

Eco man

Raised amid rainforests where celebrities now eat kangaroo testicles for a popular TV show, Andy Atkins dodged toxic trees and crazed crocodiles when out for a stroll. With machete and flaming arrows, he carved out a *Hunger Games*-style existence in the Australian outback. His dangerous childhood makes survival expert Bear Grylls look like a late developer. Andy later set up Tearfund's campaigning team, helped lead Make Poverty History, and went on to direct hard-nosed secular eco-campaigners Friends of the Earth. He now spearheads Christian environment charity A Rocha UK. He shared his story with Clive Price.

First of all, do you eat meat? Do you like to tuck into a big, juicy steak?

I do eat meat, though we're reducing our meat consumption at home and have become 'flexitarian' – vegetarian several days a week. It's better for the environment and we feel so much healthier, too.

You used to live on the set of *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* True or false?

My father was Anglican rector of a small town, Mossman, in tropical north Australia. I started school there and have many happy memories. It was a vast parish extending from the coast to a mountain range, and included the wildlife-rich Daintree Rainforest. We used to go there for picnics and jungle walks, mindful of vicious 'stinging trees' and the need to keep away from riverbanks because of 'crocs'. Sometime after we left, the forest was recognised as a World Heritage Site and became the setting for *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!*

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Being a young lad in the outback sounds like *The Jungle Book*. What kind of mayhem did you create?

When we weren't at school, we lived out of doors, roaming far and wide – just coming home to be fed and watered. On one island where we lived – in the Torres Straits between Australia and Papua New Guinea – we made canoes from corrugated iron sheets and timber. We'd go as far out to sea as we could before we had to come home to bed. →





My friends and I would make powerful bamboo bows and ‘fire’ arrows – wrapping bituminised paper around the arrowhead and lighting before firing. We used to climb the hill above the town and have archery competitions using targets down below. We were careful not to hit people. But friends’ playhouses were legitimate targets.

I wasn’t deliberately delinquent. But when we returned to Britain, behaviour that was normal in the wild was severely frowned on in the quaint Worcestershire village where my dad became vicar. I remember being stopped by the local bobby in his Panda car. He was curious about the six-inch Bowie knife I’d strapped to my leg. I told him I needed it for making spears and fighting off wild animals.

As your parents were missionaries, did you still have a choice in what to believe?

My parents were great examples of committed, compassionate Christianity – and also of allowing others to make up their own minds. I grew up accepting my parent’s faith and increasingly, my own sense of God. But in my early teens I began to find some aspects of church difficult – from the archaic language to the behaviour of some of Dad’s congregation. I realised I needed to make up my own mind about God and church. Mum and Dad gave me the space.

When I was railing against some perceived hypocrisy at church – which was Dad’s parish – Dad agreed there was a problem and said, “Just because the church can be [rubbish] doesn’t mean God doesn’t exist.” A light bulb came on for me. Soon afterwards, on a youth group outing to Birmingham to hear a famous Christian speaker, I made my own commitment to Christ.

Moving from Australian wilderness to suburban England must’ve been a disappointment.



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In many ways it was. On the one hand it was wonderful to meet relatives I hadn’t known the first ten years of my life. But it was also profoundly disorientating. I’d lived wild and free in Australia. Now my everyday entertainments – popping to the beach for a swim, cutting through the rainforest, living outdoors all year round – weren’t possible.

I was shocked at how you couldn’t walk where you wanted in England, but had to stick to ‘public footpaths’. And the ‘creek’ in the village was too shallow to even put a canoe on – let alone swim in. That was before we moved to the East End of London, five years later.

I now know my experience was typical of so-called ‘mish kids’ – children of missionaries – for whom ‘returning’ to the country of their parents’ origin is often deeply traumatic. While their parents have ‘come home’, the children have left the only culture they’ve ever known. Because of the colour of their skin and their formal ‘English’ nationality, everyone assumes they understand what’s going on. But they may as well have landed from Mars.

What was your first job? For an adventurer, an office might’ve been a little restrictive.

My first job was national coordinator of the Chile Committee for Human Rights, working for the release of political prisoners and the return of democracy. That beautiful South American country was under the brutal dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. My job was to coordinate campaign actions by our supporters. And you’re right. I couldn’t have stood it if I’d been restricted to the office from nine to five.

It was an incredibly varied job and really cut my teeth on what we’d now call ‘campaigning’. One moment I’d be writing a press release on the latest atrocity – the next I’d be down at the Foreign Office lobbying to end British arms sales to the dictatorship. One week I’d be editing the newsletter – the next I could be accompanying a brave Chilean human rights activist on a UK tour.

I made one trip to Chile, semi-clandestinely, to re-establish contact with the human rights organisations after Pinochet had declared a state of emergency and clamped down on all opposition. I had to change my accommodation frequently for security reasons and smuggled video evidence of torture out of the country.

I was newly married. It was a bit rough on my wife, Sarah, from a tiny village in Hampshire. But she came from a social justice-orientated Christian family, and was totally supportive of what I was doing. She deserves a medal for bravery.

Did you ever build a shed or a tree house, to relive the jungle days in polite Surrey?

When I first came back from Australia, I built a great hideout in the woodland at the bottom of the vicarage garden. It was a bush-style lean-to, with a frame of hazel poles I cut with my machete, and a roof of plastic sheeting covered in bracken, bark and fresh leafy branches for camouflage. I had a table and a straw bed, and kept a bird book and notepad hidden away. I’d retreat there to read or watch the birds.

My sister-in-law remembers when she first visited our home with my elder brother. He had warned her

not to worry if a Viet Cong-style guerrilla emerged from the forest. Sure enough, she first caught sight of me walking up the lawn from the woods, dressed in camouflage gear and carrying my 20-inch machete.

Sarah and I moved to Kingston, Surrey, when our first child, Rachael, was born. Sadly, we've never had a large enough garden for a serious tree house. However, I still can't resist climbing trees when we're out on a walk. It's a bit embarrassing to my now-adult and thoroughly English children.

How did you move to campaigning for the environment? And why are bees so blooming important (see what I did there)?

All my jobs have involved campaigning. That's normal for me. All my jobs – whether working for human rights in Chile, better rich-world assistance for poor countries suffering the effects of climate change, or for serious government action to save the UK's wild bee species – have involved calling on those with power to use it to promote greater justice for the poor and vulnerable, and for future generations.

I love nature. But preserving it is also a matter of justice. If we lose our native bee species, we lose not only part of the natural variety that's the rightful heritage of future generations in Britain, but also key, free, pollinators of many of our crops. Without them, we'll either lose those crops or they'll have to be hand-pollinated, sending food prices through the roof. This will affect the poorest most. For me, conserving and restoring environmental health is a matter of social justice.

Tell us about Make Poverty History. What did it feel like to create a big stir with big names?

The most inspiring thing for me wasn't the involvement of big names like Bono or Bob Geldof – though I greatly respect their efforts for the world's poor – and I love U2's music. I even turned down an invitation to chaperone supermodel Claudia Schiffer at a reception, because it clashed with an important meeting with environment secretary Margaret Beckett, who we were lobbying on climate change.

No, the most inspiring thing to me was the sense of committed collaboration across environment and development charities – from Tearfund, Christian Aid, Oxfam, through to Friends of the Earth and World Wildlife Fund – to mobilise the public on an unprecedented scale.

I'll never forget the sea of faces as I addressed the Edinburgh rally before the G8 talks, with so many from faith-based organisations, like Tearfund, CAFOD and Islamic Relief. I was so proud of all those people who believe God wants the earth to be a fairer place. We learned later we drew an estimated 250,000 – making it the UK's largest ever anti-poverty rally.

The environment seems to appeal mainly to women and children first. As you take on the leadership of A Rocha UK, how will you sell the cause to men?

Environmental work is broad. So it needs men and women with diverse skills and interests. It includes everything from arresting global climate change through ending fossil fuel use and rolling out renewable energy, to making your back garden better for birds and bees. There's a role for every man – from volunteers, builders, gardeners, politicians and campaigners, to techno-geeks, scientists, economists and entrepreneurs.

I want A Rocha UK, working with Christians and churches, to help transform communities – for people and planet. Imagine if every churchyard included a peaceful nature garden for the community – how good



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for local well-being as well as nature. Imagine our churches part-powered by solar energy – how good for climate change, as well as church energy bills. And what a witness to show love for God's creation in a practical and helpful way.

This vision needs men to become active in registering their church with A Rocha UK's Eco Church award scheme – and working with their church leaders to drive those changes. It needs men to volunteer to be trained to speak on our behalf or help restore one of our reserves. It needs men to support our campaigns.

Men and women on our staff have fascinating jobs. For example, community officer Kailean Khongsai engages with local volunteers on our urban nature reserve Wolf Fields in west London – digging allotments, creating footpaths and planting trees. They're transforming a former drug den into a beautiful green space.

Only the most selfish man wouldn't care about leaving a dangerously depleted world to his future children or grandchildren, and not want to play his part in turning it around. There's plenty of fun in the process – from cycling to work, through greening your flat or house and watching your fuel bills fall instead of rise, to joining with others to make your church a beacon of hope, through Eco Church. What's not to like? ■

You can register your church for A Rocha UK's Eco Church award scheme at: ecochurch.arocha.org.uk

Clive Price writes news and feature stories for companies and charities.



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