

# Mind of a Survivor

*What the wild has taught me  
about survival and success*

MEGAN HINE



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I would like to dedicate this book to Nana. Thank you for teaching me the values of being insightful and non-judgemental and to always be open minded and explore the world. You are an incredible role model.

I would also like to dedicate this book to anyone questioning their inner strength. I very much hope you find a ray of light somewhere in this book. You are stronger than you believe right now.



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## Introduction

There's a popular Rule of Three you'll hear if you ever go on a survival course: three minutes without air, three days without water, three weeks without food. I'd like to add another: three seconds without thinking, because nothing will kill you quicker in the wilderness than switching off and making a bad decision.

I've led hundreds of expeditions through just about every terrain on earth and worked behind the scenes on many of TV's most popular survival shows. I've seen people become paralysed by fear and sabotage themselves through self-doubt, but I've also seen heroes emerge, people who find their voice and their way when life pushes them to the absolute limit. Why is that? Why do some people have the mind of a

survivor when others do not? In this book, I'm going to explore this question by sharing some of my wildest adventures. I'm also going to show how what we do in our everyday lives can mentally prepare us for a crisis.

Disaster usually strikes without warning, whether it's a terrorist incident in a city centre, a plane crash in a jungle or an earthquake in an idyllic landscape. If something goes disastrously wrong in a remote place, the sobering fact is that very few of us will make it back to civilisation. Having a bit of training and carrying the right gear can make a difference, but the single thing that marks people out for survival is their attitude. Those who find inner strength, who remain determined in the face of adversity and are alert to possibility are the ones who do the best. And that means we all have the power to be survivors, not just the young and the fit.

The past few years have seen a massive surge in interest in adventure lifestyles, and I've read lots of survival stories that focus on the physical aspect of the survivor's ordeal. How low did the overnight temperatures fall? How long were they submerged? How much pain were they in? These stories rarely discuss how people handled their fears and emotions. It was the same when I was little, reading about explorers like Ernest Shackleton and Scott of the Antarctic: the focus was always on starvation or injuries or frostbite, and I remember thinking, Yes, but how did they cope? What was going through their heads?

I'm fairly sure I understand why these emotions are missing from survival stories: from my own experience I know that



one of the ways we endure extreme hardships is by shutting down our emotional responses. If you let fear, pain, distress and anxiety rise to the surface they can paralyse your mind and stop it functioning. When you add in the macho stigma of talking about emotions, and a tradition for maintaining a stiff upper lip, it is easy to see why adventurers leave this stuff off the page when they write their memoirs.

And yet it's been my experience that the mental side of survival is more important than fitness and experience. My guess is it doesn't get the attention it deserves for the same reasons physical health is still prioritised over mental health: we're not comfortable talking about it. Thankfully, this is starting to change, but it's only in the fairly recent past in Western medicine we've begun treating people rather than diseases – taking a holistic approach to health – because we've found that a purely scientific attitude to well-being won't cure some illnesses: we also need to soothe our minds.

Along with the rise of the adventure industry, there has been an increased interest in traditional bushcraft skills, like fire-making, foraging, hunting and building shelters. It's striking how many people get so much out of learning these ancient crafts, but it's not at all surprising. When I work with native peoples who still practise their ancestral skills and heritage, I never cease to be inspired and amazed by the similarities between skills used on opposite sides of the globe, as well as the quirks and adaptations different tribes have added so they can work with, or conquer, their environment. Who wouldn't be awestruck, as I was, by a tribe that lives alongside horses,

and who – when dehydrated or in need of energy on long, barren rides – let blood from their ponies and drink just enough from a vein to give them an energy boost? These insights make us realise how much we've lost in the modern world, but they're also clues as to how – if we're alert, open and inquisitive – we can thrive in any environment.

Bushcraft and traditional skills reconnect us with something primal, and spending time in the wilderness and discovering lost arts have huge therapeutic benefits. For a day or two, people on my courses become part of a temporary community and they leave feeling more connected to the world. They often tell me they've learnt something they can use in an emergency – but bushcraft skills are more about making yourself comfortable *after* you've survived. They are traditional living skills and a lot of them take time to perform – which is a big part of their contemporary appeal – but time is the one thing you rarely have when disaster hits.

Bushcraft skills are part of the toolkit I take into the wild, along with my experience, but what fascinates me are the people who survive without having any of my skills or experience. People who have been in plane crashes or shipwrecks, people who were completely unprepared and not especially fit, yet still make it home. What makes a survivor? Why *do* some people survive while others don't? I think it has to be because survival is less to do with fire-making and spear-fishing and much more to do with being creative, inventive, open-minded, and having the ability to make good decisions under pressure.

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In the wild that pressure is immense. If you think of times when you've experienced pressure in your own life – maybe giving a talk at work or sitting an exam – and were unable to find the words to express yourself or perform at your best, just imagine what the stresses of a survival situation would do to your ability to think clearly. You're cold, thirsty, hungry, exhausted, covered with insect bites and blisters . . . and you're hanging from the edge of a cliff with one hand. Even people who are very used to making decisions in their day-to-day lives struggle when they're truly tested by the wilderness.

Often, it's the people you least expect who truly thrive. The overtly macho guys who fit the survivalist stereotype may be covering holes in their resilience by being loud and outspoken. Once you take them out of their comfort zone and force them to come face to face with demons they don't know how to handle, they crumble. On the flipside, I've seen stay-at-home mothers, who initially come across as timid, find an inner strength and resourcefulness that surprises everyone, including themselves.

I truly believe that everyone has the capacity to overcome extreme hardship and to be resilient enough to make it home. That durability comes more easily to some, so I want to show how, through my own experiences and observations, anyone can build up their resilience and increase their chances of becoming a survivor. That's not to say survival skills and general fitness don't have immense value – they buy you valuable time – but they don't stop you making stupid decisions

or guarantee you'll find the inner strength and fighting spirit to keep you going.

It's been my experience that people who empathise with their environment and who respond instinctively to others make better survivors, and that often means women. In some of the tribal communities I've visited, women are usually taking care of children, preparing meals, setting traps and looking for roots while the men – more often than not – are doing the big-game hunting. Because the women carry out so many tasks, they are more adaptable, and being able to deal with several things at once is a key survival characteristic. Survival isn't about single-minded determination, it's about seeing the whole picture, and that includes knowing yourself.

Youth is often thought to be another signifier of doing well in the wild. I suspect that has as much to do with young people's curiosity about the world as it does with their relative fitness: how you think in the wild plays just as big a part in survival as what you do. How you view the wilderness – as something to explore and understand rather than as an impenetrable barrier – will help you survive.

My interest in the psychology of survival ignited when I studied for a degree in Outdoor Education. I took a module on Eastern European Philosophies of Outdoor Education that explored what drives people to go into the wild. I also completed one called 'A Personal Response to a Mountain Environment', which turned out to be life-changing.

It required students to spend seven days alone in the Picos de Europa Mountains in northern Spain. The idea was that

we were to immerse ourselves in the environment and keep a diary to help us examine our interactions with, and responses to, the landscape. We were all in the same area, but were far enough apart not to see each other for the entire week.

The Picos de Europa range is wild – there are still lynxes, Europe’s leopard-like big cats, living up in those mountains – and it can be as harsh as it is beautiful. All I packed was a sleeping-bag, a bivvy bag, a knife, a pen and a notebook. Some of the other students headed off into the mountains with tents and food, but I planned to make my own shelter and find my food.

It was late spring and, as I walked up, I could see the beautiful rocky valley start to come into life, but almost the moment I got up to altitude it started to snow. And it didn’t stop snowing for the entire seven days. Without a tent, I needed to find shelter and came across a massive boulder with a shelf underneath that was protected from the snow. I got inside, built a little wall around it, using rocks that were lying about, and made it my home for the next week. I quickly realised two things: it was so barren up there that there was nothing to eat (except the meagre snack of a mouse, whose home I had seemingly moved into), and there was also nothing to burn.

With hindsight, the remarkable thing is that I don’t really remember being cold or hungry. I look at that week now as a real coming-of-age experience, not unlike the tribal rituals that send adolescents off into the wilderness to find their spirit animal and get to know themselves. Once I’d

discovered there was no firewood and nothing to eat I decided to see what happened. Obviously, eventually, I would have died without food, but I knew that for a week it wasn't going to kill me. So I just stepped out of reality and entered a different place.

I was nineteen at the time, and being alone without food turned out to be incredibly interesting. I began to think about why I interacted with stimulæ in certain ways and how I processed the experiences. I was getting in tune with the mountains, but I was also tuning into myself. When I read my notes from that week now, it was clear I was having an almost out-of-body experience. It was very spiritual, which was completely unexpected because I had always been a very practical person, and spirituality had not been a big factor in my upbringing.

During the day, I'd go off exploring. I didn't have a watch. I had no idea what time it was – and I didn't know how to use the sun to tell the time back then – so I was just going with my natural body rhythms, and relying on my instincts. I became hyperaware of the ways in which my mind and body were connected. I entered a childlike state, which was all about exploration and playing in the environment. It wasn't a conscious decision to enter this state: I just stepped into it.

I became fascinated with everything, from the way the clouds moved across the sky to the daily habits of the little mouse I shared the boulder with. I had this incredible sense of wonder about everything I was seeing and feeling. It was

one of the most profound and remarkable experiences of my life, and I came away with a much greater awareness of who I was and how I fitted into the world. I also learnt that there's no room for ego in the wild. It doesn't care about your insecurities, it doesn't owe you anything: the wild is neutral.

Without anything to read, or watch, or anyone to talk to, I experienced a solitude in which I discovered there is an energy that flows through everything. If your mind is open, I found, that energy can flow through you too. It was – and still is – the most incredible feeling, but when the sun came up on the final morning I knew it was time to trek down and meet up with my tutor and the other students.

When I got there I was stunned to find that, of fifteen students, only three of us had stayed out for the entire seven days. I wanted to understand why I hadn't just toughed it out but had had the experience of a lifetime when most of the others had given up. That was when I started considering the role psychology plays in our survival.

You might expect that the people with shelter and food would have fared better than me, but that clearly hadn't been the case. Perhaps my lack of a tent, which meant there had been nothing between me and the landscape, had helped. The people under canvas, by contrast, had zipped themselves in when the weather got bad and become detached from their surroundings. Without the stimulation, they hadn't developed the sense of wonder that had so inspired me. I think they just got bored.

I also wonder if I thrived because I went into that week without any expectations. Mostly we approach a new situation – whether social or work-related – with a sense of how we should behave, what we hope to get out of it or our definition of success. If we don't achieve our goals we feel frustration and anger, emotions that are hard to deal with when you're on your own for days on end. Perhaps the others had envisaged how their week would be, and when the reality didn't compare, they felt let down in some way.

No matter where I work, or whom I work with, I'm constantly reminded of the role psychology plays in our survival. I've been particularly interested in the findings of Dr Al Siebert, who spent forty years studying resilience. He didn't just work with wilderness survivors, he studied a wide range of people, from patients who had been treated for cancer to women who had endured years of domestic abuse and to soldiers who had seen combat.

Some of Siebert's patients came to his clinic because they feared they were bi-polar, or had schizophrenia, and they wanted to understand why they seemed to be at both ends of the spectrum. He noticed that many had endured life experiences that would make most of us seek therapy, but that wasn't why they had turned to him for help. They had coped with the trauma: they simply wanted to understand the extremes of their personality. Siebert concluded that resilient people have very complex personalities and are capable of experiencing conflicting emotions. He realised that what makes somebody resilient, enabling them to cope



with whatever life throws at them, is the ability to feel lots of different emotions, often conflicting ones, sometimes simultaneously. People with more defined personalities, he noted, struggled in complex and difficult environments. Of course, there's nothing more complex and difficult than a survival situation, whether it's domestic abuse, active war or a natural disaster: survival takes many forms.

One of Siebert's more interesting findings was that, in daily life, natural survivors tend to be invisible, the kind of people who blend into the background. They're often not in leadership positions and don't have alpha personalities. The people around them might consider them lazy because if things are going well they don't waste energy shouting about how great they are. When things go wrong, though, they step forwards and take control. They have spent so long observing their environment that they seem to have an expanded awareness of what is required. When I read Siebert's work, I immediately heard echoes of my experience in the Picos de Europa.

Siebert also found that dealing with one kind of trauma made people better able to handle another: exposure to testing environments makes you more likely to cope in other situations. Since discovering this, I've led hundreds of expeditions and it's not uncommon for clients to book themselves onto an adventure after a life-altering event, like illness, divorce or bereavement. More often than not, they respond better than others to the challenges of the wild.

Siebert's work has helped me imagine resilience to be

like the immune system: when your body is exposed to a new virus or bacteria, your immune system has to learn how to defeat the invasion, which is why you feel pretty rough. The next time you're exposed to the same contagion, your body knows how to fight and initiates a much more effective response. The same happens with emotional trauma: at first it can be overwhelming, but the next time you experience distress, you'll have learnt how to deal with it a bit better.

I have tried to scrutinise my own behaviour and work out not just what I can change that will be more likely to lead to my survival, but also why I keep following a career that puts it in jeopardy. It is hard to step back from something that is second nature to me and analyse myself, but I've realised I do the work I do because I'm driven to it. If I sit still for too long, panic drives me back outdoors. I'm incredibly tough on myself, and the wild is the place where I can keep pushing and testing my boundaries, without endangering anyone else. What I do may be risky, but for me it's healthy.

The expeditions I've been on have helped me conclude that a handful of characteristics, when combined, produce the best survivors. We all possess them, but while some of us use them naturally, others don't tap into them at all. What I hope to show in this book is that we don't have to wait for a survival situation to practise these skills: we can all develop a survivor mindset as we go about our daily lives. These characteristics – or abilities – are intuition, creativity,

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empathy, adaptability and flexibility. They might not be what you'll read about in other adventure books (they're not as gung-ho or physical as most people expect from a survival expert) but I believe that if you can access them you've got the ability to survive and thrive, not just in the wilderness but in your career and personal life too.



# 1

## The Developing Mind

I'm a little unusual in my line of work because I haven't been in the military. Many of my colleagues learnt their skills in uniform and naturally gravitated towards adventurous careers after they left their regiments. My path was a little different, and a little less planned. I never had any idea what I would do when I left school: I just knew I had an overwhelming urge to be outdoors.

I'm the eldest of four children and was the trailblazer for my parents, leading them through the previously unexplored lands of parenthood. I grew up on the Malvern Hills and was encouraged to get involved in things like ballet (which I loved *and* hated *and* was crap at) and music. I played the violin (well enough to join the Children's English Symphony

Orchestra), but I was also encouraged to get outside, and often returned home dirty and dishevelled after a day with my siblings in the hills. My parents fuelled my passion for the outdoors by taking us on caravanning and walking holidays in the UK's wildernesses. Looking back now, I see these were the first steps on the path that led to where I am now.

The next step was mountain-biking, which I discovered by chance on my way home from school when I was about thirteen. I was riding my father's old bike with a basket on the back when I wondered if, instead of taking the road, I could ride along the hills behind our house. I still remember the first big descent I did, totally out of control with dodgy brakes, skidding on loose gravel. The basket fell off with the vibrations, but as I dragged it home I had a huge grin on my face. It was the start of a new era of freedom as I discovered the exhilaration of pushing myself just to see how far I could ride, or what I could ride up . . . or how fast I could make the descent. I had no idea about training or the importance of taking rest days, so when I felt tired I took it as a sign to push myself harder or go further. I know now this is against all training principles, but I think it gave me the physical foundation to endure pain and hardship.

I had a restless, wandering nature and felt most alive and fulfilled out in the mountains. As I got older I spent as much time as I could, often on my own, climbing and mountain-biking, testing myself and pushing against every boundary I

came up against. I found being indoors, especially classrooms, restrictive; I still find it nearly impossible to sit still for long inside.

Until my early teens I ran around with the boys as one of them: I didn't see the difference between me and them. I always had scraped knees or holes in my tights and was often told off for play-fighting. In many ways, boys were easier to understand: if they had a problem they'd fight it out and it'd be over. With girls it tended to be mental warfare, and I didn't have the patience for manipulative games. Looking back, I was probably a bit feral and out of control.

I really wasn't interested in clothes but I do remember in my early teens suddenly hating all my torn, patched, hand-me-down outfits when I noticed other girls wore much nicer things. It was a horrible moment of self-awareness and, for the next year or so, I became very self-conscious. Now I know that it's something everyone goes through as their body changes, but at the time I found the release I needed in mountain-biking: it was where I felt most myself and it didn't matter what I wore or what anyone thought of me.

Through my school, I got the chance to join the military cadets and was taken on climbing, kayaking, mountaineering and camping expeditions all over the UK. Although I was always the only girl, I experienced a profound sense of belonging and thought that maybe I'd go into the military after school. My parents had to give special permission for me to go on those trips as there weren't any female supervisors, and I'm so grateful now that they did; also that the

military personnel who ran the organisation saw my love of adventure and found a way for me to participate.

My parents were always supportive, but I think they assumed I'd eventually go down the academic route and head for university, which they had worked hard to achieve for themselves. I left school with A levels in biology, chemistry, geography and art. At one point I thought about studying marine biology at university, but I knew that being stuck inside, whether in lectures or in an office, was not a future I wanted. And I couldn't see an obvious career path that would involve me in the things I was passionate about. I decided I needed to see more of the world, so I took a giant leap and went on a gap year.

I had dreamt of going to New Zealand since I was eight when I'd been given a book called *The Land of the Long White Cloud*. It was filled with stunning images and Maori mythology and completely captured my imagination. After my A levels, I saved enough money for a ticket and got a placement, via a gap-year organisation, at a school near Christchurch where I photocopied and made tea. Not the adventure I had gone looking for! I lasted two weeks before I bought my first car, for two hundred New Zealand dollars, and went exploring.

By chance, I ran into a couple of guys who had just started an apprenticeship in a remote outdoor centre in the middle of the South Island. It turned out the centre was looking for another apprentice. I jumped at the chance to join them and spent the rest of my gap year training as a raft guide,



taking school groups on long-distance hikes and teaching rock-climbing. In my spare time, I went exploring on my own. Needless to say, I didn't want to come back to the UK, but when I found out about a degree course in Outdoor Studies, I realised it might just be possible to make a career out of being in the wild.

At university in the Lake District I found people who had my restless spirit, who shared my need for the outdoors and were also driven by their passions. Finally it was normal to get up at 3 a.m. to go ice-climbing before a 9 a.m. lecture (and then go drinking until midnight before you did it all over again the following day). Like most students, I paid my way by getting a part-time job: I qualified as a mountain leader and, instead of working in a bar or clearing tables, I took clients on expeditions, gaining valuable work experience in the process.

Just before graduation, I had an experience that guided me a little further along my eventual career path. I was alone at the top of Bowfell Buttress in the Lake District, watching sheep chase each other. A thought popped into my head: everything I had with me was to protect myself from nature. The waterproof clothing, the bivvy, the stove . . . it was all about keeping me separate from the elements. I wasn't working with the environment, I was battling against it. For someone who called themselves an outdoor enthusiast, there seemed something a bit twisted about that. It was a real moment of revelation.

Then, just a few days later, a friend had a spare ticket for

a bushcraft talk run by a local company. I had no idea what bushcraft was, but I wasn't doing anything so I went with him. Needless to say, I was blown away by the lecture, which was all about working with the environment rather than taming it. It was exactly what I felt had been missing. The guy giving the talk had worked with native peoples who used trees and plants for medicinal and even spiritual purposes, and I grasped how little I understood of the wilderness I loved. After the talk I went to the company's website and saw they were looking for people to work with them.

I sent them my CV, thinking there was no way they'd give me a job, but when I graduated I started a two-year apprenticeship with them. It opened up a whole new world, and taught me about the different properties of certain trees and the medicinal uses of plants. It was hard work, but it was also amazing. In the winter I paid my bills by working as an off-road driving instructor, but in the summer I lived out in the hills in a shelter I'd built, getting up super-early to do my camp chores so I could then sit in on the instructors' lectures. They were like walking encyclopedias, and I wanted not just to have their knowledge but to use it too.

That led to other work in the adventure and travel industry, and I started leading groups in the Himalayas and the Alps. In 2007, while I was running the outdoor programme at an international school in Switzerland, I was approached to work with Bear Grylls on his hugely successful *Man vs Wild* show where he battles alone through remote places to make it

back to civilisation. I had the fortunate – and slightly random – combination of rope skills, guiding skills and bushcraft knowledge, which the producers needed.

Bear and his team made me really welcome. I was instantly impressed by his ability to talk to camera while performing amazing stunts, and I developed a deep respect for him. He doesn't just stick up for what he believes but also for his team while inspiring the people around him.

I was invited back to work on more episodes of *Man vs Wild*, and through the contacts I made I was asked to work on other shows. These days, I often scout filming locations, looking for places that are remote and spectacular, but that are also accessible for a film crew. During filming, I might rig up challenges for the onscreen talent, like abseiling or zip-wire stunts.

There are usually two core safety crew members who oversee TV shows, and we'll hire local guides and specialists as required. Depending on the terrain, the safety crew can be as big as the production team – which creates its own challenges when access is tight and locations are remote: we need one safety expert for every camera operator and sound technician. On steep terrain, for example, we'll short-rope the camera and sound operators so they can get the footage they need while we concentrate on their safety. Camera operators in particular are so focused on filming the action they can't always see their feet so we act as their eyes, hold them steady . . . and absorb their falls, should they slip. I also get asked to work as a survival consultant, which can involve

advising a production team on what can be eaten, how to trap an animal or build a shelter.

It was while working on a shoot in the Arctic that I first met a guy called Stani who, after we'd spent a few years working together, became my partner in love and life. We continue to work together on some projects, and through a combination of TV assignments and expedition-leading, we spend eleven months of the year away from home, in every kind of terrain from the equator to the poles. Sometimes we work together in intense, high pressure situations, and sometimes we spend months apart on different continents.

Nothing about my career has been planned, including ending up in front of the camera. I had taken a job guiding a team of contestants on a Swiss TV show, and it was only when we started filming that I was told I'd be on screen. My initial reaction was 'This is not what I signed up for', but it was too late to back out so I gave it a go. I didn't expect to enjoy it, but I quickly discovered it was another way of sharing my passion for the wild.

My TV work means journalists want to interview me, and at first I was surprised to be asked about my experience as a woman in the survival industry. I'm so used to being the only woman in the room (or the tent, or the cave) that I'd never seen it as unusual.

I was very fortunate to be brought up in a supportive, outdoorsy environment where my sisters and I were encouraged to go outside just as much as our brother was. I am eternally grateful that my parents didn't restrict my partici-

pation in mountain-biking, or tree-climbing, or whatever else I got up to, and have struggled to understand why some people still see the outdoors as a male domain.

It's only relatively recently that I've realised just how few female role models I had, which is probably why I have a very clear memory from my first Alpine climb. I was in my late teens and had just summited a high glacial peak with a friend. When we got back to our accommodation, we read the guide to the climb we'd just completed. Guide books on Alpine mountains give detailed descriptions of a route, telling you where to expect difficulties and how hard and exposed it is.

What caught my attention was that the first descent of this mountain's north face – a 300-metre sheer cliff – had been achieved by a woman. According to the book, while on the summit she had dropped her purse into the valley below and had climbed down with her guide to retrieve it! It's hard enough climbing up that face let alone down it, but the really remarkable thing was that she did it in a skirt! She was probably wearing a corset too (which would have restricted her breathing) and would have drilled nails into the soles of her boots to gain enough purchase on the ice. The image of her in her finery holding a long Alpenstock ice axe was beautiful and inspiring. Since then I have been fascinated by old mountaineering photos: it turns out that many a woman balanced on a ladder spanning a crevasse or walked across an expansive glacier.

If you go looking for them, you'll find plenty of daredevil

women in climbing and travelling histories, but they're not as well-known as their male counterparts, which is a shame: they were remarkable women who did remarkable things. In the 1760s Jeanne Baret became the first woman to circumnavigate the globe and did so disguised as a man on a ship in the French Navy. Lady Hester Stanhope was a pioneering archaeologist who, in the early 1800s, explored the Middle East carrying a sword while riding a huge stallion; and in 1871 Lucy Wallace became the first woman to climb the Matterhorn, apparently living on a diet of sponge cake and champagne (I totally need to rethink my nutrition plan). The frustrations I sometimes encounter due to my sex aren't because of any outright bullying: they're more to do with the perception other people have about women in my profession because the stories of women like Jeanne, Hester and Lucy are so rarely told.

My sister Pippa recently reminded me that when I'd first started working for the bushcraft company in the Lake District, I'd told her I had to work twice as hard to be noticed in the same way as my male colleagues, or for some people to take me as seriously. Although it was irritating when a client instinctively asked a male instructor a question rather than me, I never let it put me off. Instead I took it as a challenge to show them I had just as much right to be there as anyone else. I wasn't the only one who didn't have female role models: they didn't either. If someone has only ever seen images of a man as a leader, that's what they think a leader looks like, but it doesn't mean they can't be educated

by exposure to women in that role. I wonder if I found this prejudice easier than some to overcome because I never doubted or questioned my right to be there.

My sex has never defined me, and I don't know if being a woman is the reason why I have a different approach and leadership style from my male colleagues. I'm pretty flexible when I'm at work – I can adapt my style to suit the client or the type of expedition – but I'm not sure if that's to do with my sex or my personality. However, I am aware that there are times when clients respond differently to me because I'm female. People tend to open up to me far more than to some of my male colleagues. They seem to feel comfortable telling me about anything from swollen, infected mosquito bites on scrotums to domestic abuse. This gives me an advantage: if someone is hiding illness or masking fear, it can potentially put the rest of the team in danger. And now, because I've had so many such conversations, I'm really good at reading what people *aren't* telling me, which helps me address their needs and keep everyone safe.

I guess the fundamental reason why I don't see gender as particularly interesting is because the wilderness doesn't discriminate: it will kill a man as quickly as it will a woman, if you make the wrong decision. I know how important role models are, though, and feel proud and humbled (slightly embarrassed, too) now to be considered one. I occasionally get letters from fathers thanking me for being a great role model for their daughters, which is lovely: I remember feeling that I didn't fit the mould and feared being pushed down a

path that wasn't for me. It's probably one reason why I was such a wilful teen, who skipped lessons and gave my parents a lot of grief. Perhaps if there had been someone like me in the public eye when I was growing up I'd have thought, Ah, it's OK, I can be like her. Looking back to when I started mountain-biking, I can't remember seeing another female riding, but now when I visit trail centres, there are often groups of women or mixed-sex groups. So much has changed for the better in just twenty years.

Although I love supporting and helping women gain confidence and find their place in the outdoors, I am just as intent on supporting men. I want to help as many people as possible, from every walk of life, to experience the wilderness. I feel so lucky to do such a wide range of work that allows me to share my passion for the wild. I never know what I'll be doing next. The next time my phone rings it could be a producer needing me to scout locations in the desert, or a director wanting me to set up abseiling stunts in the jungle. Or it might be a client asking me to plan an expedition that takes them deep into the bush or to the summit of Aconcagua. Putting together an expedition from scratch is like completing a complex puzzle: if you miss out one piece it could all fall apart: it's a challenge I really enjoy.

I lead corporate expeditions, too, taking co-workers on team-building adventures that test and challenge them. I work with young people, guiding school groups into extraordinary environments or showing groups of young entrepreneurs different ways to build their resilience and coping strategies.



No expedition is the same as the last and the skills I use can vary enormously. If I'm conducting survival training in a remote jungle, the soft skills of liaising with native peoples might be just as valuable as my knowledge of field medicine, and sometimes my ability to listen to a client going through a crisis will be the thing that keeps an expedition on track. I might be away for a week or for several months.

Whatever I do, whoever I work with, one aspect of my role is always the same: to encourage people to truly experience the wilderness, to find out what they're capable of, and to do it all as safely as possible. I'm so lucky to do something I love. I get to see amazing places, work with amazing people, and every day is different: I couldn't have planned it better if I'd tried.