

LOCAL

Rain forest rider in Athens this week

Hometown man goes coast-to-coast for environmental cause

By Jeff Chappell
Athens NEWS writer

Lucian Spataro is riding across America on horseback, to save rain forests in another hemisphere by raising awareness about their destruction.

"Our primary goal is talk to people about it," said Spataro from atop his horse out on Ohio Rt. 32 Sunday morning. "Local media coverage has been good. We've probably reached 10,000 people directly. We've had 70 to 80 articles and lots of TV coverage, so we've probably reached another 4 to 5 million."

Spataro, an Athens native, said that people typically aren't aware of the plight of the rain forests or the extent of their destruction.

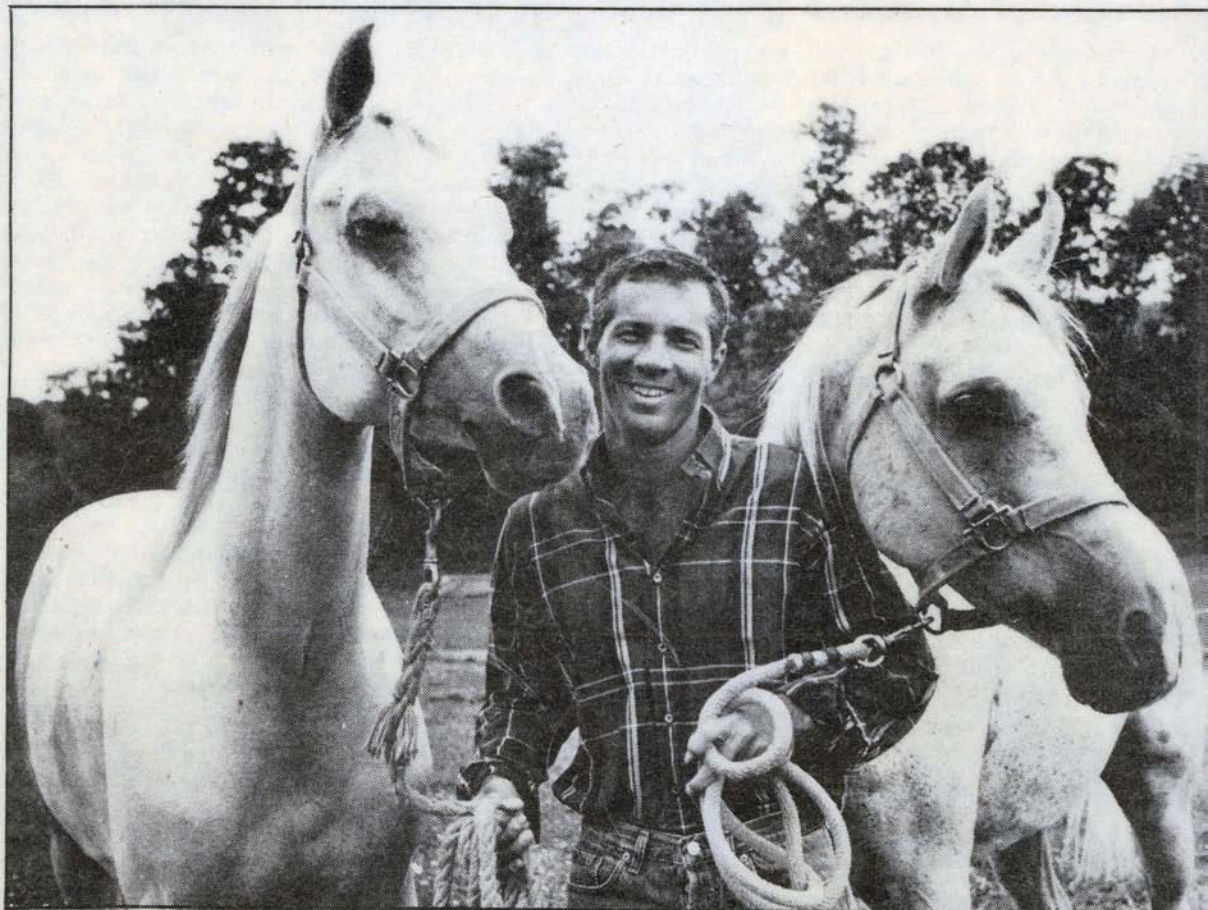
"There are places the size of Ohio where there were once rainforests and now there is nothing."

—Lucien Spataro

"It's amazing. It knocks you over. There are places the size of Ohio where there were once rainforests and now there is nothing. It's like they've become deserts.

"We want to get people to understand that there is a dependency," said Spataro, "a direct relationship — what they do here has an impact down there." The earth will lose 50% of its plant and animal species if the remaining rain forests are destroyed, Spataro said, —and the rain forest ecosystem is being destroyed faster than any other type today.

Spataro attributed the high rate of destruction to the high concentration of rain forests in relatively



Lucien Spataro with his horses March Along and Sea Ruler. Spataro is riding another horse, Sweet William, cross-country. NEWS photo/CIE STROUD

small areas worldwide, and to population booms in the areas where they still exist. But, Spataro said, "we don't know what the impact will be" if the rain forests are completely destroyed.

It's taken Spataro more than three years to organize the ride — to gather sponsors and get the correct permits, but he has "wanted to do it for quite a while." The idea first came to him in a flash while he and a friend were mountain climbing in Mexico. So with one eye on the rain forests and the other on several Guinness World Records for time and distance, Spataro set out across America.

Spataro said that coming

through Athens is "fine. This is a cakewalk," compared to riding through most cities, although the horse handles cities without any problems, he said. Spataro usually rides through the larger cities such as Flagstaff, Ariz., and Oklahoma City, Ok. between midnight and 8 a.m., to avoid heavy traffic, he said.

The horse is outfitted with special rubber boots that fit over its metal shoes. "They're like car tires," said Spataro, "they last forever." However, they still need to be reshod every 5 to 6 hundred miles, he said.

And while it's been tough on the horses, it hasn't been easy for the rider. "The first month was

tough," said Spataro, "but now it's getting more of a mental event as we get near the finish. I went through a stage where I was a mental vegetable for a while."

For the most part people have treated Spataro well on his sojourn across the U.S., but he has had his problems. "One guy threw a beer bottle at me once, missed and came back to try again. I asked him to get out of the car and I knocked him down with my horse."

Spataro will be in Athens most of this week. He was scheduled to speak at the Dairy Barn and Baker Center at 3:00 and 7:00 p.m. yesterday, and is scheduled to speak in local schools today.