

# EDWARD NORTON RUNS THE EXTRA MILE TO HELP PRESERVE KENYA'S WILD PLACES

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Oscar-nominated actor Edward (above) has always thrown himself head-first into his film parts, so it comes as no surprise that he takes his role as conservationist equally seriously. The 40-year-old has spent much of this year in Kenya helping set up the Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust

Edward Norton does nothing by halves. One of Hollywood's most powerful actors, he does not so much act as live the roles that have won him critical acclaim and Oscar nominations.

For the controversial *Fight Club*, he took lessons in boxing, taekwondo and grappling and for *American History X* he packed on 30lb of muscle for his role. His next outing on the big screen will see him playing a convicted arsonist in the thriller *Stone*, opposite Milla Jovovich and the legendary Robert De Niro, to whom he is often compared.

But the role of which he is most proud is that of conservationist and wildlife protector, which is why he spent much of this year in drought-stricken Kenya helping to set up the Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust. The charity aims to preserve healthy ecosystems and biodiversity within the Maasai tribal lands by promoting conservation and sustainable benefits for the community.

"I have been going to Kenya for years but this year I really felt I had to do something to raise awareness," 40-year-old Edward told HELLO!. "I wanted to start a real grassroots campaign of involving people, so we decided to put together a team of Maasai runners for the New York Marathon and it just sort of picked up steam."

Edward spent months training with the Maasai and, on a cold, wet New York day last month, the actor was joined for the 26-mile run by his friends singer Alanis Morissette and magician David Blaine, and by three Maasai warriors. Friends and supporters lined the route to cheer them on the 26-mile run through the streets of the city, shouting, "Go Maasai..."

As Edward explains to HELLO!, this was not some publicity stunt by a Hollywood star promoting his latest film or book – the actor donated \$23,000 (£14,000) of his own money to the charity and set up a website where sponsors could donate, raising an amazing \$1million.

**Edward, was running the New York Marathon as much of a challenge as preparing for your character in *Fight Club*?**

"It was excruciating but exhilarating at the same time. The race wasn't without its challenges. I completed the 26.2 miles in 3 hours 48 minutes and it was phenomenal. There were so many supporters and friends in the crowd yelling encouragement. It was totally inspiring."

**How did you come to enter the race?**

"I wasn't planning on running the marathon myself. Everyone started saying, 'You're going to run too, right?' And I started going, 'Oh sure.' Then I started confronting the reality of what that means. I've always liked running and I've always been drawn to the idea of a marathon. But what I didn't factor for was that I was going to be travelling to Kenya. They don't have a lot of safe roads, and after running over the rocky roads my shins felt like an old man's."

**Was this your first marathon?**

"I've run to be in shape for climbing or diving and to change my body for a film role, but I'd never run a marathon. The difficulty of it intimidated me, but that was part of my motivation to do it. I've often found that pushing myself towards fear produces extremely interesting experiences. I also wanted to be in better shape at 40 than I was at 30, and training for a marathon seemed like a good way to get there."

**What was it like training with the Maasai?**

"What's interesting is these Maasai guys run in sandals made out of old off-road tyres and they don't have GPS watches or heart-rate monitors or any of that sophisticated running stuff. And somehow they seem to go along and barely break a sweat." ▶



In order to raise awareness and funds for the trust, Edward entered this year's New York Marathon, along with three Maasai warriors – (below left, from left): Samson Parashina, who is the son of a Maasai chief, Martin Sunte and Parashi Atanin. The Kenyans changed their sandals – made from old off-road tyres – for state-of-the-art running shoes donated by sponsors. Before the race the actor spent months training in Kenya with his fellow runners (below right). Above: Edward with Samson and Martin, along with Edward's friend Andrew Wolff, who raised \$142,000 in sponsorship for the trust







**'The Maasai run in sandals made out of old off-road tyres. And somehow they seem to go along and barely break a sweat'**

resulting in a tripling of the local lion population within 24 months. The trust also builds schools and employs over 40 teachers."

**You trained as a pilot and fly your own plane. You obviously love to travel...**

"I travel a lot. I love to dive and hike. I've been to 18 countries in the last three years. But what I deplore most about travel is the superficiality. What I find disturbing is when I go to a hotel that's billing itself as an 'eco-lodge' and then find that what they're doing is very, very superficial."

**President Barack Obama has Kenyan roots, and you recently made a documentary about his journey from senator to the White House, entitled *By the People: The Election of Barack Obama*. How did you first meet?**

"We initially met in 2006. I had no idea the film I was producing would turn into a chronicle of the Obama campaign. After Obama announced his intent to run for President of the United States, his new campaign was sceptical of the documentary. To his credit, he stood up for the idea. So he played a key part in letting us continue to do it."

**Are you planning to quit acting now you've had such success in your role as conservationist, protecting the Maasai and their way of life?**

"I have no plans to give up the day job. I love acting and if it can provide me with a platform to inform or raise awareness of a cause I am passionate about, that's even better. My limbs are still aching but it was worth it." **H**

INTERVIEW: VERONICA BLAKE  
PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE MAASAI WILDERNESS CONSERVATION TRUST

For more information, visit [maasaimarathon.com](http://maasaimarathon.com).

Edward and Martin in Kenya (above). US President Barack Obama's father was Kenyan and Edward recently made a documentary about the Obama victory in last year's election (below). Also joining the *Fight Club* star for the New York Marathon were friends such as magician David Blaine (right, with Samson) and singer Alanis Morissette (below right, with Edward)

**How did you first get involved with the Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust?**

"It was when I went to Kenya eight years ago to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. My father is a conservationist, so I grew up informed by his values. I really believe in the work this organisation is doing and I'm hugely inspired by the people who initiated it: Luca Belpietro and Samson Parashina, the son of a Maasai chief, who came to New York for the marathon. He's very committed and aware of the daunting challenges the Maasai face to survive and coexist in a sustainable manner."

**Were people sceptical at first? Did they ask you why they should donate to a cause so far away when there are so many problems closer to home?**

"In response to why we should care about a community and ecosystem that's so far from home, this is the model of how it needs to happen all over the world, so if you're interested in the global struggle for sustainability, this is right on the cutting edge. But imagine if you had to point at a picture of a lion and explain to your grandson why that animal no longer exists. It's going to happen if people don't make an effort to work on these issues. That a particular ecosystem of these incredible creatures still exists is somewhat miraculous. But in no small part it's because people like the Maasai, in resisting being drawn towards modern life, have left their landscape largely intact for these animals to live in."

**What are the problems the Maasai face?**

"The Maasai are facing enormous pressures: developers subdividing their land, hotel chains utilising the natural resources and giving nothing back, the corruption of leaders, and global tourism."

**What projects is the trust involved in?**

"We've set up the Simba Project, which prevents the killing of lions and other large predators through our livestock compensation programme,



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