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WEEKEND

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

He dreamed of Africa



Haskell Springs photographer brings exhibit to Prescott gallery

By PAULA BLANKENSHIP  
Staff Reporter

Willis Peterson has an image to protect.

He is the quiet guardian of the Maasai, a silent lover of Africa.

A stealth profile behind the lens, Peterson has witnessed a medley of cultures as a wildlife and nature photographer. His assignments have brought him to Egypt and Sri Lanka from Alaska to Baja.

Yet his spirit has found a permanent home with the nomads.



"The older women sit together off to one side against a dung and mud wall and study me," Peterson writes in his African journal.

"I make shot after shot of their faces. I feel I am getting some great insights. You can see hope, travail, sadness and pride in their eyes."

It's Peterson's 74th birthday and he's on the Serengeti.

As a young boy in Colorado Springs he dreamed of Africa.

"The search for the Nile was my favorite as a child," Peterson explains from his studio in Haskell Springs. "But now Africa is the last outpost for environmental protection. It's been exploited to the point it may disappear."

Peterson's mission is to preserve

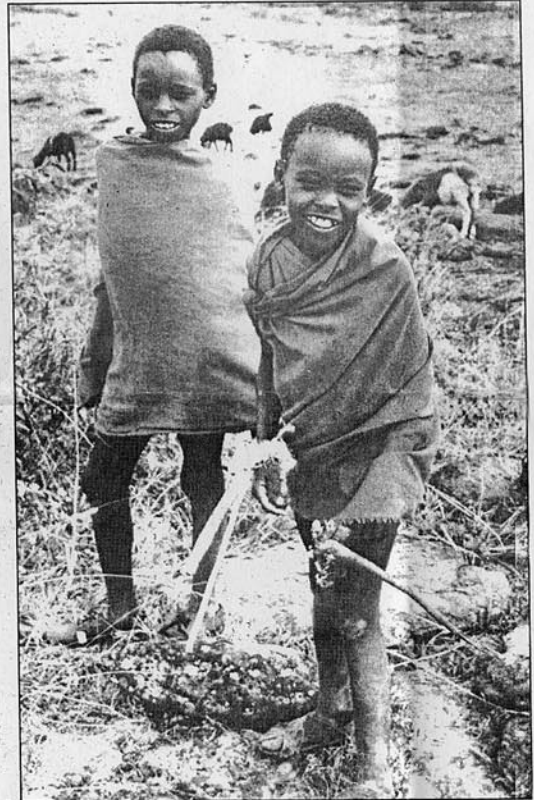
a multitude of wildlife images and to capture for perpetuity a people preserved in time. In his most recent exhibit, "African Visions," at Prescott Fine Arts Gallery we witness a traditional blood letting, courtesy of the Maasai chief and \$180 in U.S. currency.

The arrow flies into the neck of the cow. "Thuck." It enters the jugular vein with just enough force, but not to exit. This is where the bowman's skill is evident, for if it did penetrate the opposite wall of the artery, the chances are the cow would hemorrhage to death. The arrow is carefully drawn out. A gush of blood spurts out. It is immediately caught in gourds up to about a liter or so. A portion will be drunk immediately. Most will be mixed with a kind of gruel to be eaten later.



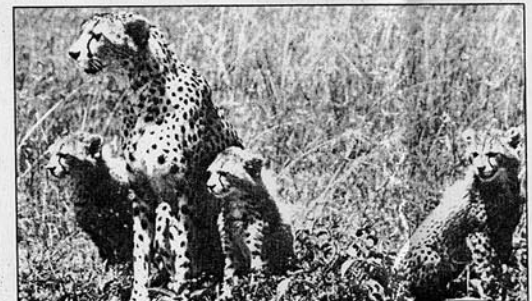
"If we abandon our Maasai way of life, our next step would be extinction," says Kakuta ole Maimi Hamisi, who began his education under an Acacia tree in southern Kenya. Like his ancestor's before him, the

American student is devoted to the Maasai belief: "It takes one day to destroy a house but to build a new one will take months, perhaps years. If we destroy our way of life to construct a new one, it will take thousands of years."



Photos by Willis Peterson

"African Visions" will run at the Prescott Fine Arts Gallery from Sept. 7 through Oct. 7. The gallery is part of the Prescott Fine Arts Association, 208 N. Marina in Prescott. For more information, call 928-445-3286.



"Africa is where mankind started," says Peterson.

The natural beauty and remaining wildlife of the Sudan is also a reminder of Africa's grandeur, its history.

So, with camera poised in the back of his guide's Combi, Peterson focuses above the flat-topped acacias. Long

black tongues avoid the native brush's protective spikes. Peering directly into his lens are the world's tallest land animals.

"A Madonna-like signature of the

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# Africa

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*Mara," he writes of a nursing giraffe and its mother before they drift into a thicker grove of acacias. "What a sight. I take several shots with the zoom, but they are too far away, so I attach the 1.4 extender and make more shots. The sight, the ambiance is just too good to be true.*

"I want people to learn from what I've seen and discovered," Peterson explains as his wife Roberta displays photograph after photograph of the couple's most recent safari. "The more people understand about the environment, the more they will cherish it. That's the whole idea."

It's been the muse behind Peterson's work as a free-lance photographer for Arizona Highways, National Geographic and Audubon Magazines. His images have garnered him a worldwide audience during the International Wildlife Photographic Exhibit and his book, *The Glory of Nature's Form*, which feature both his writing and 113 images.

Not constrained by one medium, Peterson also filmed "Western Wildlife" for PBS affiliate KAET and uncharacteristically moved in front of the camera as the program's host. His artistic and creative talents were also showcased in regular features for the *Arizona Republic*.

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In 1968, Peterson began a photography program at Glendale Community College, which he continued until 1986.

"I don't think there is any end to anything," Peterson says of his retirement "I keep going and one thing evolves into another."

The Prescott exhibit features wildlife from Botswana, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Tanzania, and South Africa.

"When we received his slides, we became really excited about bringing Africa to Prescott," explains Paula Goodbar of the Prescott Fine Arts Gallery. "Willis is right up there with some of the best photographers. His images of the Maasai were really interesting."

Peterson's last adventure on the continent ended in the summer of 1997.

Deluged by periodic rain, Peterson and his wife spent July 11 to Aug. 8 discovering the beauty of Africa. Serenaded by hippos on the banks of the Mara River they found respite in a dark tent with a furtive desire to possess, if only briefly, the Holy Grail of the couple's wildlife quest: Cheetahs.

*When the female cheetah selects a victim she never waivers from this choice. Her eyes are focused on only one animal. Suddenly she picks up her pace -- Joshua guns the Land Rover and we bounce over rock and depression until our teeth chatter, but we cannot keep up with the cheetah. She is hitting close to 70 miles an hour.*

But they do catch up, and every image speaks of life in the Serengeti and the Mara

Later that night, Peterson awakens to a lion's roar.

He's no longer dreaming. He really is in deepest darkest Africa.