A touching moment between anthropologist and National Geographic grantee Jane Goodall and young chimpanzee Flint at Tanzania’s Gombe Stream Reserve.

Photo by Hugo van Lawick, National Geographic
"Think Jane Goodall’s work with chimpanzees. Think Bob Ballard finding the Titanic. Think of our work today protecting the ocean and saving big cats”…NGS President and CEO Gary E Knell is passionate about the global impact the Society has made through its scientific and educational endeavours for almost 130 years, across a plethora of channels. In an exciting interview with International Innovation, he discusses the importance of promoting exploration and environmental conversation, and teaching the next generation about the world in which they live.

Gary E Knell
President & CEO
National Geographic Society
The National Geographic Society (NGS) was founded in 1888, with an ambitious mission to inspire people to care about the planet. Today, what action is the Society taking to fulfill this objective?

Actually, we were originally founded for the ‘diffusion of geographic knowledge’. Sounds exciting doesn’t it? Well, at the time it really was – the 33 founders of the Society were scientists, adventurers, civil war veterans and writers who were mapping the West, heading to the Poles and studying the stars. They wanted to share what they learnt with others – through a journal (which today is the National Geographic magazine), a lecture series (which still lives on in the US, Canada, Europe and Australia as National Geographic Live!) and, of course, maps.

Exploration remains our guiding principle. In fact, we believe in the power of science, exploration and storytelling to change the world. With the help of our members, partners and philanthropists, we have supported over 11,000 projects during our 127 years. Right now we have nearly 400 active projects around the globe, where people are searching for knowledge about our world and solutions to our most pressing problems.

We are very proud of our international grant-making expansion, which started in Europe in 2011. As National Geographic works to become more meaningfully global, we are establishing a presence on the ground in communities beyond the US, where local teams support and empower local grantees to carry out scientific research and exploration. The Global Exploration Fund—Northern Europe, based in Stockholm, Sweden, is a great example of this strategy at work. Scientists and explorers will discuss the relevance and impact of their findings, and the unique role National Geographic plays in helping them do this work and share it with the public. We have since expanded into China and are looking at other spots around the globe.

As one of the leading non-profit scientific and education institution worldwide, what is the key to your success?

It depends on how you define success! We’ve had a number of successes over the years, but today I look at it two-fold. Editorially speaking, we have maintained a rigorous standard that has produced the most incredible photography and stories of this past century – providing context and meaning for us to better understand the world we live in. But what good is an amazing photograph or story if no-one sees it? I am proud of our incredible global reach, which includes over 600 million people worldwide through our publications, cable channels, films, books, digital and live programmes. Our social media footprint is tremendous:
FOUR CORNERS OF EXPLORATION

NGS has categorised its geographical, archaeological and natural sciences work into four key areas, as Gary Knell describes.

This has been a very difficult task. The good part is that these are not mutually exclusive. A project can fit into one, two, three or all of these categories, but this exercise has helped us more clearly articulate our areas of focus:

Our Living Planet

A good example of an initiative here is our work with the National Geographic Pristine Seas project. A marine biologist named Enric Sala came to National Geographic with a dream of exploring and protecting the last healthy and untouched parts of our ocean. That was six years ago. Today, the project has set out the goal to help protect 10 per cent of the world’s oceans by 2020. So far, there have been 12 expeditions and 1 million square miles protected, including vast expansion of US Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument.

New Frontiers

This has always been a hallmark for us. So many people over the years saw distant cultures, animals and landscapes for the very first time in the pages of our magazine. Today, we still chart new frontiers, sometimes looking deep within to understand the mysteries of the brain, other times taking great risk to reach unreachable peaks. For example, in partnership with North Face, we recently sent a team to climb the summit of an obscure mountain in northern Myanmar, and, in the process, settle a long-standing geographic question: what is Southeast Asia’s highest mountain?

Critical Species

This encompasses work we have done to protect lions, tigers and other endangered big cats through our Big Cats Initiative, as well as extensive editorial exposés on wildlife trafficking by journalists like Bryan Christy and explorers working to protect elephants and other species hunted by poachers.

Our Human Story

The more we know about our past, the more we know about ourselves. I am particularly excited about a recent story we did this past January about early humans and what we know about them through the artwork they left behind – from cave paintings in Spain dating 39,000 years ago to engravings found in southern Africa that are 100,000 years old.

We hope you will join us at www.nationalgeographic.com to explore and participate in innovative ways to make the world a better place.

Second, it’s really all about our purpose, and that is to inspire people, illuminate important issues and teach the next generation about the world they live in. So our greatest success is the impact we have made, empowering people to change the world through exploration and storytelling. Think Jane Goodall’s work with chimpanzees. Think Bob Ballard finding the Titanic. Think of our work today protecting the ocean and saving big cats.

NGS now focuses on three main elements: Inspire, Illuminate and Teach. Why have you decided to reorganise the Society’s structure and what benefits will be afforded by the transition?

During my first few months at NGS, I met with hundreds of employees in the course of a three-month ‘listening tour’. I began to think of this wonderful place as being like an advent calendar. Every time you open a metaphorical door, you find something new and interesting. The institution had achieved so much during its long history and, understandably, had evolved as an organisation built around its most visible work.

I felt that there was much we could do with our assets, but we needed to transition from a structure built around our media platforms and activities to one more orientated toward our purpose. A few months later, we realigned the organisation under the pillars of Inspire, Illuminate and Teach, and unveiled a freshened brand architecture. We spent the rest of the year operationalising that new vision: creating and executing strategies to strengthen and expand our work supporting scientists and explorers; providing context around the important issues of our time; and encouraging the next generation to better understand the world in which they live.

Where do your own skills, experiences and interests lie? As CEO and President of NGS, what attracted you to the role and what are your key responsibilities?

Before joining National Geographic in January 2014, I served as CEO of NPR (formerly National Public Radio), where we took the fire hose of information available today and provided curation and context for our listeners. Leading NPR reinforced for me the importance and power of storytelling.

I also spent 20 years at Sesame Workshop. Our mission was to use the educational power of media to help children worldwide – whether it was adjusting to a family member deployed in the military or battling childhood obesity. Leading Sesame taught me the power of educational entertainment.

Together, these experiences prepared me for National Geographic, which I see as the juncture of education, entertainment and journalism. When I interviewed for this position they asked me what was most important to me. I knew my answer to this question would mean the job. I answered ‘education’ and I got the job.

I am determined to elevate education, but it is really under the banner of impact. For 127 years NGS has made great impacts in exploration, science and storytelling – inspiring people to understand and change
NGS has created a number of green initiatives related to water, energy, recycling and employee programmes, as Gary Knell reveals...

We use triple-bottom-line accounting – making decisions based not only on revenue but also on the effect these decisions have on our staff, community and environment. Our building is a certified Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) Gold by the US Green Building Council.

Compared to our utility usage in 2002 before our first efforts at gaining LEED certification to 2014, our water use is 41 per cent less, our electrical use is 17 per cent less and our natural gas use is 12 per cent less.

We have a Green Team made up of dozens of staff volunteers that work daily to identify and reduce waste. The effect of engaging all our employees in the efforts? Compared to our utility usage in 2007, when we began our employee Green Team, their ideas and behavioural changes helped reduce water use 11 per cent, decrease natural gas use 16 per cent, and cut back on electrical use by 24 per cent.

We’ve also been working to keep our waste out of landfills – in the first six months of last year, we kept 70 per cent of our waste out of landfills!

COCOS ISLAND, COSTA RICA

Marine biologist and National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence Enric Sala dives with a green turtle off Cocos Island, Costa Rica. Sala leads National Geographic’s Pristine Seas project, which aims to find, survey and help protect the last healthy and undisturbed places in the ocean.

Photo by Octavio Aburto