

# Taegen Yardley

*Nat Geo Guest Blogger Olivia Ries Interview with Taegen Yardley:*

• **What first inspired you to try and protect elephants?**

I was first inspired to save the elephants in 2013 when Laurel Neme and Ashley McAvey invited me to help with a bake sale at the screening at the documentary of “Battle for the Elephants” at the University of Vermont

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• **Where or how did you first learn there was a problem?**

I first learned that there was a problem when I watched the documentary.

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• **Why did you think you could make a difference?**

I thought that I could make a difference after I was asked to testify at the Vermont State House. I realized that sometimes adults listen more to children than to other adults.

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• **Who else helped you?**

I have worked with many wonderful conservationists. Laurel Neme, Ashley Prout McAvey, Allen Sandico from Tusk Task Force and Jen Samuel from Elephants D.C. When I was working on producing the movie “Vermont Battles for the Elephants” I received so much help from so many wonderful people and organizations. My teacher Mark Cline-Lucy at the Vermont Commons School filmed and edited the movie. Several students from my school were willing to be a part of the film. National Geographic photographers allowed us to use some of their photos. The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust and Big Life Foundation allowed us to use some of their images and video footage.

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**What is one thing you wish everyone knew about this problem?**

I wish that everyone knew that this is not just a conservation issue but also a humanitarian issue. Sadly, some people do not believe that conservation issues are enough of a reason to take action. If people knew about the humanitarian issues, I believe that more people would take action and support our efforts. Terrorism and global warming seem to attract more attention than saving wildlife.

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• **What can teachers do to help? What could students do to help?**

Teachers can educate their students by teaching about the importance of wildlife conservation and about all of the animals that are on the brink of extinction because of us. They can encourage students to do research projects about the issue and to get involved with efforts in their cities, towns and states. The Humane Society oftentimes has Bill's that they are trying to pass and teachers and staff can work with their students to get involved in supporting and trying to pass these Bills. Students would not only learn about the issues but about government as well. Students could help by spreading the word about this issue. They could speak with their friends, their parents and their teachers. They could research the importance of saving elephants and many other creatures and find ways to get involved in efforts that are trying to implement change.

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**· What is something that surprised you about working on this?**

The thing that surprised me the most was how much poaching is affecting our planet and its ecosystems

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**· How far away has your effort reached? In other words, have you been surprised about someone helping or hearing about your work from far away - and HOW far away?**

This effort has reached many different countries in Africa and Asia as well as other countries around the world. The movie has been shared and viewed on social media by the Ambassador to Gabon, Senator Ray Lesniak of New Jersey, actress Kristin Davis, The Chief of U.S. Fish and Wildlife for Africa and Asia. Many government and conservation organizations from around the world have shared it as well.

**· What has been the hardest part? The easiest part?**

The hardest part is getting everyone at the same table for organizational meetings and not knowing if what I am doing is making a difference.

The easiest part is trying to implement the change. I want so much to see change that I get so excited about anything I can do to make a difference.

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**· What has been the biggest disappointment you have experienced since taking on this project?**

The biggest disappointment was when the vote for Bill H.297 was postponed last May. It was postponed until this January/February (2016). The bill just passed out of Committee and is now in the House. We are hoping to hear if it is voted out of the House this week.

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**· What is one thing readers can do to get involved?**

I would love for readers to contact their state legislators. So few states have passed similar legislation to Vermont's Bill H.297. Unless each state passes legislation, there will be loopholes, which will allow for the trade and sale of ivory to continue. We do not have much time so please find out who represents you and contact them.

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**· You recently attended the "Voices for the Wild: Inspiration to Action" at the State Department in recognition of World Wildlife Day in Washington DC, what was that like?**

I attended "Voices for the Wild: Inspiration to Action" at the State Department. It was very informative listening to filmmakers, wildlife photographers, journalists, artists and writers from so many amazing companies and organizations that are dedicated to raising awareness about the importance of wildlife conservation. It was very inspiring to listen to all of the different ways that they try to raise awareness. Sometimes they focus on empathy to make people try to relate to a situation. Sometimes they focus more on shocking information to get people to understand the reality of the situation. One of the highlights of this event was meeting one of my heroes, John Hemminway. He produced the movie "Battle for the Elephants" which I saw three years ago and which is the reason I want to save the elephants. After the event I was able to attend a reception where I met Under Secretary of State, Catherine Novelli and Assistant Attorney General, John Cruden. They were both very kind and very supportive of my efforts. I also met an actor and a race car driver who are able to make a big impact because so many people are interested in what they do and listen to what they have to say. I was able to talk to filmmakers about what their jobs are like and about what they feel the best way is to get people to listen and pay attention to our message.

**· You also then raced up to New York and attended the UN's World Wildlife Day Event, tell us about that?**

The event "World Wildlife Day Celebration 2016" at the U.N. went way beyond my expectations. I was able to sit on the floor of the UN chamber. I sat in "Mongolia's" seat. I was able to meet actor Kristin Davis who is a supporter of the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust. Her movie "Gardener's of Eden" was one of the winner's of the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival's "Elephant Film Festival". I met model Gisele who works to promote the conservation of wildlife. I also met the Secretary-General of CITES (Convention for the International Trade of Endangered Species). Listening to the panelists from around the world was very inspiring and being able to attend an event at the UN was amazing! At the end of the event, Lisa Samford from the Jackson Hole Film Festival announced the winners of the "Elephant Film Festival". We were not able to enter our film because we found out about the contest one month after the deadline. Lisa liked our film though and that is why she invited me to all of these events. She even recognized my film from the floor of the U.N. WOW! That evening we attended a reception at the Paley Center and a screening of one of the winning films "Naledi". At the reception, I was able to meet Senator Ray Lesniak

from New Jersey. It was great to meet him because New Jersey is the first and only state that has passed a bill which bans the sale of ivory and which also has no exemptions! Everyone has to see the movie "Naledi" when it is released this fall. It is about a little orphaned elephant. It is a beautiful movie!

**· How has attending these event affected your resolve towards helping elephants and if so, will you change your strategy going forward ?**

Attending these events has inspired me even more to get my message out and to make sure as many people as possible hear it. We don't have a lot of time to turn around the current rate of destruction of this species. I don't plan to change my strategy but attending these events helped me to understand what I need to do. My next step is to have my movie translated into other languages. I have wanted to do this all along but I have realized even more, how important is it.