary between that group and Governor Brown's administration. "I signed up with the Friends because I agree with them in general, but I also believe there has to be some spirit of compromise. They want complete protection. I don't believe in that; the fisheries have their place, too. But we mustn't threaten this little otter with extinction. The Department of Resources must be made to manage responsibly."

It's a recurring counterpoint in his thinking. "I'd like to do some writing about the natural history of the desert and the problems of management to protect that fragile environment. Arid lands cover 14 million acres of California, and it's the biggest unexploited resource we have. It's less utilized than the desert in Israel, where they've developed a drip-trickle agriculture that uses just tiny amounts of water between salt layers. And there's this magnificent natural biota we have to protect. We have to *plan*." Management and protection, human use and the integrity of wilderness—such opposites come easily to Ken Norris in the same breath. He sees this approach as the

only alternative to chaotic and unchecked exploitation. Perhaps because of his own paradoxical temperament, he hopes to turn the futile clash of value systems into an orderly process of change.

He speaks with qualified approval of a new International Whaling Commission policy that will divide the world's whales into four different "management stocks," permitting limited killing that would not deplete any population below "maximum sustainable yield." But the MSY concept defines nature strictly as an economic resource, measuring it by quantitative cost-benefit analysis. Norris is pressing the Marine Mammal Commission to accept an alternative policy: "optimum sustainable population." OSP would allow for the qualitative benefits we may derive from a living species or a wild tract of land: its beauty and wonder, its vital place in the web of life, or what it can teach us about natural interactions and controls. MSY is of the old world-view; OSP embodies the transition to a new. Ken Norris stands between them.

Much of his personal sympathy lies with the new ethic of environmental protection: "I'm in love with the land in a very real sense, a very deep sense. I've seen the matrix of life, how subtle it is, and to see it destroyed could make me sad for life." Yet he knows this new ethic hasn't a prayer unless it respects the needs and expertise of fishermen and loggers, cattle grazers and coal miners—provided these groups, too, act in good faith. His article on porpoises in the February 1977 *Smithsonian* is a case in point. He praised the tuna industry for its efforts to save porpoise lives, but said it had not gone far enough. The industry responded by faltering in its research and seeking more good press, and that bothers him. But under federal mandate it has also taken some of his suggestions: seiners are now using new nets that allow porpoises to free themselves, and a man in each seiner swims within the net when it is being

A Week in the Life of Kenneth S. Norris

From his memo to Annie Gottlieb:

"Here's last week. I raised money for the marine program; set up nature trails on campus; talked to lawyers about two porpoises that were let go in Hawaii; made arrangements for a workshop I will lead in Hawaii on harassment by photographers and divers of the humpbacks breeding there, plus the effects of hydrofoils, etc. I met with students; set up committees for selecting a new ethics staff member; raised money for student interns; wrote a grant request to set up an interface between state agencies and our environmental studies-marine program; looked at the boat I've just been given which we will sell to get a trailerable boat for my porpoise field work; sang songs in the office; drank a little wine; finished the review of a survey of humpback whales by the marks on their flukes; drew up a gift plan so we can seek a little slice of land that has a live stream on it to the west of campus, for our nature system; accepted a speaking engagement to the California Academy of Science annual Fellows Banquet—a big deal. I'll talk about 'What's it like to be a porpoise?'

"I turned down another speech in August because

I have a family reunion, and because I'd rather dig potatoes in the summer. I set up the equal opportunity machinery for all our temporary appointments this fall. I took part in the oral exams of two of my students; they both did well and I am very pleased. I tried to catch up on mountains of correspondence built up during my field quarter; it seems to come in bales. I tried to keep the campus farm and garden from falling apart (it is having support problems, but many of my natural history students want to know about small-scale agriculture as an alternative social direction). I bought chicken food and boots (mine fell apart hiking in Tuolumne). I sent off letters on the value of Big River as a state park (rather than having the estuary logged). I rounded up a pile of notes and photographs I took of porpoise skulls in Chilean museums, and sent them off to a friend who wants to work on them more than I do. There were lots of students in and out, with counseling problems, some with senior theses, including a jewel on composting that should be published. There were two or three parties, and stuff like that. It was a busy week."

hauled in, to help the porpoises escape. (Estimates now in have porpoise deaths at one-fourth of what they were last year.) Other of Norris's suggestions (such as the purchase of a research vessel) have not been followed, but he is quick to tell me that Congress is partly at fault, in not providing research funding.

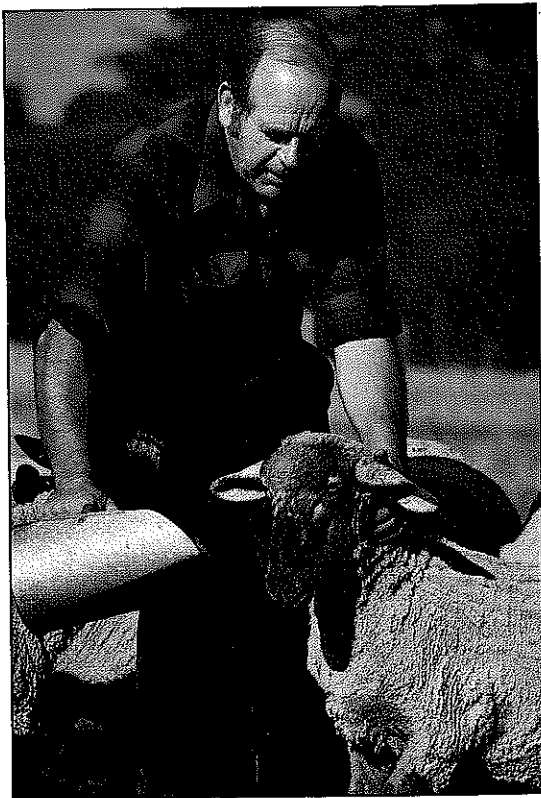
By and large, Ken regards fishermen and miners and other "exploiters" as part of nature: he thinks their claim to life and livelihood is just as real as that of the creatures they "exploit." He understands them too, in a visceral way. So the contradictions of the environmental dilemma run deep in his own life. He can resolve them in the world to the unusual extent that he resolves them in himself.

Speaking of the "social decision" he would have us write into the law on each contested species—"We are going to exploit this animal for its fur," or "We are going to protect it and simply look at it"—Ken muses, "How do you *make* such a decision? It's a real ethical barbed-wire tangle, and I don't feel terribly confident that I can untangle it. I don't know if it's ethical to grade species in terms of intelligence. How do we fake ourselves into thinking sheep are stupid beings? I've got sheep out there that are my *friends*."

"And you slaughter them."

"Yes, I do." He gives me a mild, challenging stare. "And I don't know if whales are different."

The resolution, then, seems to lie in Ken's not seeing the ethic of use and the ethic of appreciation as inherently contradictory, any more than ruthlessness and nurture contradict each other in nature—or in Ken's nature. Good use is appreciative (as the best tuna seiners respect por-



"How do we fake ourselves into thinking sheep are stupid beings? I've got sheep out there that are my *friends*."

poises and know they need them); true appreciation is a kind of use. Ken feels that humans must care for nature precisely because we nourish ourselves physically and spiritually from it—because we are a part of it. A "pure" environmentalism that excluded us as alien plunderers would only repeat the fundamental error of the old ethic of careless mastery. It would deny the truth that Ken sees as the very force of the "new ethic"—"that the world is systemic, not linear, that all things in the world are related as parts of a system," including ourselves and our needs.

Truth is an important word for Ken Norris. For him it means something real and discoverable, at once the goal of science and the ground of morality. Truth is crucial to survival in at least two ways: we need detailed information about nature and candor about our own motives. Ken's whole effort is to increase the supply of these two rare commodities in a world dying for want of them.

He is a persistent agitator for government-funded research—on whales, for instance: "We don't even know where the migration routes are. How can we count 'em? NASA has developed magnificent capacities for remote sensing; polar satellites cross *every piece* of the world twice a day! Why couldn't they be used to track whales? It can be done, the technology is there—it needs refinement, application, support!"

He spends much time gently correcting the romantic exaggerations (and sometimes the "guff" and "baloney") of environmentalists, which, though sincere and even useful as forces for change, are in his view less useful and less wonderful than the truth: "How involved am I in the mysticism about whales—those magnificent beings in the sea that sing songs? The answer is: *a little*. I know too much about the animals. At least in the case of the baleen whale, what I see is a large grazing animal that engages in stereotypical behavior—seeks out krill and opens its mouth. Myths are fun, but I see a marvelous animal that's still very much of a mystery."

He is far harsher with what he sees as deliberate, self-serving distortion, whether it comes from industry spokesmen, government agencies, or environmentalists: "It really turns me off when they tell lies about the whale situation. I see little reason to think that any species of whale is being driven to extinction. We see blue whales off our coast quite frequently. Of course they are terribly depleted, one twenty-fifth or even one-fiftieth of what they used to be, and people mustn't hunt them. But I don't think they're going to be extinct."

But if Ken's concept of the truth is stern, it is far from austere. To get one's own fantasies out of the way is not to see a world barren and impoverished but, on the contrary, to open oneself to the full wonder of nature. Ken, who has worked so closely with dolphins, does not share the fanciful speculation that they have an intelligence and a language comparable to our own; the evidence, in his view, simply doesn't support it. He thinks their big brains probably relate primarily to their extraordinary acoustic capacity, not to a penchant for philosophy or poetry. But this avoidance of fantasy "doesn't mean I don't let my own emotions get involved; I do. I think you have to. I don't believe animals are automata. That was holy writ for years, and I've objected to it. There's no question that dolphins have emotional lives and reasoning power, and I don't feel a *bit* frightened about saying so." He writes

(Continued on page 110)

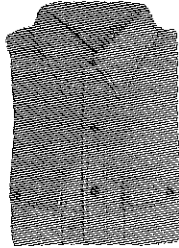
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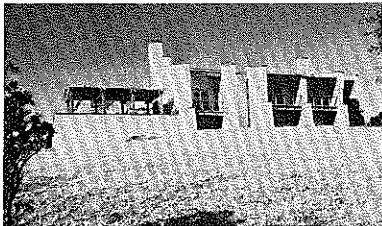
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PROFESSOR OF WONDERMENT Continued from page 32

about them with lyrical awe and talks of them with fascinated affection. "Every day there's some exchange—you could call it empathy. They engage in context-aware behavior, like deceit, and they show altruism toward each other and toward us, which is very exciting. They're terribly forgiving when you do dumb things. And they like to play tricks on each other and on you. They'll splash you, and"—Ken rolls his eyes portentously—"how the hell do they know you're dry? Hmmm?" But the next question really knocks me over: "Imagine looking up through the wavy surface and seeing a *person!* What's it like to be a porpoise?"

I never thought I'd hear a scientist say anything like that. But to Ken Norris, "intuition and wonderment" are at the very heart of science. He is forever saying, "You mustn't get your own ego involved, you must throw out all your mistaken notions—the *specimen is the authority.*" But you don't throw out your imagination. Disciplined and cleared, it is the most direct route to the truth—the consummate instrument for apprehending another creature's reality.

"It's important to get off your perch as a human. Think like a bug, imagine you're a lizard, wonder what it's like up a tree for a bird—or what if you were the tree itself?" We are standing at Tioga Pass in the Sierra, 9,900 feet up, and Ken, in old plaid shirt, baggy pants, and a red GMC Trucks cap, is giving one of his "sermons." The text is "ways of seeing," which is Ken's way of saying that there are as many versions and visions

of the world as there are living beings. I think of William Blake's words, "How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?" These alien "worlds of delight," Ken is saying, need *not* be closed to an imagination served by the senses in "the method of refined observation: focusing down and down on details until you arrive at a whole new understanding of the conditions of life for a given organism."

He provokes his students to a demonstration. Why does the ponderosa pine succumb to frostbite at very high altitudes, while the whitebark pine survives? What is it about this bent and tangled tree that adapts it so well to extreme cold: the flexible twigs that bow under the weight of snow, the bunches of needles at twig-tips that trap snow or warm air for insulation, natural antifreezes in its sap? Ken coaxes and listens—he is an intent, self-effacing listener—and his students put forward idea after idea that never would have occurred to me. I begin to recognize another function of the disciplined imagination: to question the obvious. My own perception of nature will never again be so complacent and vague.

Down in the lush Tuolumne River Canyon two days later, I watch Ken send his students off to detect the minute convection currents that rise from rocks or filter through pine needles, to measure the temperature differentials between earth's surface and the air one inch above it, between dark rock and light, and then to consider how intimately these "micro-

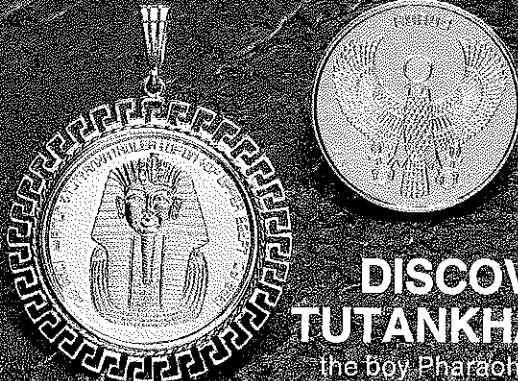


climates" shape local life. "When you get down to a little rinky-dink thing like this beetle, I think the whole world changes when convection changes." The students scatter on their investigations, a third of them stark naked—it looks like science in Eden—while Ken watches from a rock in the sun. "How are you?" "Oh, I'm just sittin' here full of joy."

He is constantly *looking*, gently, unobtrusively, just making conversation: "Is that a digger pine? The cones look too small. . . Which is the boy and which is the girl, or don't they do that?" A grackle eases into the pine without stirring a needle. "Isn't *that* beautiful! What a neat bird. . . Look, a rock mortar!" I have been sitting obliviously beside the hollow in the granite where Chumash Indian women ground acorns and gossiped a hundred years ago. Nothing, but nothing, escapes Ken's attention and wonder, least of all his students: "So many personalities in here with so much going for them, such capabilities. . . She's so bright, and he's so . . . wow!" And watching them, he is moved by another aspect of the "new ethic": "It's not like in my day. It's more natural, and they're better friends. One of the things that impresses me is that now people can really love each other. You didn't used to be able to do that without signing a contract. Now everyone can be with everyone else. It's one of the reasons I react so strongly to a group like this, get so full of joy."

There's a lot of joy on this trip: in the day's science with its heady mixture of exuberance and precision, in the night's hilarity around the campfire, where Ken leads a wild, impromptu rhythm section on a washtub bass made from a five-gallon tin. It is the last field trip of the semester, and at its end Ken, three days unshaven, reads aloud from his journal in a circle of students, then becomes the nucleus of a staggering 15-person hug. He has shown them "how to *see*, which is what I have to pass on." He has shared with them his hardheaded, wide-eyed wonder at the way things are. "I'm hoping to hang on to the spirit of inquisitiveness, the sense of wonder that pervaded the class," wrote one student later. "Ken carries that spirit and exudes it. May I carry it with me, too."

Or, as Ken put it: "I thought it was kinda neat."



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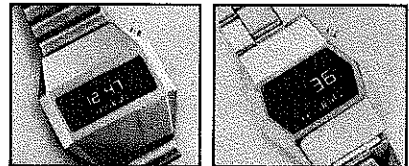
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