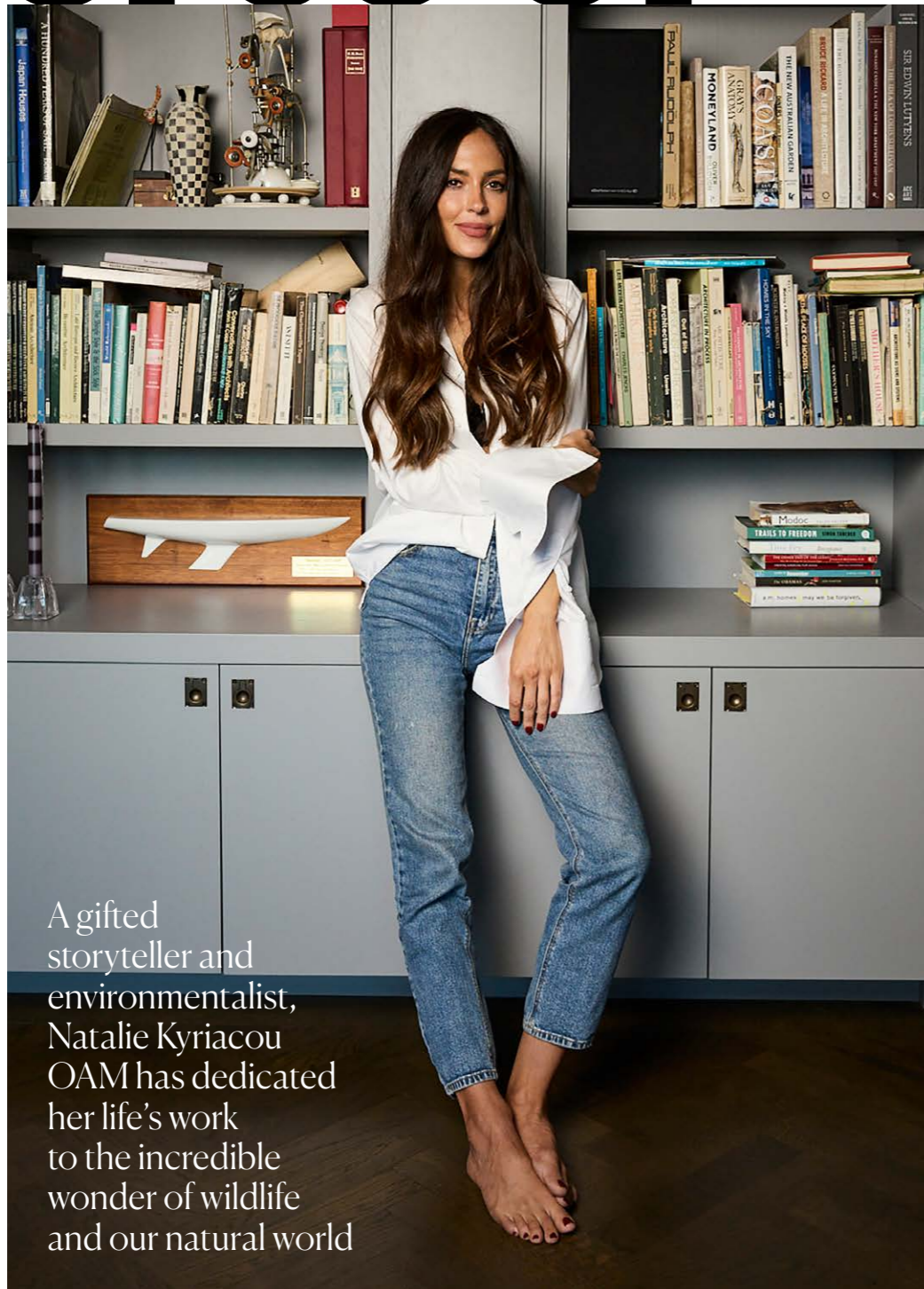


# Force of



WORDS BY JUSTINE MCCLYMONT

A gifted storyteller and environmentalist, Natalie Kyriacou OAM has dedicated her life's work to the incredible wonder of wildlife and our natural world

# Nature

As a child, Natalie Kyriacou was always outside, searching for interesting insects and spotting wildlife. Little did she know, but these were the moments that would, in turn, transform into a lifelong calling to protect nature and its inhabitants.

Today, Kyriacou is an environmentalist, social justice advocate, entrepreneur and author. Her list of accolades is impressive: a Medal of the Order of Australia, finalist of the UN Environment Programme's Young Champions of the Earth, UNESCO Green Citizens Pathfinder, and board director at both the Foundation for National Parks & Wildlife and CARE Australia. She has also served as a delegate at the G20 global forum spotlighting gender equality and women's economic empowerment in 2023.

As the founder and chair of My Green World, Kyriacou leads a charity dedicated to addressing global wildlife and environmental challenges through youth-focused education. Growing up in Melbourne, the seeds for inspiring the next generation were planted young. "Every second weekend, my parents took my sister and me camping," says Kyriacou. "And on the weekends we stayed home, my dad would often pitch a tent in the backyard so we could pretend to be living in the jungle. I would trail after frogs and watch little insects go about their lives. I'd feel deeply sad if there was any sort of suffering ... So I guess I never grew out of that."

When Kyriacou finished high school, she enrolled in a journalism degree with the hope of reporting on environmental and human rights issues. After graduating, she enrolled in a master's degree in international relations, but before starting, she volunteered at the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre on the island of Borneo. There, surrounded by the beauty of the tropical jungle, Kyriacou witnessed firsthand the consequences of habitat clearing on wildlife. It changed her trajectory forever.

"I was there because I wanted to write an article about the impacts of palm oil and orangutans, but I just had the most profound experiences," she recalls. "I had seen orangutans that had been orphaned by industry, the beauty and wonder of nature, the challenges that communities face, and the challenges that non-profits face. An orangutan came up to me and he just started holding my hand. It was this really tragic moment, because he's not meant to be doing that - he's not meant to be standing holding my hand. He's meant to be wild."

With this experience front of mind, Kyriacou flew back home with a new purpose: a "passion project" to build a mobile game app that empowered



Natalie Kyriacou at the September launch of her book, *Nature's Last Dance: Tales of Wonder in an Age of Extinction*.

"We tend to forget that the greatest joys in life are often in the simple things"

children to learn about environmental issues and become virtual wildlife conservationists. Each animal in the app would represent a real-life charity, helping to fund actual conservation efforts.

"Creating an app back then wasn't like creating one today," she explains. "It took a really long time and I had to sell my car, put my life savings into it and do garage sales to fund it. But it also meant that by the time I finished my master's degree I was on an entirely new mission." In 2013, aged 25, Kyriacou launched the World of the Wild app.

While it could be easy to feel overwhelmed by today's pressing environmental challenges, Kyriacou continues to view the planet with awe. Now 37, she finds joy in the innate quirkiness of the natural world and the peculiar, delightful creatures that inhabit it. And she loves telling stories that invite people to see this too.

Perhaps that's where her power truly lies. Not only as a changemaker, but as a storyteller who is fierce and funny, unapologetic and unwavering. It's this talent that has seen Kyriacou's new non-fiction book, *Nature's Last Dance: Tales of Wonder in an Age of Extinction*, receive worldwide acclaim.

"It felt like all of my life's work and childhood, all of my passion, my whole heart, my whole brain, it was all of it," she says of the book. "It was this call to action and rebellion and a love letter ... It's my contribution to both the enormous efforts of millions of people and hopefully to future generations who are fighting for the environment."

Kyriacou's greatest hope is that her work inspires a renewed love for nature - one worth fighting for. "Birdsong in the mornings or a whale breaching in the ocean, a pod of dolphins passing us, or lightning or stars," she says. --"We tend to forget that the greatest joys and the most meaning you can get from life are often in the simple things: to go outside, to live kindly, to think about others, to consider deeply the world that we live in and to not take that world for granted."

Photography Chloe Paul; Lucy Parakhina.