







# Sailing on the Wild Side

BY JILL JOHNSON





Sometime in June 2004:

It's the dead of night in the Pacific. *Wildlife*, a catamaran with a crew of three, noses right into a vicious storm — one of eleven it would meet head on between Chile and French Polynesia. A speck in the vast ocean, the boat dances wildly as it's swallowed in the shadow of a rogue wave. The eighteen-foot liquid wall does its own dance, hovering, then lunging forward in a crushing arc. The crew scatter like marbles as the sea fills the vessel: John-Frederick ("JF") Thye, the captain, flips out of bed and hits the ceiling; Kate Hagerman, the cook, catapults off the toilet, almost breaking her nose; and Daniel Michahelles, the first mate, hits the floor in the galley and tumbles down a flight of stairs.

Also in June 2004:

The boat is approaching Easter Island. It's finally a perfect day. *Wildlife* is sailing under spinnaker and a mainsail that shouts [Wildlifesail.org](http://Wildlifesail.org) from sea to shining sea and carries its eco-friendly crew to the world's most varied marine habitats. Suddenly four fin whales, characterized by their gray backs and white bellies, appear on the starboard side. "Whales!" yells JF. Everyone races up on deck to engage in a staring contest with some of the largest creatures on earth. One of the whales turns on its side and holds its gaze. Then, like a peacock spreading its plume, it rolls on its back and salutes the crew with its snow-white belly — an underwater white flag waving in unison with *Wildlife's* sail. Tears of awe run down the observers' faces.

**T**hese two scenes from one month in the thirty-three that former Greenwich resident JF Thye spent circling the globe (well, almost) capture the essence of the thirty-one-year-old's dream voyage: It was a wild wrestling match with nature and a love story between man and marine life. The 30,000-mile journey — from Europe to the Caribbean, around South America and across the Pacific to Fiji — yielded a string of adventures and, more importantly, an education in marine conservation for more than just the boat's crew. *Wildlife's* itinerary targeted Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) projects where researchers collaborated with the crew, who in turn educated students via content on the Wildlife Sail website. The forty-seven-foot catamaran provided a platform for research and transportation to remote locations to which scientists otherwise would not have had access. Sharing the boat and its resources with the scientists was like giving birds with clipped wings a chance to fly.

We first met up with JF in a sun-splashed room at his parents' elegant white Colonial in Greenwich after he had completed *Wildlife's* Atlantic crossing in 2003. The family came to Greenwich, where JF raced sailboats at Indian Harbor Yacht Club, in 1996. >



*Wildlife* in a shipyard in Rio de Janeiro for repairs, surrounded by commercial and household trash, paint and oil spills, dead rats and noxious harbor water

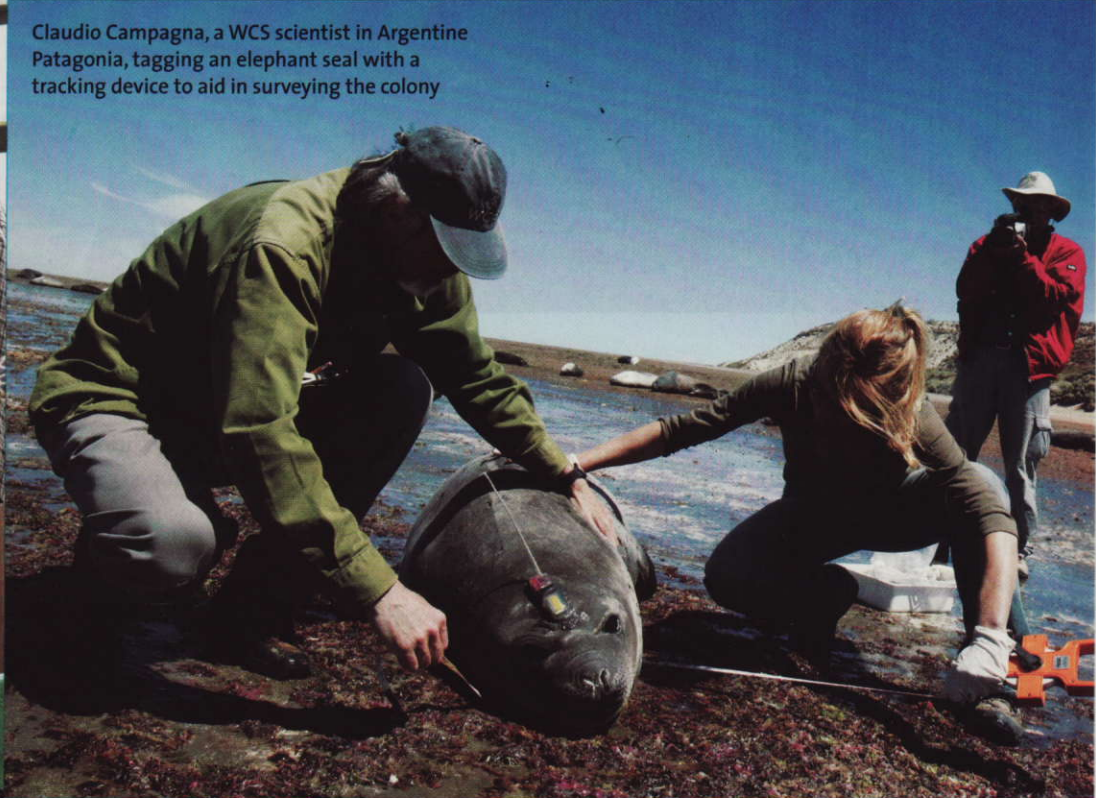


Brother King on Bequia Island in the Grenadines, where he collects hawksbill sea turtle eggs and rears the hatchlings to give them a better chance of surviving



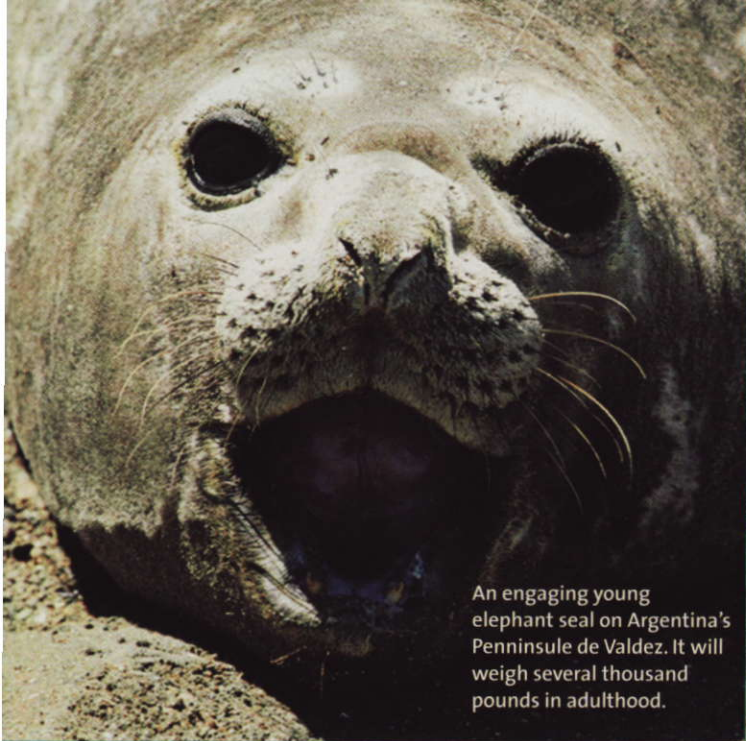
Magellanic penguins that are being studied to learn why their numbers are shrinking

Claudio Campagna, a WCS scientist in Argentine Patagonia, tagging an elephant seal with a tracking device to aid in surveying the colony



A baby guanaco in Patagonia, where the guanaco population has plummeted because imported English sheep deplete their grazing areas





An engaging young elephant seal on Argentina's Penninsule de Valdez. It will weigh several thousand pounds in adulthood.

The many wild creatures encountered in South America by the *Wildlife* crew include these pelicans in Valparaiso, Chile.



*Wildlife* next to a 3.5-mile-wide glacier connected to the Patagonian ice cap. In places where the water was too deep to anchor, the crew tied lines to trees on shore.

"During the first eighteen years of my life, I had twelve major surgeries on my left leg," explained JF, who was born with one leg shorter than the other. Wearing grey cargo pants and a blue sweater, with a goatee and a thin line of facial hair scurrying along his jaw, he appeared casual against the formality of the gated estate. His soft voice, average build and gentle demeanor defied the image of a daredevil sailor. "I would spend months in the hospital and a lot of time on crutches," he said. "I kept having this recurring dream that I was flying across the water like a bird. Sailing a catamaran is exactly that experience."

His girlfriend Kate Hagerman, a yoga teacher with a cascade of blond curls and a face like Kate Hudson's, glided into the room. JF recounted their meeting at a gallery opening in New York the previous fall: "We just kind of collided, and it changed our lives." Kate, a new addition to the crew that had sailed across the Atlantic from Spain in the French-built boat, chatted about her recent experiences on *Wildlife* in the Caribbean. She left us so that JF could continue with his story.

JF's father is from Germany, which is where JF grew up until moving with his dad and American mom to Boston in 1987. "My dad sailed in the Baltic," said JF, "but I was scared of sailing as a boy." It was only when his father got a beach sailor — "a contraption with three wheels and a windsurfing sail" — that JF overcame his fear. Later on, sailing on a friend's twenty-five-foot catamaran in Westport, Massachusetts, made him feel as if he had "wings to fly across the sea," JF recalled, adding, "I have always retained my respect of the sea, but at that moment I knew I had to sail it."

As teenagers, JF and Florian Wilken, a German exchange student who lived with the Thye family in Boston in 1992, hatched a plan to sail around the world on a catamaran one day. By this point JF, who had faced the possibility of never being able to walk normally, could walk and run. He had

reason to believe in dreams coming true.

"Niam Expeditions, my company, came about because as our dream developed, we realized that sailing around the world was an experience Florian and I wanted to share with other people," JF explained. September 11 initially stalled their plans, but they finally pulled together enough sponsors to supplement their own substantial personal investments. JF and Florian enlisted WCS as a research partner and secured the equipment they would need so the boat could serve as a floating research and educational hub. After more than a year's collaboration between Christoph Bereau, a boat architect, and JF, a Cornell-educated structural engineer (who designed some of the boat's interior, structural reinforcements and part of the solar-powered electrical system), *Wildlife* was ready to go to sea.

A crew of six, including JF's and Florian's fathers, sailed the first 3,800 nautical miles from Gibraltar to the Caribbean at the end of 2002. The trip took twenty-one days, during which they hit 50-knot winds and a sailing speed of 27 knots. "That's pretty fast for a sailboat," said JF, explaining two advantages of a catamaran: "It's faster than a boat with one hull; and the two hulls, made of honeycomb, enable the boat to float even if it's totally flooded." One of *Wildlife*'s hulls contains two bedrooms and a bathroom; the other holds the captain's quarters. The galley, dining area and navigation station, along with the Internet connection, are located in the middle of the boat. A large trampoline offers prime viewing within inches of leaping dolphins and pirouetting whales. A highlight of the first leg was spotting a pack of ten killer whales.

After a festive Christmas in Martinique, JF and Florian picked up Kate, and the trio sailed to the Grenadines where they met with a man called Brother King who's trying to save hawksbill sea turtles, among the most endangered sea turtle species. King runs a sanctuary on Bequia Island where he collects hawksbill





Daniel, Kate and John-Frederick on Isla Horno at Cape Horn. They celebrated crossing the cape, a tall windswept rock separating the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans, with cheers, Champagne and cigars.

sea turtle eggs and rears the hatchlings to improve their chances of survival.

After exploring the Tobago Keys, Kate flew back to the States and JF and Florian geared up for the 2,800-mile treacherous journey down to Salvador. "You're going against the current, wind and waves, so it's a pretty uncomfortable ride," said JF. "We made many stops on the way and met fishermen in log canoes who had never seen a yacht before." In the ship's log, JF reflected on the voyage.

March 24, 2003

*We live in tumultuous cultural and political times. A circumnavigating sailor comes in peace, assisted by the wind, having endured the rawness of the elements in order to visit a foreign place. A sailor is fueled with curiosity and respect for the communities and environments he visits. Flo and I, during our trip down the South American coast, have been greeted with hospitality, humility and big smiles. As a major war has unfolded in a different part of the world, we are witnessing the local charm of communities filled with people of different colors, lifestyles and certainly limited economic opportunities.*

JF goes on to tell of three teenagers offering them a bowl of fresh shrimp — most of their catch of the day: "We had no local currency and our foreign currencies were useless to them, since they'd never seen a bank in their lives. We gave them a bottle of wine, a *Wildlife* T-shirt and a few coins from countries we had visited. The boys said that they will make necklaces and earrings from our coins to remember us by." On another occasion, *Wildlife* got snared in a fishing fleet's net. The crew expected a verbal attack from the fishermen, but instead one dove into the potentially shark-infested waters and silently untangled the net. In a show of *Wildlife* Sail spirit, JF jumped into the waves and swam

toward him with a case of beer. "We met each other between the bobbing boats," JF related, "forty miles away from land, in the middle of the night, with nothing to hold on to besides the firm handshake between us — a universal gesture of peace and respect. Before I knew what to say, he placed two massive fish in my open hand."

There were some scary moments as well: "One night a commercial fishing boat came within a hundred feet of hitting us. Another night we anchored the boat and went in a little dinghy to a party. Then we couldn't find the boat. We didn't even have a flashlight — that was the most naïve thing I did on the trip."

We next talked with JF last July at Indian Harbor Yacht Club, where he and Kate (secretly engaged in the Grenadines and newly married in a ceremony on *Wildlife*) had brought the boat, along with Daniel Michahelles, an orange-haired German with a slight build whose first sailing experience was the Atlantic crossing. JF, now with a beard and broad shoulders, appeared manlier; three years at sea had clearly agreed with him, or three weeks of marriage had.

Following the trip down to Salvador, Florian returned home, and Kate and Daniel returned to the boat. This trio was a constant on *Wildlife* for the rest of the trip, though a stream of scientists, friends and relatives joined them on land and at sea. In her written accounts, Kate described the next leg to Puerto Madryn on Argentina's southern coast as rough but punctuated by the joys of marine life: Dolphins, "the all-star athletes of the sea, spring in front of the bow, leap, flip and love applause." After standing watch at night, she wrote: "The sun does rise, and in its blinding orange rays I spot a troop of penguins squeaking by. They look totally vulnerable, and they are fine with it."

In Mar del Plata the crew conversed in Spanish about American foreign policy with the owner of a Middle Eastern restaurant. Kate told about a gift they received: "The man left for a moment



# InStitches

Exceptional Custom Needlepoint Designs

Designer Needlepoint Canvases

Unique Fibers and Accessories

Extraordinary Finishing

396 Greenwich Avenue  
Greenwich, Connecticut  
203.422.2150

LESSONS AND CLASSES AVAILABLE

Tuesday – Friday

10 am – 5 pm

Saturday

10 am – 4 pm

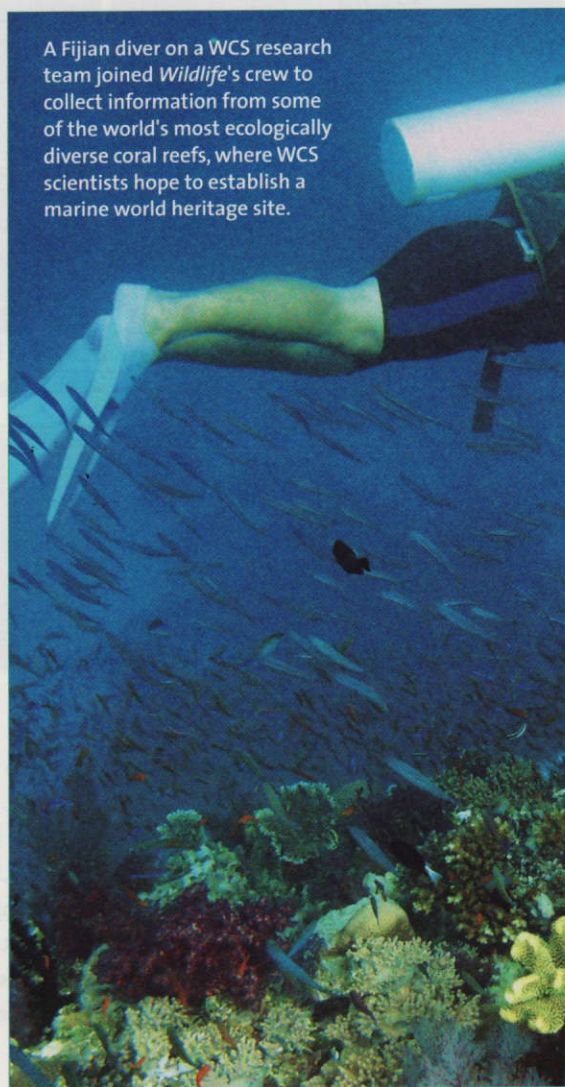


# HAGGERTY POOLS

50 YEARS IN BUSINESS!

**SERVICE & CONSTRUCTION**  
**203-348-6899**  
**www.haggertypools.com**

A Fijian diver on a WCS research team joined *Wildlife's* crew to collect information from some of the world's most ecologically diverse coral reefs, where WCS scientists hope to establish a marine world heritage site.

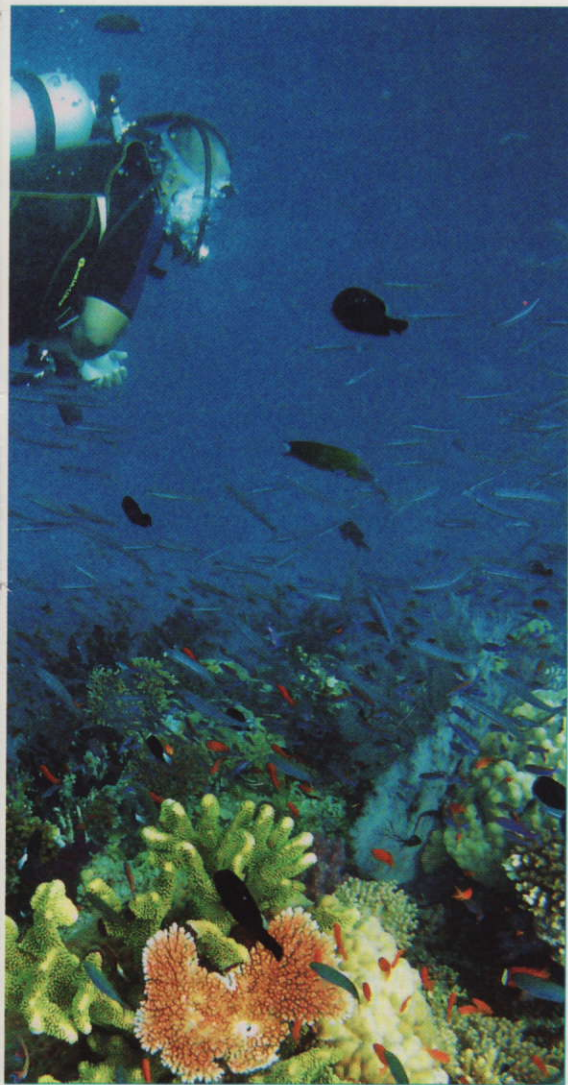


and returned with a small teacup with the inscription *welcome* in Arabic. He placed the tiny cup in my hand and said, 'Please take this cup as a message to the American people, and tell them that not all Arabs are bad.'

Peninsula Valdes off Argentina's coast is "the last truly wild place," Kate said, but reported that humans are starting to impact the whale population by leaving trash uncontained. "Because of this, the seagull population has proliferated and developed a habit of pecking at the backs of right whales. The whales get infected and stop nursing their babies earlier so they can get away from the birds. No other seagull population 'hunts' whales like this."

In Patagonia, where the crew spent six months, they learned that unchecked commercial fishing is eliminating certain marine species. "Marine animals from all





over the world come here to feed," JF said. "If the food at the bottom of the chain disappears, the rest of the ecosystem will collapse."

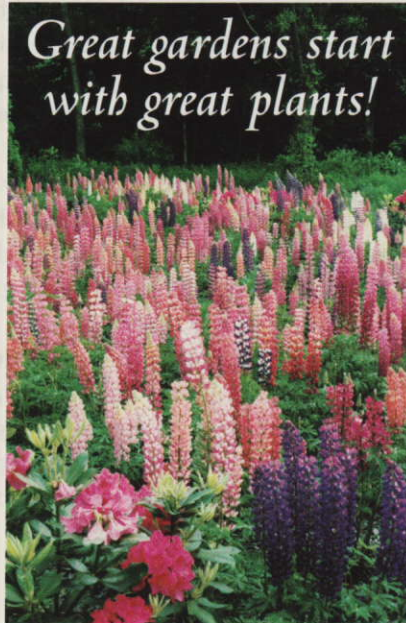
"The albatross, penguin, whale and seal are all globally threatened species due to the fishing industry's stronghold here," Kate observed. Incensed by what they learned about fisheries exploiting the area, the crew wanted to record their findings on film. "Only do that if you have a death wish," warned the local scientists. They heeded the advice but are involved in a documentary for CNN; and their observations, along with scientific findings from the Sea & Sky project to protect the marine ecosystem of the Patagonian Shelf, have been presented to countries involved in the area and the UN conservation community.

The *Wildlife* team worked closely with Claudio Campagna, a WCS



**SAMBRIDGE**  
NURSERY & GREENHOUSES

*Great gardens start  
with great plants!*



437 NORTH STREET • GREENWICH • (203) 869•3418



Jamie Collins Photographer

Tel. 203.854.9771, 100 Washington St, Norwalk, CT 06854

[www.jamiecollinsphotography.com](http://www.jamiecollinsphotography.com)





## One Woman Alone at Sea with a Crew of Men

(Excerpts from Kate's journal)

**Fury/Bliss:** "I got in a fight with one of the crewmen over a misogynistic comment he made. I was ready to walk to the closest airport — which was 3,000 miles away. As I was writing in my tear-stained diary, three Commerson's dolphins appeared. They circled the boat three times and reached their sweet beaks out of the water and let me pet their sides. It was the worst and best day of my life."

**Vanity:** "While the guys were busy tying the boat to shore, I would sneak a hot shower, with organic shaving cream, and use my energy-sucking hairdryer — a once-a-month indulgence!"

**Strength:** "We anchored the boat near Glacier Holanda, a 10,000-year-old frozen blue river, and took a dinghy to shore. It was low tide and we ran into a little trouble. I said, 'Not to worry guys, my red rubber boots you make fun of are just above the waterline, so I will pull you!' Pull the dinghy to shore with four capable men afraid of the freezing cold water is exactly what I did."

**Resignation:** "At Glacier Holanda, I wanted my own view away from the howling men. I took a route that wasn't marked. The face got steeper by the step, and soon I was scaling the side of the mountain, clinging to cracked rotten roots and chipped rocks. When I reached the top, I was covered in black soot, dirt, leaves, grass stains, and my braid was undone. I humbly accepted that silence was a distant fantasy and took to the brutish act of yelling animal sounds with the guys."

scientist who heads the Sea & Sky campaign. *Wildlife* took Campagna and his assistant to two previously inaccessible islands off the Patagonian coast that had traditionally been major breeding colonies for seals and sea lions. "We discovered, even though it was cubbing season, none of the seals were breeding," says JF. "Our observations posed the question: What happened here that made breeding seals move away?"

Kate and JF were impressed by the llama-like guanacos, described by Kate as a cross between a giraffe and a deer: "They walk like emperors and graze the desert-scape of Patagonia." She said their population has plummeted from seven million to under 400,000 because they have to compete for grazing land with the imported English sheep, which are more valued by commercial interests for their wool and meat. (Benetton owns over twelve million hectares of sheep farms in the area.) The sheep have forced the guanacos out of their ancient grazing grounds, JF said, and fences for the sheep pastures prevent the nomadic guanacos from migrating.

The crew made multiple attempts to round Cape Horn, which JF calls "a sailor's Mount Everest." It was "wild, windy, freezing, unpredictable and scary as hell!" Once successful, "We got naked, drank Champagne and smoked cigars," Kate said. "You have to get a little crazy after doing something like that!" At the Cape they climbed stairs up the steep mountainside to a wind-beaten shack. There they got their passports stamped and dropped off some provisions with the family that lives in the lighthouse and receives about ten visitors per year.

The remainder of the trip included adventures involving the glaciers of Chile (such as anchoring by accident in a glacier ice flow), a mind-numbing sixty-day sail across the stormy Pacific, the incest and alcoholism among Isla Robinson Crusoe's eighty-one inhabitants, the eroded soil of treeless Easter Island and the French Polynesians who brought the crew stalks with hundreds

of bananas for breakfast. The WCS highlight was a month in Fiji, where the crew worked with David Olsen, the president of WCS Fiji, and his wife Linda Farley, who are trying to establish a marine world heritage site to protect the area. "Fijian reefs are among the most productive and intact," JF said. "Seven new fish species were found during one two-week period in 2003." The scientists also have found evidence of coral rejuvenating after being damaged. This unusual coral behavior and the richness of this marine habitat make the mission to curtail the huge toll of commercial fishing even more urgent.

Though *Wildlife* continued from Australia to Florida aboard a yacht transporter, the crew — faced with a return date they needed to meet — was content with Florida to Massachusetts being their last leg. They had gone to the edges of the earth and had experiences as rich as the waters of Fiji. They learned valuable lessons: "how drastically we are depleting the sea's resources; how little land there is on the planet; how carbon dioxide emissions are turning the ocean into a carbon sink; how the killer whale, at the top of the food chain, is now the most toxic organism in the world; how much water means; how to conserve energy, resources and food." The trio is working on a book and editing hours of film footage. "The three of us are very passionate about conservation of the sea," said JF. "We want to figure out how we can make a difference."

*Wildlife* is for sale in the Chesapeake. One chapter in the Thyes' book of catamaran adventures is coming to a close, but it won't be the last. "We hope to sail in Patagonia again when we have children," Kate said, "on a catamaran, of course. If they invent an ice-class cat, that is. If not JF will probably design one." In the meantime JF will be giving seminars on marine conservation, and the couple has bought a house in Garrison, New York. The views aren't quite as good as in their previous abode, but fewer rogue waves and more hot showers are nice for a while. ■