

"It's an evolving mission and even though I've learnt a lot and have made mistakes along the way, I can envisage a better future for these animals and I want to be a part of that. It feels like my calling.

"Anyway, you have to do something, don't you?"

Ro London is hardly someone who can be accused of doing nothing. Since her wildlife protection crusade began a decade ago she has devoted to it the same energy and commitment applied to other challenges throughout her life, including her sporting youth as a champion gymnast and diver, and then later her design career.

"I was a state-level gymnast. You live your life upside-down and it's very disciplined and very regimented for as long as it lasts," she says.

"You don't leave gymnastics, it leaves you, and you eventually have to go out into the world and discover if you can offer it more than twists and somersaults."

Always creative, art and interior design came naturally to Ro, who studied at Sydney TAFE before the chance to visit the US saw her enrol at the New York School of Interior Design. Through the 1980s she worked in America designing for homes and hotel chains across the country.

Upon her return to Australia, Ro saw potential in a rapidly



expanding Gold Coast, set up shop with her Timeless Interiors outlet in Runaway Bay in 1988 and began building her client base.

"I did quite a lot of work at Sanctuary Cove, as well as with the Grand Mariner in Surfers Paradise and private homes elsewhere on the Coast.

"I also did a huge renovation of the Ettalong Beach War Memorial Club in NSW, although I suppose the most unusual challenge of my interior design career came with the opportunity to work on a maximum security prison in Wanganui, New Zealand, in 1989-90.

"Prison design is all about layouts and colour schemes and common sense. Nothing sharp, nothing dangerous, nothing too provocative.

"I had to create separate areas for separate gangs and ensure the designs worked for the inmates and the prison staff. The New Zealand government had to approve my colours and formulae.

"It's a matter of creating an environment of balance and harmony, about creating seasons, about giving prisoners less reason to feel angry or suicidal or violent."

As Ro's interior design career flourished during the 1990s, a trip to Fiji in 1999 would spark the next phase of her life.

The activist in Ro was awakened when she learned the plight of Fiji's green turtle, just one of a number of endangered marine turtle species there.

"The idea hit me like a thunder bolt. I was now going to design cruise and resort wear to promote awareness of endangered species and raise funds to help them," she says.

"Silk scarves, sarongs and kaftans were ideal for spreading the message of wildlife protection, so I began commissioning paintings of endangered species which are now digitally printed on to fine silks and natural fibres so as not to lose one stroke of the beautiful artwork.

"Ten years later I have nearly completed seven collections with eight magical designs in each collection."

Over the years Ro has worked with

gifted artists including the late Ronald Chambers, Rycki Symons, Jean Sindelar, Davvyd Brown and Blake Twigden and the strikingly colourful results have promoted the cause of many endangered species, including marine life, reptiles, birds, elephants, bears, pandas, big cats and orangutans.

For research in pursuit of the intricate details that make up her ingenious signature prints, Ro has explored the world – from India to Borneo, Alaska to Papua New

Guinea, Thailand to the Galapagos, Africa to the Amazon – pouring her own funds into wildlife preservation initiatives and establishing new markets for her designs.

"As I said before, it does feel like a calling," she says. "A long time ago I decided I wanted to be a veterinarian and studied vet science at Brisbane TAFE until I realised I'd spent most of my time crying if any animal was distressed or in pain.

"But this work, through the fashion ranges, is my way of honouring and, I hope, helping these magnificent animals which, through no fault of their own, are unable to help themselves."

She admits to a few favourites.

"The Indian sloth bears, obviously, and I'd like to do some more work in Africa for the mountain gorillas and the SanWild sanctuary in South Africa, but of all the places I've visited the Galapagos is simply mind-blowing," she says.

"You fall in love with everything. These creatures are all like little actors. The land iguanas put on a show for you, the seals and sea lions swim with you and the birdlife is hysterical.

"And the landscapes of the Galapagos are so different. On one

island you find emerald sands, on another it's like terracotta, while on another you may as well be on Mars."

While constant travel and work demands much of Ro's time, she would not trade the freedom of a life lived on her own terms.

There is no husband, no children. Just Larrabee.

"I have a few very close and special friends who share my passions. No major involvements.

I've been engaged three times but it all becomes so complicated, doesn't it?" she says.

"Animals are extraordinary because animals have no ego.

"Like I say, I'm not lonely, I'm just a loner and my goals sit contentedly within a slogan I try to follow – think nature, love nature, be with nature."

Having recently participated in Australian Fashion Week, secured an international fashion agent and established stockists in Sydney and Melbourne, Ro London is an unconventional businesswoman who values her expanding national and international profile for philanthropic rather than commercial reasons.

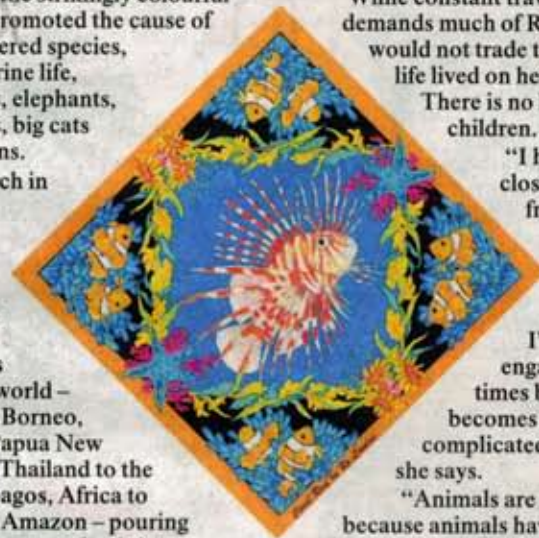
"I want to do something extremely big, beautiful and bold, something entrepreneurial and lasting for the animals, and I know it won't happen overnight and I know I can't do it alone," she says.

"Richard Branson says that when you step up to invest in something, and when you feel that knot of anxiety in your belly, real growth lies in taking the next step.

"That's what I want to do. I want to take the next step for these animals, to ensure they are protected and nurtured and can live without fear or exploitation.

"It's a matter of finding the right people and going in boots and all.

"I've never really known any other way."



Ro London's website is www.wildlifecrusader.com