

GOING NATIVE

The world's wild places have provided anthropologist and botanist Wade Davis with adventure, fame and a respect for the variety of human culture. He talks to JO CHANDLER.



WADE DAVIS GREW UP longing for an unconventional life. His academic and writing careers have fulfilled this youthful ambition.



AS AN UNDERGRADUATE at Harvard University in the early 1970s, Wade Davis was the archetypal student of the era — restless, doing drugs and determined to rebel.

BORN IN QUEBEC in 1953 and raised in the suburbs in a loving home by dutiful parents, he had watched his banker father go to the office every morning and return each evening for a cocktail and dinner. “I desperately wanted an interesting life. The alternative I had known,” he reflected years later.

On a whim he chose to major in anthropology, hoping this might set him on course to an adventurous life. Instead he found himself bogged in the tenets of ethnography — the formal study of people and their cultures. The field seemed so slippery and obscure, at least as it manifested in rarified Cambridge.

Then he attended a lecture by ethnobotanist Richard Evan Schultes and fell into the thrall of the “swashbuckling scientist” (as Schultes would be eulogised by *The New York Times*). Schultes had spent years up the Amazon, collecting more than 24,000 plants and emerging as the leading authority on hallucinogenic and medicinal species. His field offered solid, graspable scientific concepts. And adventure. *And* drugs. Davis was sold.

What happened next is a well-worn nugget from the treasure trove Davis plunders at his sell-out speaking gigs around the world. He walked into Schultes’ Harvard eyrie and declared that he wanted to travel up the Amazon “just like you did, sir”. How soon could he leave? Schultes’ parting advice was to be sure to sample the potent psychedelic potion ayahuasca.

Ten days later Davis was on a flight to Bogota to join an expedition into the Columbian rainforest. Today, 40 years down the track, the momentum of that journey propels him into Melbourne on another whistle-stop tour recounting insights gleaned from Amazonia to zombiedom and many meandering waypoints in between.

He has succeeded spectacularly in his boyhood resolve to elude the constraint of the ordinary.

After that first diversion into the rainforest Davis did find his way back to Harvard to knuckle down long enough to complete degrees in anthropology and botany and a PhD in ethnobotany — the relationship

between indigenous cultures and their use of plants. He spent three years in the Amazon and Andes as a plant explorer, collecting some 6,000 botanical specimens.

His thesis then took him to Haiti, where he set out to investigate whether there was a material, chemical basis for its enduring folklore of “living dead” being raised from their graves and forced to toil as slaves. This became a four-year quest for the secret “zombie powder” toxin used by voodoo priests. It also became a blockbuster book, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, and a “horrible movie” of the same name.

Davis identified the main ingredient as a potent neurotoxin found in puffer fish that could so lower the metabolic rate that the victim appeared dead and could be buried. If the “zombie-maker” got the dose right the person might later be dug up alive (albeit psychologically damaged). If not, many undoubtedly died from the poison or suffocation, Davis theorised.

Hollywood’s treatment of the topic won cult audiences but cost Davis some academic credibility. “They promised me Peter Weir,” he shrugs. “But let’s see the queue of students who would say no to selling their PhDs to Hollywood for a quarter of a million dollars.” A rock star scientist was born.

Today Davis, 61, is firmly embraced in academia as a tenured Professor of Anthropology and Chair in Cultures and Ecosystems at Risk at the University of British Columbia. He is also variously described as a “wisdom-seeking wanderer”, adventurer, woodsman, author (of 17 wide-ranging books) and filmmaker. Fellow Canadian David Suzuki describes him as “a rare combination of scientist, scholar, poet and passionate defender of all of life’s diversity”.

How does he define himself? I meet Davis in the café of a Melbourne hotel where he will barely lay his head before flying out again. (His carbon footprint, he confesses, is gargantuan.) “I always see myself as a storyteller,” he says.

And the stories spill out, seemingly without pause, although Davis also manages to down a beer and a bowl of soup. When I slide a question in edgewise, he appears to consider it. But perhaps he’s

heard them all before. Effortlessly and elegantly, that warm Canadian drawl winds its way back into a pre-crafted groove. Phrases and anecdotes echo out of his voluminous archives, which is likely inevitable for someone who gives 70-something presentations every year.

That said, it’s great material. His yarns and insights are captivating, challenging. As his former boss at the National Geographic Society, Terry Garcia, once told a US magazine, Davis “has so many ideas, so much he wants to tell you, it’s like drinking from the proverbial fire hose”.

That profile recounted that in the space of an hour Davis jumped “from his experiences with hallucinogens to US drug policy to America’s historic isolationism to 9/11 to the challenges of a global economy”. I hear all these and then some: reflections on the Australian Government’s continuing struggle with Aboriginal values; public and policy inertia around climate change; the place — and absence — of anthropology in geopolitical discourse.

and moral messages”. He’s become a cultural evangelist, preaching powerfully, profitably and unapologetically to a general audience.

In presentations to book festivals, TED talks and ideas forums such as the one that brought him to Melbourne, he parlays questions that occupy anthropologists into discussion of topics including indigenous dispossession, terrorism, exploitation, development, education and gender.

“The central revelation of anthropology,” he told a Melbourne Writers Festival audience in 2011, “is that other peoples of the world are not failed attempts at you, at being modern. On the contrary they are unique answers to a fundamental question: what does it mean to be human and alive?”

“And when the peoples of the world answer that question they do so in 7,000 different voices, and those voices and answers collectively become our human repertoire for dealing with the challenges that will confront us all. When we lose a culture we lose a part of ourselves. And it doesn’t have to happen.”

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Wade Davis in the field in Haiti where he researched his PhD thesis about the secret “zombie powder” toxin used by voodoo priests. The thesis became the blockbuster book, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*.

For all the twists and turns the narrative keeps returning to hammer an underlying theme, the profundity of human culture. Davis was one of *National Geographic’s* elite corps of “explorers-in-residence” for 13 years, alongside oceanographer Sylvia Earle, primatologist Jane Goodall and underwater archaeologist Bob Ballard to name a few. Davis’ dream mission was “to change the way we viewed and valued culture”. He travelled “the ethnosphere” with film crews and photographers, collecting stories of culture with “intellectual

“I NEVER REALLY set out to be a spokesperson on culture,” Davis tells me. He volunteers that he has never practiced hard-core ethnography, never dug in deep on a long-haul investigation.

He acknowledges there are legitimate questions in anthropology today about “whether you can be a fly on the wall in a society and write a monograph that is an objective description of that culture”, but adds, “those men and women who go and commit five years of their lives, I think are heroes. Those monographs are invaluable to us today.”

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Two Huli men from the souther highlands
of Papua New Guinea. The Huli were not
known to Europeans until 1935.

“WE HAVE THIS DISCONNECT BETWEEN OUR BEHAVIOUR AND WHAT IS GOING ON IN THE BIOSPHERE.”

“[Academic fashion] turned the other way, saying that nothing we know can be known. It then created this thing where now what we are supposed to study is the process of change. So visiting the Melbourne bus station is as important as going to Arnhem Land. It’s a nice convenience for anthropologists – it’s cheap, they get to sleep in their beds. But it also takes them off the front lines of where human rights abuses are occurring.

“I always felt anthropology had a powerful activist role to play,” he says. “I was steeped in that tradition of anthropologists as activists going back to Margaret Mead and (Franz) Boas and (AL) Kroeber.” He nominates William (WEH) Stanner as another – “the great Australian anthropologist, who really lived outside the academy much of the time” – and whose influential work through the 1950s and ’60s is unfortunately little known today.

“He’s the one who first allowed me to understand the notion of Aboriginal Dreamtime. The fundamental thing is that it was a culture of stasis, not change; of maintenance, not development. Where the entire purpose of life wasn’t to improve anything, but rather to do the ritual gestures within your clan territory deemed to be necessary to keep the world exactly as it was at the time of its creation.”

This goes to the heart of a controversy playing out during Davis’s visit, around Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s description of remote communities as a “lifestyle choice” which governments could not be expected to “endlessly subsidise”. Does he want to buy into that discussion?

“To be fair to Australia, it’s very difficult. I can’t think of two civilisations whose value systems and ideologies and entire sense of existence could possibly be more diametrically opposite than that of the Aboriginal people of Australia and the Europeans who came here.

“When the British came here they saw people who looked strange, who had a simple technology. But what really offended them was that the Aboriginal people had no interest whatsoever in improvement, in progress, the essential values of Victorian Europe that died in the blood of Flanders, but that nevertheless at the time of contact were very strong. What, of course, is missing is any appreciation of the Dreaming.”

For Davis, storytelling informed by anthropology lights a path to guide people into unfamiliar intellectual landscapes, places they might find insights to enrich their own lives, challenge their assumptions and perspectives, and perhaps inform the policies that shape their societies.

“If you could take all the genius that allowed us to put a man on the Moon and applied it to finding a way across the ocean, what you get is Polynesia” – a

culture that mastered navigation to cross the Pacific using stars, wave patterns and clouds.

“In the case of Aboriginal Australia, if we had followed that Dreamtime intellectual devotional trajectory we wouldn’t have put a man on the Moon, but we wouldn’t be talking about climate change.”

The central observation of his wide-ranging career, informed by qualifications in the natural sciences and the social sciences, is that both biological and cultural diversity are equally important – and both are being eroded by the same forces. These run the gamut from changing weather to shifting populations, deforestation to development, information technology to international markets.

As a scientist with a foot in both camps, Davis wants to build more holistic perspectives on social and environmental issues. This straddles a gulf that was profound in his own formative academic years. He recounts a story from 1979. Norman Myers had published one of the first books on the biodiversity crisis, *The Sinking Ark*, and at Harvard, biologist EO Wilson was introducing Myers at a lecture. Across the street the Dalai Lama was speaking. His Holiness had pulled the bigger crowd.

“Apologising for the sparse crowd, Wilson – a great hero and mentor of mine – said that ‘if even Harvard students would rather be across the way listening to that religious kook, you know how far we’ve got to educate the public at large’. It was just emblematic of the chasm.”

Both spheres of science have, he says, “done a terrible job” of communicating the wonders of nature and humanity. “It’s one of the reasons I think we have this disconnect between our behaviour and what we know objectively is going on in the biosphere. How can we expect people to respect forests if they don’t know what photosynthesis is?”

Davis is a passionate advocate of environmental conservation and preservation, but his message on vanishing culture pointedly engages different language – it’s about cherishing, respecting, sharing. He’s espousing cultural survival, not cultural preservation. It’s a critical but often confused distinction. The former recognises the right of cultures to evolve according to their own dynamics and values, not those imposed from outside.

“It’s not about us going to a pre-industrial past or keeping anyone from the genius of modernity. It’s about asking how can we find a way that all peoples can benefit from the genius of modernity without that engagement meaning the death of their ethnicity.”

Today half the world’s 7,000 languages are not being taught to children. For Davis this is a tragedy, the intellectual equivalent of bulldozing old growth forests. But while there’s value in striving to lock up endangered landscapes, “you can’t make a rainforest

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An Ariaal maiden at a wedding in Karare, Kenya, 1998.

“YOU CAN’T
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This portrait of an indigenous Amazonian youth was taken in northwest Colombia. The youth lives in a community on the Rio Pirapana, a region notorious for treacherous rivers, rapids and waterfalls.

park of the mind”, he says. “Change is the one constant of culture. We have this idea that remote cultures, quaint and colourful, are somehow destined to fade away as if by natural law if they can’t keep up with modernity. And nothing could be further from the truth. In every case these are dynamic, living peoples being driven out of existence by identifiable forces. And that is an optimistic observation because if human beings are the agents of cultural destruction, then we could be the facilitators of cultural survival.”

The obvious assassin of culture is industrial growth, he says. But he also points the finger at the equally merciless swathes cut by political and social movements, including Marxism and consumerism. “It’s not about the traditional versus the modern. It’s about the rights of free people to choose the components of their lives.”

He illustrates with the case of the nomadic Penan of the Borneo rainforest. If Malaysia really had an enlightened policy to deliver health clinics and computers to the Penan, “maybe they could have a good discussion about what they wanted. But the reality is that the language – ‘we are going to give you modernity’ – is coda ... it’s just used as an excuse to drag people off lands they have inhabited for millennia. So where are the Penan today? They are living in squalor, and their forests have been destroyed. That’s what makes culture more than an issue of human rights or nostalgia. It is really an issue of geopolitical stability.”

Look at any of the social or political flashpoints around the world, he says, the constraints of tradition and the forces of modernity are common themes.

Davis laments that anthropologists are not more visible and vocal in explaining the cultural clashes and misunderstandings that shape geopolitics. Terrorism experts are constantly bobbing up as media commentators, but where are the anthropologists? He wonders if the profession itself is to blame for not “having the wherewithal to push outside itself and share its considerable wisdom with the public.

“If there is one thing that anthropology teaches us it is that culture is not trivial, it is not decorative ... It is ultimately a body of moral and ethical values that every culture places around each individual being to keep at bay the barbaric heart that lies within all humans. As history largely shows us. Culture matters. It’s not about preserving anything. It’s about asking about what kind of world we want to live in.” ☺

WADE DAVIS visited Melbourne courtesy of Creative Innovation 2015 Asia Pacific “From disruption to sustainable growth” creativeinnovationglobal.com.au

JO CHANDLER is an award-winning freelance journalist and author.

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