NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

DATE: January 2021

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The art and activism of *How to Build an Ark*

World premiere cast sits down for a Q&A with inspirational photojournalist Joel Sartore

The cast of The Rose Theater's latest world premiere, **How to Build an Ark: Searching for Joel Sartore***, sat down for a question-and-answer session with the National Geographic photographer to learn more about his view of the world, his life, his art and his activism. The following is a transcript from that discussion.*

Questions were asked by members of the cast and Rose Theater staff members. All answers were given by Joel Sartore.

Q: Some of the animals are pictured with food. What was your thought process behind these photos.

A: So what kind of food does the frog have with it? Cheese? Yeah, that's the frog. And he's got mustard on top of him. And then the other one is the naked mole rat?

Okay, so the process with the naked mole rat came out of the desire to photograph something while my wife was ill -- and she's fine now. That was 15 oe 16 years ago and I just needed something to shoot. The Lincoln Children's Zoo is a mile from my house. So, they got a naked mole rat and put it on a white cutting board in the zoo kitchen, along with a couple of poison dart frogs. That was that shot.

When I was applying for an internship right out of college, or during college, I wanted to get a job at the *Wichita Eagle*, and I needed to do a food illustration. And so I got a frog and put him on a hamburger bun and put a mustard strike down its back and called it a food illustration and it was that picture that got me my internship. Actually, in fact, the Director of Photography at the time Steve Harper said, "Everybody else's portfolio is boring your that picture was so twisted. It was the only twisted picture I got. It made me want to have you down for an interview and I figured

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somebody who would do that would be amusing to be around." And indeed I was, I guess. So, yeah that was just something I did as a food illustration because back then when you were playing newspapers for jobs in the mid 1980s you needed a sports picture that was pretty good or a news picture a general news picture. And you needed food illustration or fashion illustration so that's how that came about. But it's not a Photoshopped picture. And we don't coat our animals in mustard anymore. But he did get released back into the pond from whence he came.

Rats, by the way, are one of the few use social mammals, meaning they have a hierarchy like bees do. They have workers; they have soldiers; they have a queen. And they deal with their worlds via smell, because they're nearly blind they very seldom ever come up to the surface, they're all subterranean.

Q: How have current events, like the pandemic, affected your work with the Ark? I heard a podcast recently that said, at least early on, this was actually a kind of positive development ecologically, in some way.

A: Honestly, I was pretty bummed out. I'd gone to England and Germany with my wife to work on the Photo Ark and see the sights. We were grounded, basically the first group. By March 10, I'd lost all my speaking engagements, and the big question was really how we make a living. (But we're diversified enough so that we are fine.)

We work on a Geographic grant, and I really wanted to maintain that grant because we have six employees. We sent them all home except for one. She works, managing our office and eventually we added a second person because we realized our building that we own -- this little two story brick building from the turn of last century has two floors with two separate air handling systems. So one person runs the Video Ark on first floor, while Rebecca Wright runs our office, and everything on second floor.

So, I realized I needed to keep them busy and they were gaining on me. We've always had a two two year backlog. So let's say if we went to a zoo and photographed animals there, there would be two years before they got pictures out of us, and before we could promote that zoo on social media. Well they were gaining on me fast, working on the backlog of photos. They really gotten up to 2019 by early April.

I went out to get my paper in the dark one morning and our porch lights had drawn in not just moths but lots of different types of insects and I thought, "I bet I could do insects this summer; that would keep me busy," and so we did and we ended up doing 1000 insect species. And those insects ranged from moths to caterpillars to native bees, assassin bugs. We got a moth that had never been photographed alive before, even though it was collected in 1890 -- nobody knew a thing about it.

I also worked in northern Kansas. It just across the river into Iowa from Nebraska City. I worked at our at our cabin in Minnesota, and in Colorado and New Mexico staying in houses and guest

houses that were empty, houses that friends of mine own. So we were able to do it, socially distancing. I also worked on Nebraska stream fish thanks to a fishery's biologist here who was willing to catch different species and bring them to Schram Aquarium, near Ashland.

Then I also did a driving trip of the South, one driving trip where I went to a few zoos where they had the very last of species in captivity. I had needed to do that for years but these are some long-lived tropical birds, they have hornbills and so forth. So I was able to add about 1200 species to the Photo Ark over the summer and fall. So that's what I did with my summer vacation: photograph insects mostly but also freshwater fish, some small birds at wildlife rehab centers, and lots and lots of insects.

Q: How does photography bring you joy? What do you like about it?

A: I like the fact that light is infinite and I never understand it. I can't understand it still. I'm 58, I've been doing this since I was 18 or 19. And I still don't really understand how light works exactly. It's kind of a mystery. It's hard to do a perfect picture; that's something you probably never, ever, ever will.

When on assignment for National Geographic, I did like 35 stories in the field. You're never off work. There's no breaks; you should be thinking about shooting the entire time in the field. My first assignment was 27 weeks long, and I was on the Gulf Coast. I remember going into a movie theater because it was really gray and rainy. I went in to see a movie just to break the tension, you know. I came out in the parking lot: the storm had passed, and the clouds were lit up fiery red and I was not in a place to make a good picture and it just killed me. So it's the last time I ever went to the movies on assignment or had any fun on assignment.

With the Photo Ark, it's a little different because zoos close at five so I can go out and have dinner and plan the next day. It's a lot of work, but also the reason that I like it is because if I was just a field photographer, would there be a stage play done about the Photo Ark?

Now I was a field photographer for like 18 years for Geographic. There were no plays done on me that whole time. If I just continued as a field photographer, would with my images have been projected on the side of the Vatican at St Peter's Basilica? Don't think so. Would the pictures be in 40 traveling exhibitions? I don't think so. Would they be the subject of three television shows - two on Geographic and one on PBS? I don't think so.

So it's weird. Basically, a series of pictures of an animal in black or white, that look like they came out of an encyclopedia, most of which are not flattering, has moved people to this point. It's all about eye contact because believe it or not, you and I are monkeys. Humans are primates, and we're all about eye contact. That's why we have eyebrows to draw our attention to the eyes. That's why when you open your eyes wide in anger or fear or attraction, the whites of the eyes, draw us in. That's why we avert our eyes if we feel that we don't like somebody as a mate or we feel threatened by them, or we want to be subservient. And so, you know, we're all about eye contact.

So, thanks to social media, we can see how long people linger on a picture how much they share a picture, and we can get animals noticed and try to save their habitats and save them, and promote the institutions that are working on captive breeding or whatever for them.

It used to be that to get a picture of a monkey, or a clam or whatever into the Geographic would take a full year. Today we can post within minutes, if we want to. So that's really great. And I always say well we kind of know what the world will look like in about 100 years due to human overpopulation but that doesn't stop us from doing everything we can. Right now, we try to save species in their habitats. And we can make things less bad for future generations by getting on things right now, not waiting any longer we can make things better. I think the world will get hotter, there will be more misery and more suffering more hunger, you know, I don't know that'll ever go away. But we can make the impact less due to climate change, and we can try to save vast blocks of habitat. True change is generational. And so, it's slow. But, it'll happen.

All the car companies are going to electric vehicles, instead of fossil fuel, that's tremendous. We're going to get our electricity from wind and solar; tremendous change is coming. There will be no more coal-fired power plants built, that's done. So, it's happening and that makes me feel good and that's kind of why I do all this as I see progress being made. It's not as fast as I'd like but I see it. And if the Photo Ark plays some small role in that, that's great.

Also, you know, the real thing I like about it is that most of the animals we photograph have never been photographed before, not well. Some not at all. And, we do video, too, if the animal permits us to. But if you look at extinction and the photographic record, there's no good pictures of lots of things that have gone away.

If some grad student is studying the fish in some river in Wyoming somewhere, we can show that fish alive, instead of dead next to a ruler in some mud. We're the only people that have ever taken the time to do that. Most of the species we shoot are small. We've got all the photos of tigers and gorillas already. So most of what we with the Photo Ark do are small things that never have a chance to sing. The Photo Ark gives them a voice. That's what I like the most about it.

So that's what the Photo Ark is built for really, we're really hoping to give a voice to the voiceless these small brown animals like sparrows and toads, salamanders, things that are not showy things that zoos are never going to stop and propagate because they're just not sexy enough to draw people in through their gate.

Q: How would you describe the relationship you have with your camera?

A: Well my first camera I've sold. I've never collected cameras and so all the cameras I've ever used, except the ones I'm currently using are gone. The camera is a means to an end. I'm not a gear freak. Cameras get more and more and more complicated every year. The camera is only as good as the eye behind it right. So, really, I just want to know the camera well enough to get it to do what I want it to do. But I'm not hung up on it. You ever see a pianist that just plays and they don't

need to have sheet music, and they just pick it up anywhere, anywhere in a song, any song you can think of, they can just do it? I want to be able to do that with a camera and really takes years to learn where all the buttons are and what they do. My big thing is seeing, I think you can make as good a picture with an iPhone, as you can with the camera there on the table. I think it's just it's just the idea behind it.

The key thing to remember is that that most people, the vast majority of people photograph the world from five feet off the ground, because that's where our eyes are. They don't bother to get down on the ground. They don't bother to climb up on anything and change perspective. They don't bother move around and see which way the lights coming or which direction the background is best. That's all that good photography is really is moving around to your background doesn't fight you. So the light works for you. And so the perspective is good if you want to make somebody big like a hero, get down on the ground and shoot up. You don't even realize it but if you watch a movie or cartoon if they want to make somebody giant, they put the camera on the ground looking up. You want to make somebody look small you get over the top of them and have them look up. No matter how tall they are they look tiny. Right. So I think about perspective. And I think about light and background and moments you want to have something interesting and catch it at the right moment. That's what I'm thinking about more than I'm thinking about the camera.

The camera is just a piece of weight that gives me a sore neck. I'm not a big camera fan but I have to have it; I can't work without it. These are just my opinions, a lot of people love great gear.

Q: Have you had any moments you shooting an animal where you were really surprised or your perspective really shifted dramatically?

A: Well, every animal I photograph I think is intelligent, even the insects, I mean they've been around forever right, they've made it through hundreds of 1000s or millions of years. I think they have a basic right to exist and they all have intelligence about them. Even a jellyfish -- I mean how it's moving around the ocean and surviving. So, I just give things a lot of credit.

When I see a spider I think there's never been a machine that can do what a spider does, that we've never invented a machine that complicated, yet where it can it can sense danger and get away from predators. It can stalk and hunt food and out-think its prey; It can it can get out of the wrong temperature in the wrong precipitation levels and walk upside down and navigate in the complete darkness just fine. I mean, we just don't have anything that can do that. We've never invented anything that complicated just a spider. The next spider you see, think about that.

I've never stopped and looked at something that had a big revelation, unless it was maybe the last of something. Like there was a frog at the Atlanta Botanical Gardens that we knew was the last one. When I was photographing it, I thought, "Will I remember what this is like? Will I be able to tell people how epic this was?"

I guess if you want to see an epiphany. I was in, before I did the Photo Ark, I was in water and I was in a salmon stream on the west coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada, and I got into the water for the first time with a snorkel and got in there with red bright red sockeye salmon on a gray rainy day, and they were all hovering over their spawning bed. And you know, they die and then their bodies nourish the aquatic invertebrates in that stream that eat their dead bodies so when the eggs hatch, the young have plenty of aquatic insects to eat. So, it's a brilliant strategy. And it's intentional, you know, through evolution. That's how they benefit. But when I was looking at these fish, I still can't put into words but I knew that I was seeing something that was far more epic than me or even humanity in terms of just something that survived it's a very ingenious strategy.

And we're losing that and I think that if we lose enough life forms, we're going to be in a bad way. So it's very important for me, at least with my time on earth, to try to convince people that we need to save vast tracts of habitat. We need rain forests around the equator to generate the rainfall we get here in Nebraska to grow crops, for example, when those rain forests are gone. It will serve the precipitation cycles to the point where we won't be able to grow as much food and lots of people will starve to death, not rich people but poor people will be the ones that go first; having money gives you kind of a privilege of dying last, but we don't want it to get to that point.

So, I just think in terms of an animal that's moved me, maybe those salmon in a stream spawning and they didn't care that I was in there with them and it was a firsthand sight to something that was much bigger than me.

But I just realize with every animal that I look at, there's great intelligence there. Just because we don't speak their language doesn't mean that a mouse doesn't understand its environment and what's going on on the smallest animals, you know. When we see these news stories: "Oh my gosh birds can talk to each other." "Oh my gosh, elephants can can mourn over their dead." Of course they can, of course, it's not a surprise. It's just people don't give them any credit. My job is to give them credit.

Q: How does it make you feel when you experience the last of an animal species?

A: Well, I get sad, but I don't get depressed. It motivates me to get going to do more. Right? I don't like seeing things go away. I think it's dangerous for the planet. It's certainly tragic that we drove something to extinction, or we're driving everything to extinction just about. I mean, not the cockroaches or the snow geese or the red foxes or sparrows, but a lot of the other stuff will be gone. And so it just makes me nervous. It never makes me depressed. It just pisses me off and makes me more determined to try to do more to try to get more species, and tell their stories because that's the best I can do right now with what I got. That's what I want to do.

I get a kick out of this play because it might be the start of something. I mean who knows? That would be great. And to be able to move the Photo Ark into more into popular culture, that's a big thing. That's a good thing -- it's kind of where it needs to go. I always say, nature needs a long term

ad campaign. You know, we need to see billboards about nature and to remind people of all the things that we do that we don't need to be doing, that would actually make us money if we stopped and benefit the earth like insulate our homes. Quit pouring poisons all over your lawn, what is the point of that, and it's nasty-ing up the drinking water for somebody downstream or even ourselves.

Planning a pollinator garden is a lot of fun. And you can take up some of your lawn with it, so you don't have to mow which means you save time and money and carbon. There's a million things people can do -- for example, eat less red meat. That's a big thing because it's so energy intensive and water intensive.

So, does that kind of answer the question? I went astray a little bit, but I don't let it get me depressed. I don't like it a bit, but I don't let it just eat me alive. I got a lot of other animals that need my help. I can't dwell on. I just have to keep going and thinking, "Well I will use pictures of that one to tell the story of extinction, and why it's so bad and why it threatens all of us."

Q: I understand you were a Boy Scout.

A: Yes. I got my Eagle Scout actually when I was 17 at troop 77 in Ralston, Nebraska. I probably started in Scouts when I was a kid, like maybe eight years old, in Cub Scouts and stayed with it all the way through. So being an Eagle Scout is one of the things I'm most proud of, actually. I'm an Eagle Scout because I'm very type A, and I never, I never put off anything. They told me I needed, you know, 60 merit badges or whatever, so I got 80. I'm proud of the fact that I made it. I don't really like to camp; I've had to camp a lot for my job for Geographic, but, you know, it's uncomfortable. When I went through Boy Scouts, it had come of age and so there were merit badges for photography, merit badge for stamp collecting, there was a merit badge for animal husbandry. There were all sorts of merit badges of things that I was really interested in -- astronomy, for example, coin collecting whatever. So I was, I came along at the right time and it was, it was extremely fun.

Q: Have any celebrities ever come across your photos and shared them to their social media?

A: It's great when that happens because the Photo Ark gets discovered by more people than ever before. I think, Leonardo DiCaprio is done that with photos and and DJ Khaled. It's not enough I can tell you. I straddle this border land between being famous, which I'm not. But the Photo Ark is starting to get there. I would love to just keep it that way. I'm not looking to be a celebrity. I don't want to be a celebrity. I like that nobody knows who I am. But I want the Photo Ark to be famous, because there's no time to lose. I mean, we're really trashing the planet. Of course, it's always fun to tell my young daughter that we've got, you know, DJ Khaled following something, you know. It's kind of fun.

Q: What did you think when you found out that we were going to be making a play?

A: When I found out I was flattered. I thought that was great. It's fine. That's the truth; I thought, "Wow that's that's interesting. I can't wait to tell my wife, so she'll say, 'Oh now you're even harder to live with.'"

Q: What were you like as a kid and what inspired you to become an artist and an activist?

A. So, I had parents that cared. Growing up in Ralston, our backyard bordered a place called Oak Park, which originally was a golf course at the turn of last century; they let it just go to seeds and weeds, big old trees and lots of wildlife. So, I grew up there. My mother was a big fan of her backyard birds and squirrels and flowers. My father took me hunting and fishing, all the time growing up. And, you know, he'd always say, "I don't care whether we get anything or not, we're outside and we're together." And so they cared. They weren't tree huggers. No, my dad liked Husker football like everybody else. I had parents that instilled in me an appreciation for nature. When we heard geese flying over the house, we ran outside to listen to them, even if it was night, you know.

In terms of how I was inspired to move on and make a career out of it, I did some natural history work a little bit when I worked for the Wichita Eagle. I keep a file of things by month -- they call it a tickler file, so I would be reminded of what goes on each month and where, and I remember I went with a high school biology teacher to a bat cave in south in southwestern Kansas. And it was a super hot day and we went down in that cave where it was kind of cool -- cool temperature, very stinky. And, like, 10,000 bats are in this cave and they netted a couple and they held in their hands and it was just awesome. And you know, you come up out of that dark cool place and you're back out in the hot baking sun. I just really like natural history. I like the fact that it can move people.

A good photograph can move people. Photographs helped in the Vietnam War; photographs helped show some of the atrocities in the Iraq war. Photographs can show kids in cages on the border. They can change policy, you know. I mean, I just think photographs have a lot of potential. So, an activist now for sure.

I didn't start out that way. I just figured everybody would care if they knew -- why would you want to drink sludge? Why would you want to let your kids play on a poison lawn? You know, I was a kid who went outside barefoot; my dad put so many chemicals on the lawn (he was a chemist). We couldn't walk on the lawn -- we'd burn our feet; the bottoms of our feet would turn red and get blisters with that crap he put out. Number one, there's no fighting nature. I mean there's no fighting insects. And number two, that's nasty. I don't know what what the fear is of bugs.

I never imagined I would find a way to make a living from photographing nature. Never imagined. But I ended up meeting a Geographic photographer at a traveling photo seminar and pinning him in the corner to look at my book. Then he gave me a recommendation to get in the Geographic. My first story was one that nobody else wanted on Southern bald eagle recovery in the southern states. I went to a breeding center in Oklahoma, and the guy there is still good friend of mine and he really helped me get really great pictures of bald eagles being reared and yeah and so I took every natural history story I could get from that point on, from, you know, the Safari, the safari places in Africa to Antarctica to the High Arctic, Alaska North Slope to the Gulf of Mexico of coast at work in every state. And mostly on conservation.

Q: What are your hobbies outside of work?

A. What are my hobbies outside of work? More work. I just tend to work. We restore old historic buildings, once in a while; we do one every three or four years. Needless to say, I like to save things. I like to fix things.

I like to fix problems, whether it's home repair, saving a building that's going to be burned for practice by the volunteer fire department that's historically significant, I've done that a few times. I like to keep moving. I like to fish -- all catch and release. And, yeah, so I'm always I always try to be busy, if I can. I don't sit around and I don't watch a lot of television or movies or anything. Yeah, so it's not a lot of fun hanging out with me.

Q: You have traveled a lot. What do you think has been your favorite place to go?

A. Antarctica, hands down Antarctica, because it's just, it's clean and pure and you can't get internet and there's no jet contrails in the sky and there's no pollution and if the boat shuts off its motor there's no other sounds -- just the penguins and seals calling. So that's that is my favorite place.

I thought I would be bored. Geographic calls it an 'expedition,' but it's kind of a cruise ship for people that are Society members, and I was the Geographic photo coach. They put one on every boat. It's a Geographic thing. And it's the best place I've ever been just hands down. It's so nice -- you go during their summer (which is January/February here; their seasons are opposite). But it was not not freezing. You wore like a fleece jacket and you're fine the whole time and they put you out on shore and you're in the middle of a king penguin rookery with 500,000 birds just standing there. Humans never got down there to hunt them, so they don't really have any fear. (The reason that birds take off from phone poles here and tjat deer run away is because the ones that were friendly and curious about us and all have all been eaten. So, that just leaves their descendants who all have a fear of people.) No such thing in Antarctica. You can literally lay down on the sandy beach, and you just look up at the blue sky and eventually you just see penguin heads popping in your field of view, they just waddle up and stand right around you, and look down at you and just kind of cool. It's amazing. So yeah, that's for sure.

Q: Monarchs are a major theme in the show. What was your experience with that particular animal?

A. Well, I've had several experiences with monarchs. Our kid collected them as a kid. We have a couple of these farm ponds in southeast Nebraska, and we planted native prairie with lots of milkweed at both. We saw some monarchs this fall and they have to have milkweed to live; their babies have to eat milkweed, that's all they can get by on. If you don't have milkweed for the adults lay their eggs on, they're done.

But the most spectacular thing was seeing the monarchs that live in the mountains outside of Mexico City, where they come to winter. There's four generations, I think. They move up and down

North America and they end up overwintering, and then fly back part of the way back up north in the spring. There's so many of them that they bend the boughs of the fir trees they're staying on, they just are these giant massive clumps. Butterflies don't weigh anything but by the millions, they literally break the branches off the trees because they're hanging on these branches and on top of each other, and on top of each other again. When the sun comes out, they start to fly around a little bit and the sky just turns orange like you're in an orange blizzard. That's pretty amazing.

But, that phenomenon is going away because of farming practices where there really aren't any weeds anymore. Their needs being milkweed and other things like other flowering plants that monarchs need for energy, like nectar-bearing plants. So that's what we planted in our office, at our home and around these couple of ponds.

But, if you're if you're thinking about seeing the monarch migration, you should go now. Because I think they've gone from five mountaintops covered with butterflies to three now. And we don't know how long it'll last.

Q: What sort of observations have you made about your creative process?

A. Being uncomfortable leads you to do better work. Generally, I've found that when something doesn't work out the first time, it works out better the second time because you're uncomfortable and you're highly motivated to get it right. And you'll be more creative, to get it right. I've always found that to be true. I think, you're most creative when you have to be.

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