

# FOR THE LOVE

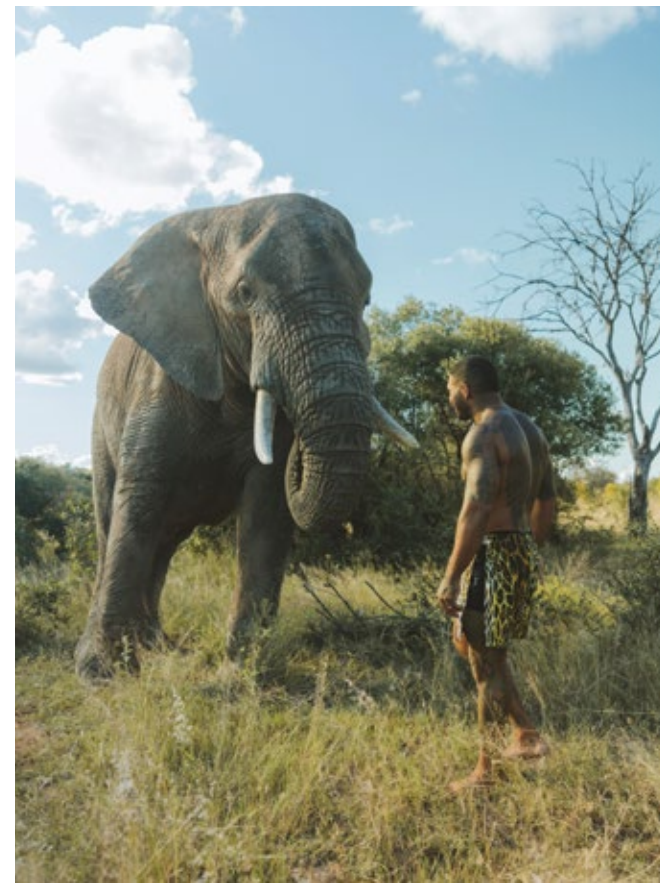
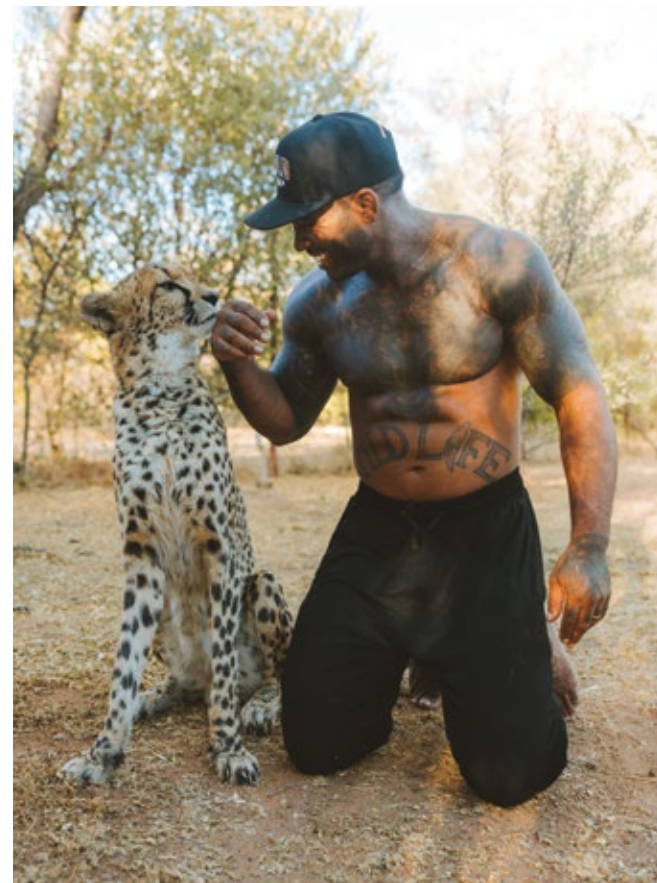
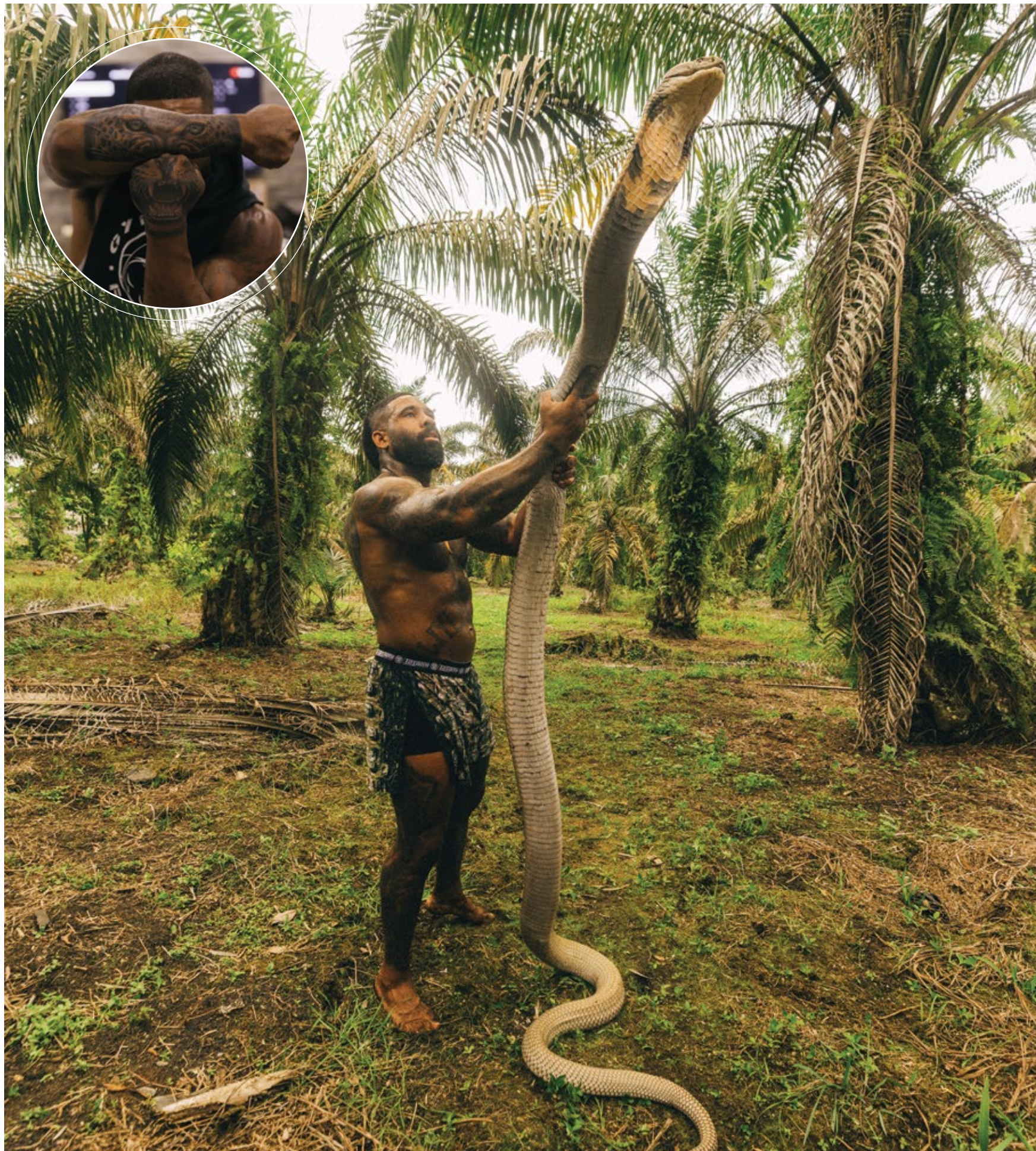
*of the wild*

## THE SOUL AND UNTAMED INFLUENCE OF MIKE HOLSTON, "THE REAL TARZANN."

BY GIL MACIAS

**W**ith 15.1 million followers on Instagram, 5.4 million on TikTok, and 1.2 million subscribers on his YouTube channel, it's safe to say that Mike Holston, better known as "The Real Tarzann," is one of the most-watched animal enthusiasts on the planet. And if you take a glance at his awe-inspiring interactions with wildlife, it's immediately apparent why he earned that name.

"I used to have long dreadlocks like Tarzan, and (I was) known to have pet animals," he tells *Inked Magazine*, explaining the origins of his moniker. "The name started as a social media handle but evolved into a mission statement. Tarzan is a symbol of living in sync with the wild, but I put 'Real' in front because I wanted to show authenticity, not fantasy. It represents walking between two worlds: the human world and the animal kingdom."



As for his ink, Holston describes his tattoos as “a living diary” that serves as “reminders of the journey, battles, and the creatures who’ve shaped me.” He has “WYLD LIFE” emblazoned on his abdomen, and some of the exotic land, air, and semiaquatic creatures that adorn his body include a Bengal tiger, harpy eagle, and Nile crocodile, to name a few; he has “dozens” more. But it’s his ink of the reptilian variety that resonates with him the most.

“One of my two favorites is the anaconda wrapping my entire leg and the Indian cobra hood on my back,” he shares. “(They are) a tribute to my bond with reptiles and the lessons they’ve taught me about adaptability and survival.”

Holston’s infatuation with the animal kingdom started at a very young age, and it was a reptile that triggered an undeniable connection that would eventually evolve into his life’s work. His “natural pull toward animals” stems from his earliest memories with his

dogs, catching salamanders, and gazing in wonder at the pet boa constrictor he received on his fourth birthday.

“I didn’t need toys anymore after that — nature was my playground,” he reflects. “The first real moment that lit the fire in me was holding a reptile as a kid and feeling its raw energy, realizing I wasn’t afraid but connected. That spark became the foundation for everything I’ve built today.”

After nearly three decades of bonding with all walks of wildlife, Holston has developed an intuitive way of communicating with animals, a skill he describes as “part instinct” but not without some “trial and error.”

“I’ve studied animal behavior endlessly, but there’s also a frequency you can’t teach — a sensitivity to body language, energy, and presence,” he explains. “I describe it like a conversation without words. Over time, I honed it by putting in almost three decades around wildlife, but the root is an instinct I was born with that

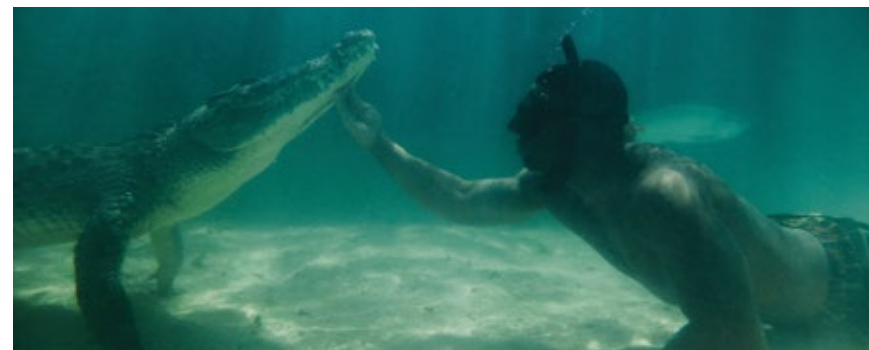
I feel many of us have; we just don’t keep it up over the years.”

In 2012, Holston realized that he could turn his passion into a career, so he took his Real Tarzann persona to social media, launching both a YouTube channel and an Instagram account that same year. His content drew hundreds of thousands of views, even attracting celebrity attention, and his following quickly skyrocketed to millions of followers. But for Holston, it was never about the attention or dazzling his followers with his animal-taming abilities; he saw it as an opportunity to educate and to serve as an amplified voice for animals.

“I realized social media wasn’t just entertainment — it was a megaphone,” he says. “I saw I could take my passion for animals and project it to billions worldwide. The first steps were simple but powerful: create raw, authentic content, share daily, and show the beauty and respect these creatures deserve and, most importantly, learn with your audience too.”

From his photos with majestic big cats and elegant avians to his up-close encounters with colossal crocodiles and gargantuan serpents, the 31-year-old animal educator has been captivating his followers with his fearless and uncanny ability to commune with a variety of toothy beasts and unpredictable predators.

Holston has certainly had his fair share of brushes with danger. “There have been moments where fear sets in — close calls with venomous snakes, being charged by



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large animals, or near misses with crocodiles,” he recalls. “One encounter with a massive constrictor reminded me how small and fragile humans really are. Those moments taught me that respect is non-negotiable. Animals don’t run on ego — they run on instinct.”

One of Holston’s idols, the late, great zoologist Steve Irwin, died after a fatal encounter with a seemingly harmless stingray. It’s a death that serves as a constant cautionary reminder about the unpredictability of wild animals and the always-possible life-threatening danger in his line of work.

“Steve Irwin is always in the back of my mind. His story is a reminder that even love and expertise can’t eliminate risk,” Holston says. “I’ve lost friends in this field to animal accidents, and every time it shakes me to my core. Those memories keep me humble and remind me to never get complacent.”

Holston goes on to describe Irwin as an “obvious giant who paved the way” for his career, but that’s not his only hero. “I also admire Birute Galdikas and Jane Goodall for her lifelong commitment to primates and conservation, and countless unsung herpetologists and field biologists who grind without fame just to push science forward,” he adds.

As Holston is certainly aware, fame and a massive following also come with detractors. Some critics have clashing views about animal confinement, species preservation, and whether or not these creatures should ever be disturbed for videos or photo ops in the wild, which often leads to misconceptions about his work.

“The biggest misconception is that what I do is ‘showboating’ or reckless. The truth is, everything is calculated and intentional. People see the 60- to 90-second viral moment, but they don’t see the years of study, preparation, or the filming (and) conservation projects, and behind the scenes,” Holston says, adding rescue missions, breeding programs, and educational initiatives to that list of quiet accomplishments.

“I’ve worked with sanctuaries to rehabilitate animals, supported rewilding projects, and helped fund conservation projects for endangered species and natural disasters,” he adds. “That’s the work that truly matters, even if it doesn’t always make the feed.”

“I’ve done this for 20 years straight without a camera ever recording me,” Holston adds. “Social media is only a few years old in my life. It’s about creating connection so people care enough to protect, and grabbing as many eyeballs as we can to help spread our message and mission.”

As he globetrotts to jungles around the world, Holston is on a constant learning journey, too, and every first encounter with a wild beast he’s never come face to face with brings him valuable new knowledge he wants to share with the world. But there is one big takeaway he has.

“The biggest lesson I’ve learned is that humans underestimate how deeply animals feel and how smart they are,” he declares. “They might not speak, but they communicate respect, trust, and fear in ways we can sense if we listen. If animals could talk, I think many would say, ‘Respect me, protect me, and let me live wild.’”

As for his legacy and his overall message to his fans: “I want my legacy to be bigger than social media. I want it to be about awakening a generation to love and protect animals. If my 15 to 20 million followers walk away with one message, it’s this: We are not separate from the animal kingdom — we are part of it, and it’s our responsibility to protect it.”