

Rider carrying vital message of trees

By R.W. GREENE
The Press-Enterprise

The silhouetted figures on horseback rose silently out of the haze near Lake Mathews south of Riverside about noon yesterday. Swirls of dust pirouetted from the horses' hooves, but the riders' faces remained hidden. Wind whipped across the scrubby rolling range.

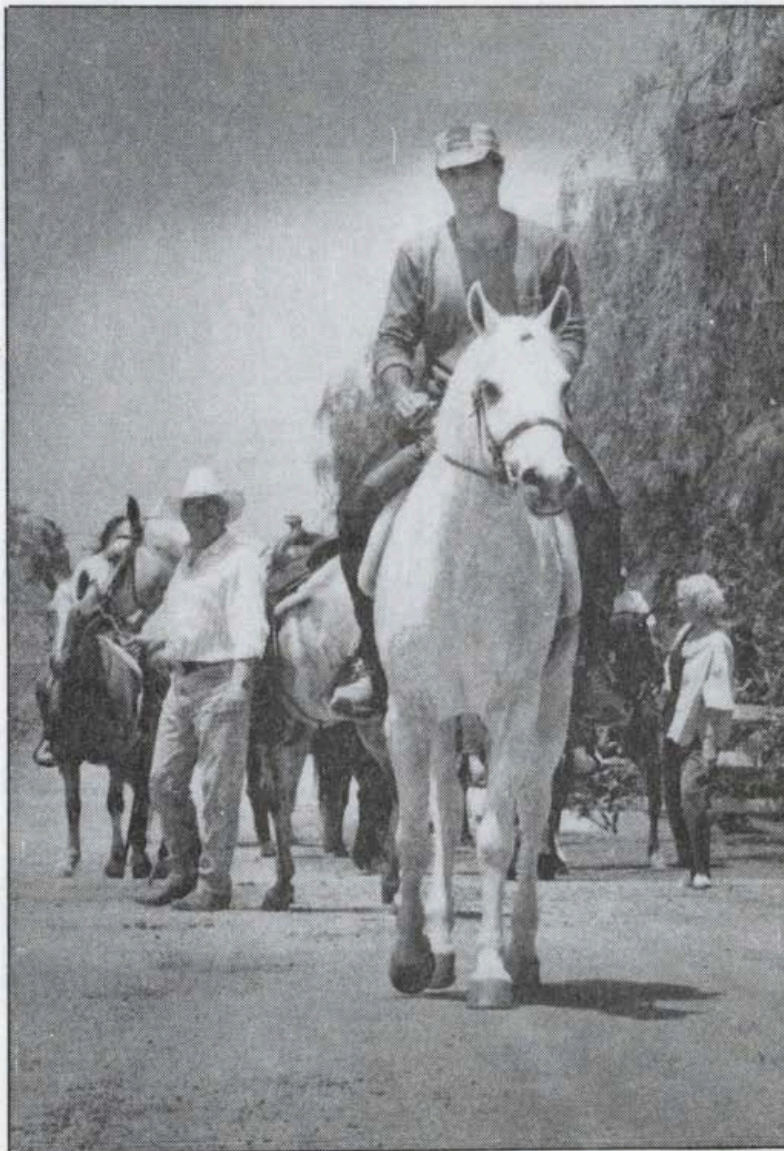
An eternity passed before their leader finally rode into view, his white horse stalking down the dirt road. Sweat creased his weathered face and ran down his black spandex bicycle pants.

"I tried jeans for about a week, and said forget it," Lucian Spataro said later. "They rub too much."

It was only one of hundreds of details Spataro has had to consider in the last few months, but a potentially crucial one, since he'll be on horseback for the next hundred days or so, until he and his eight-year old Arabian gelding Sweet William reach the Atlantic Ocean.

The journey may take him until August, at 20 to 25 miles a day. The 31-year-old Tucson, Ariz., businessman hopes to raise \$1 million for the Rainforest Action Network, a San Francisco-based non-profit organization dedicated to stopping the destruction of the world's rain forests.

While the network board of directors includes such luminaries as the wife of publisher William Randolph Hearst and actor Ted Danson — who helped raise the \$60,000 the trip will cost — Spataro and his three-member team are depending on the kindness of many American horse enthusiasts for their journey. Yesterday's 20-mile trip from Prado Dam wound up at the



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Lucian Spataro rides his horse Sweet William near Lake Mathews on his way to New York to call attention to an effort to stop destruction of the world's rain forests.

horse breeding ranch of Lillian and Eskild Reinhold, who not only put up Spataro and his team

for the night, but also sponsored an evening barbecue for several hundred guests to raise money

for the rain forest network.

Similarly, the Lake Mathews Rural Trails Association is guiding Spataro and Sweet William through the concrete forests of Orange and Riverside County. Sweet William is used to traffic, said Spataro, although the group took a circuitous route, following the Santa Ana River, to avoid most of the urban congestion yesterday and Friday.

Spataro planned to camp near San Jacinto tonight, proceed to a site near Banning tomorrow and to Palm Springs by Tuesday.

The biggest hassle so far, said Spataro, has been getting the necessary permits from myriad government agencies for permission to ride across the country.

Like the rain forests, Spataro said he sees the countryside available for horse riding gradually diminishing. "In five or ten years, you won't be able to make a trip like this."

Activists say the destruction of the rain forest poses an enormous environmental threat and it is a cause Spataro takes with deep seriousness.

The forests are sometimes known as "the world's lungs," in terms of their importance.

The forest is like a perpetually regenerating source of life-sustaining nutrients for many of the world's species, Spataro said, so its destruction has global ramifications.

"That critical mass gets smaller and smaller, and finally it can't regenerate," he said.

The \$1 million Spataro hopes to raise will go toward programs to persuade the world's leaders and population to stop the destruction and more generally to persuade Americans to consume less.