

Having already trekked the equivalent of more than half the Earth's circumference, **Geoff Dalglish** is walking to raise awareness around critical water issues

THE pilgrim's PROGRESS

What would possess anyone to brave heatstroke and choking dust storms to trek willingly through California's punishing Mojave Desert at a time of crippling drought?

Photographs by **Geoff Dalglish** and **David Wright**



Why choose parts of a route unadorned by life-sustaining rivers or streams, which passes perilously close

to Death Valley and relentlessly shadows an ugly pipeline and series of soulless concrete channels? Why not a more scenically uplifting option like the iconic Pacific Crest Trail immortalised in the film *Wild* with Hollywood's beloved Reese Witherspoon?

You could argue that the route chose us. And following the waterways, natural and man-made, was the very point of the exercise when a motley international group answered the call of Walking Water. It's their urgent response to the global need to create a new relationship with water and each other. Let's face it, the way we've been using, abusing and polluting water isn't smart! And yet it's happening almost everywhere, with devastating consequences.

So, our plan was simple enough: We'd walk from the source of the waters high in the majestic Sierra Nevada mountains to the place of end use—the Greater Los Angeles Area that's home to some 18 million thirsty souls. And we'd do it in

three sections, three weeks at a time over three years, completing the final leg in October this year.

We'd walk and listen, talk and learn, gathering stories and withholding judgements while inviting all players to share their pieces of the puzzle.

This pilgrimage is the inspiration of English-born Kate Bunney, and her vision has attracted peace activists, environmental campaigners, filmmakers, photographers, farmers, local entrepreneurs, musicians, artists and Native Americans who are the original protectors of the land and its waters.

"It's not a march. It's not a demonstration," Bunney has assured repeatedly. "Rather, Walking Water brings together role players from all walks of life, including representatives from the indigenous tribes who are the first people of the land. Hopefully, with ancient and modern knowledge we can co-create healthy ways of being in relationship to water and each other."

"Walking Water attempts to connect that sacred path of pilgrimage—our internal relationship to ourselves—with our relationship to our external environment. We walk toward a vision of a regenerated environment, revolving



PREVIOUS SPREAD: The haunting Mono Lake—our starting point—owes its otherworldly colours to evaporation and high levels of salinity

THIS PAGE, TOP: Walking Water pilgrims are trekking from high in the Sierra Nevada to Los Angeles

THIS PAGE, BOTTOM: California has been in the grip of the worst drought in recorded history

OPPOSITE, TOP: Walkers have been following the LA Aqueduct and pipelines without actually seeing water for many days on end

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Sunbaked earth tells the story of enduring drought



around a simple bottom line: for the enhanced protection of all life."

Already I believe I'm witnessing a wonderful healing taking place. Walking Water is a prayer as much as a political or ecological action, and I'd like to imagine it's being heard.

No matter how exhausted we may be at the end of a day's walking, we circle up in the time-honoured Way of Council, offering a sharing and caring way for

“ We are of one mind, sharing a common love of our Earth and her life-sustaining waters, and feeling deep pain when we witness needless destruction. ”

all voices to be heard and respected. Seasoned community activist and Walking Water co-leader Gigi Coyle invites the uncomfortable questions as a path to authenticity and healing.

A bottling plant owned by a multibillion-dollar corporation is sucking precious springs dry and exporting its products, and yet its representatives are invited to participate and contribute their stories. They ignore the invite.

Among us are some with every right to be angry or embittered, or mired in feelings of despair and hopelessness.

The land we walk is stained with blood and tears. Historians point to two major events that precipitated an ocean of pain and heartbreak: One hundred and fifty years ago, white settlers arrived and erected fences, cutting off the tribe's seasonal life with water, food and place.

This led to confrontations and, ultimately, to the forced displacement of the tribes who'd lived sustainably in the region for thousands of years. Today, this is mourned as yet another trail of tears that has claimed so many lives. Then, a century ago, it was the turn of both the tribes and local settlers to suffer as the waters were purchased secretly and then diverted from the Owens Valley to the fast-growing city of LA.

Using an aqueduct and pipelines, Los Angeles pulled off the audacious theft of an entire river, sparking the bitter California Water Wars. They inspired the acclaimed 1974 movie *Chinatown*, starring Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway, and the true story is no less dramatic. It's one of political corruption and intrigue, of billion-dollar struggles over water rights, of ecological and economic disaster—and of dizzyingly

▶ GEOFF DALGLISH

ambitious engineering feats, as parts of the desert were transformed into a green Eden (at least for a while).

Humans are clever at moving water around but, inevitably, there's a heavy price to be paid somewhere.

We need to let the waters flow naturally, and I delight in the fact that FLOW is a clever acronym coined by filmmaker Steven Starr: For the Love of Water. He has created a powerful and disturbing documentary also titled *Flow*.

now... it's too fresh. My emotions are still too raw!" It seems we pilgrims are of one mind, sharing a common love of our Earth and her life-sustaining waters, and feeling deep pain when we witness needless destruction.

Looking around at the tanned faces of my fellow travellers, I'm struck by the fact that we're not here by chance. Each person has something important to contribute, be it an idea or a way of tackling life without fear or compromise.

of the worst airborne pollution in the United States.

Now I eagerly await the resumption of the third and final leg of Walking Water, when we'll head into the city, walk along the LA River, engage in urban water sustainability projects and eventually arrive at Long Beach.

Perhaps the greatest gift so far has been the people with whom I walk. Alan Bacock, the water co-ordinator for the Big Pine Paiute Tribe, teaches me about



Often, we pilgrims are profoundly moved by the stark beauty of the landscapes. Stepping out day after day at the pace of our ancestors, it's easy to feel awed by the magnificence of nature that has inspired so many visionaries. It was Albert Einstein who observed: "The legs are the wheels of creativity," and "Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better." Hippocrates noted that "Walking is man's best medicine," while philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche insisted: "All truly great thoughts are conceived while walking."

My own creative juices flow freely; even after the most punishing of days, I feel an urge to blog—my emotions sometimes mirroring those of singer-songwriter Sarah Nutting, who paints beautiful word pictures, bringing them to life with a voice that plucks at our heartstrings.

Once, at the end of a long gut-wrenching day, I wrote a blog titled "Trail of Tears" and Nutting independently created a song with the same name and sentiments. Later, when she started singing it to us, the tears stained her cheeks and she stopped strumming her ukulele. "I'm sorry," she apologised. "I can't sing this

Invariably, there are between 40 and 50 of us at any one time, although fewer than a handful will complete the full distance from source to sea. Many are unaccustomed to long-distance walking—and suffer. The campsite sometimes resembles a mini field hospital as blisters and aches and pains are administered to.

We all have our challenges. One night I'm invaded by a squadron of blood-thirsty mosquitoes, my self-inflating mattress punctures, and the clouds of smoke from drought-induced fires are no holiday for this asthmatic!

Hey, no one said this was going to be easy.

But I'm in my element. I'm into my rhythm and loving each step. Loving the camaraderie and sense of shared purpose. And loving the uniqueness of each amazing individual.

Already we've reached The Cascades, where the aqueduct brings the waters of the Owens Valley to the city's doorstep, with water chief William Mulholland famously declaring in 1913: "There it is. Take it!" And take it they did, sucking the giant Owens Lake dry. Within a decade, it was a dustbowl that became the source

LEFT TO RIGHT: One of the interesting people I've met on this walk, Rajendra Singh (right) is known as the "Waterman of India" for helping to bring water to countless parched rural villages in his home country; Some days our campsite resembled a mini field hospital as walkers attended to blisters and injured feet; Walking Water pilgrims circled up every morning and evening in a way that honoured representatives of the indigenous tribes

a more reconciliatory approach to life, especially coming from a valley of often extreme viewpoints. Its sparse population includes indigenous tribes, survivalists, cowboys, hunters, fishers, miners, devout Christians and countless employees of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power that controls water rights hundreds of kilometres away from the city.

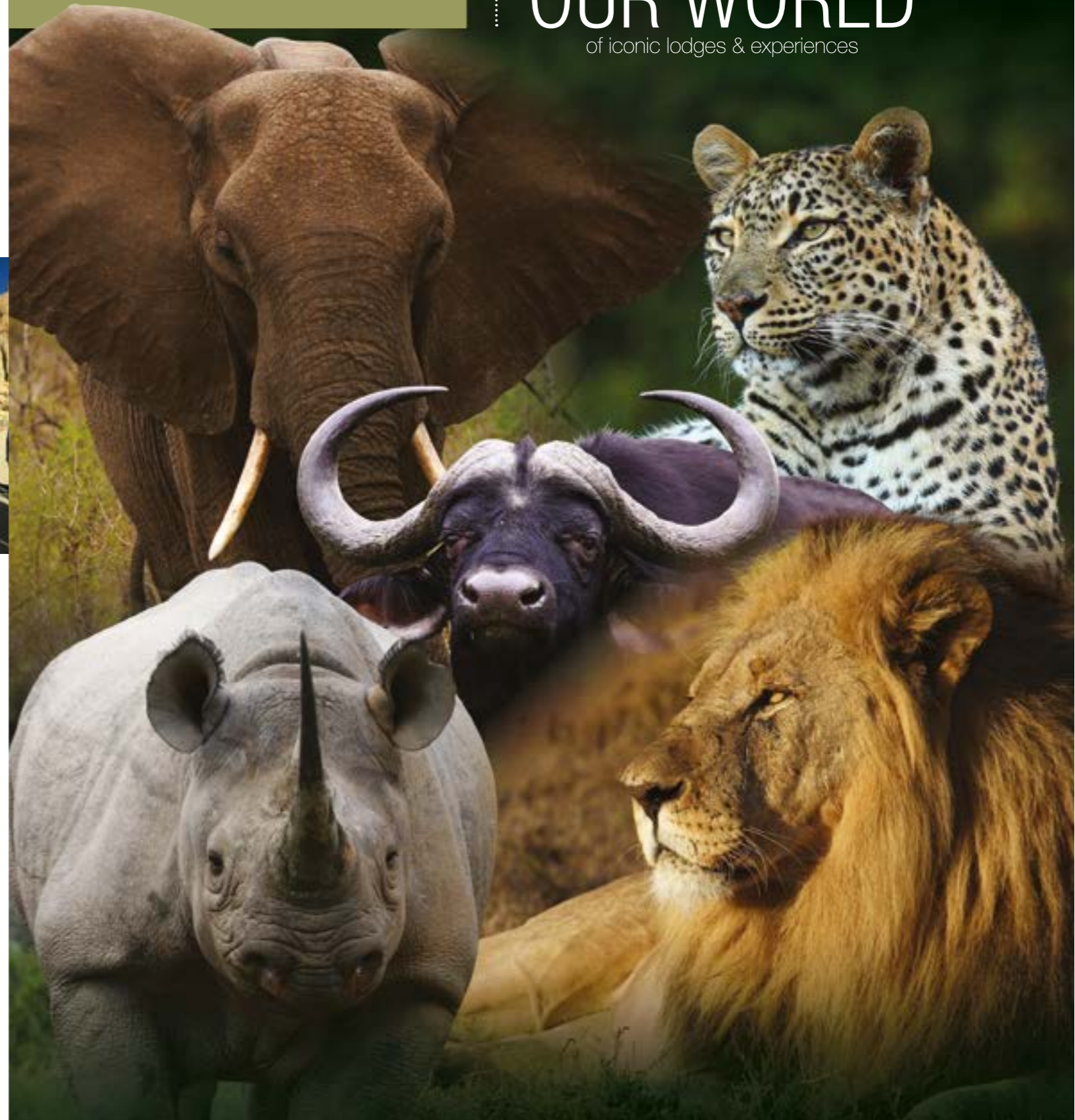
While his own Paiute ancestors were driven to starvation by the arrival of the white settlers, and further compromised by the theft of the Owens River, he has also lived in the city and insists: "I love the people of LA!"

Visit www.walking-water.org and www.earthpilgrimafrika.com for further information.

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