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New Zealander Is 'Crocodile Hunter of Natural Disasters'

■ Television * 'Volcano Detectives' follows shy Geoff Mackley as he captures the dangerous side of Mother Nature.

By WILLIAM STEIGERWALD, Special to The Times

Geoff Mackley doesn't look like one of the planet's most daring adventure cameramen. He could show you photos of himself holding on to a rope for dear life in a 200-mph Pacific cyclone. Or standing in a heat suit at the lip of a lava-spitting Italian volcano. Or stalking a tornado with his trusty \$25,000 Panasonic digital video camera.

But you'd still have trouble believing a shy, snake-fearing, yogurt-and-raisin-eating New Zealand Boy Scout like him makes his living roaming the planet capturing close-ups of Mother Nature at her wildest, nastiest and most dangerous.

But he does.

Mackley, 38, didn't earn the nicknames "Rambo Cam" or "The Crocodile Hunter of Natural Disasters" because he's a homebody. And he's not just padding his resume when he lists his interests as volcanology, severe weather, mountaineering, caving, cycling, mountain biking, long-distance running and triathlons.

Forest fires, floods and earthquakes don't scare him any more than chasing tornadoes each May in Kansas, which is how he now spends his spring "vacations." But his fear of snakes is genuine. He's also pathetically terrified of salsa and American junk food, two other terrors he never encountered growing up in Christchurch.

Given Mackley's unique resume and his danger-seeking nature, it's easy to see why the Learning Channel is featuring one of his adventures in its two-hour special called "Volcano Detectives," which airs on Friday. Or why he has signed with Stoneworks Media Group, a Hollywood TV production company that hopes to build reality shows around his mad, global adventuring.

Since 1999, Mackley has put himself directly into the path of half a dozen powerful Pacific cyclones, including a Category 5 monster in Western Australia. Its 200-mph winds obliterated 80% of the little town of Exmouth, which he got to

by plane and car only hours before it was hit.

In the last two years he's also visited or camped overnight on the rims of Mt. Stromboli and Mt. Etna and shot into the fiery mouths of more than half a dozen active volcanoes in Indonesia.

Right now, Mackley's on holiday in Tornado Alley. Two weeks ago he was in Ecuador climbing active volcanoes. In July, he plans to visit the Lengai volcano in Tanzania's moonlike Rift Valley. This fall he'll chase Caribbean hurricanes.

Mackley's serious. He'll do just about anything to get the money shot. But he is not reckless. He plans everything with great care--from travel mode to safety gear. He uses helmets, heat suits, safety harnesses and whatever else he needs. The closest he's ever come to dying was in 1999, when he was almost hit by a lightning bolt while chasing a tornado.

Mackley uses satellite phones and uplinks, e-mail, laptops and any other gadget that lets him travel the globe light, fast and usually alone. As for his photojournalism skills, he taught himself how to be a photographer at age 17. Thanks to his expertise with police emergency radios and nose for excitement, in no time he was selling Auckland's daily newspaper photos of the raging fires and truck wrecks he invariably got to first.

Around 1990, Mackley made the jump to video. He freelanced spot news to the Auckland TV station and became locally famous for doing things like lashing himself to the nose of speedboats and using his mountaineering skills to get to plane crashes in the mountains before rescuers got there. His Web site, www.rambocam.com, contains scores of his news photos.

In the upcoming Learning Channel special, North America will get its first good look at Mackley in action. "Volcano Detectives" features the adventures he and his Australian volcanologist pal John Seach had when they flew to Northern Japan in January 2000 to witness a volcano being born in the middle of a town of 10,000.

When they arrived, police had the media corralled in a motel parking lot and wouldn't let them within 10 miles of the town, which had been evacuated. After several days of being infuriated by their lack of access, Mackley and Seach each packed up 60 pounds of food and gear and sneaked off at night through the snowy woods.

Reaching the town, they camped on the top floor of the strongest building they could find. "We had this amazing view out the windows down the deserted street," Mackley said. "This volcano was blowing its top at the end of the street. Rocks were raining down on the town and mud slides were coming down."

They got to within 400 feet of the volcano's mouth to get video, but the constant earthquakes drove them off after three days. "That footage [shot] in Japan will be shown forever," he said, thinking rare thoughts of mortality.

Mackley doesn't plan to stop working any time soon. And, except for that lightning strike in Kansas, he says he really hasn't had a single close call. "Many times I've stood on the edge of a volcano and I've walked away and 10 minutes later a rock the size of a car will land where I'd been. But don't think, 'Gee, that was a close call.' Because it wasn't a close call: Either you get hit, or you don't."

* "Volcano Detectives," Friday at 9 p.m. on the Learning Channel.