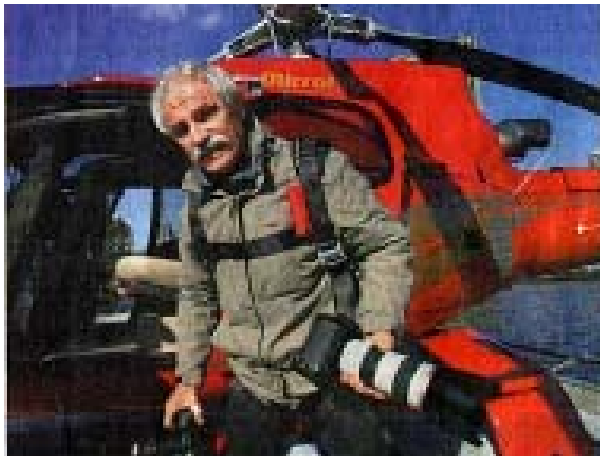


Friend of the Earth turns his lens on Melbourne



Yann Arthus-Bertrand's aerial photographs show a beauty that could be lost, writes **Steve Waldon**.

YANN Arthus-Bertrand has multiple views of the world. There are the physical ones — the extraordinary images he captures from a helicopter hovering anywhere between 30 and 3000 metres.

In these he assembles the prevailing colour, light, topography and symmetries until they please his photographer's eye. Click, and there is another little piece of the planet rendered to posterity.

And the planet is where his other views enter the story. Arthus-Bertrand, 60, has a simple philosophy that the Earth and mankind have a compact: they are bound together.

"We have only one home — we cannot go somewhere else to live," the French photographer told a breakfast audience at Federation Square yesterday.

On that basis, our stewardship of our only home deserves constant scrutiny, he says, and he wants his photos to remind people that their existence depends on the planet's health.

Arthus-Bertrand leaves Melbourne today, but he leaves behind the *Earth from Above* exhibition, which opened on September 14 and continues at the River Terrace, next to Federation Square, until December 12.

More than 50 million people in more than 100 countries have already seen the travelling display, which includes 120 photographic enlargements of the world as Arthus-Bertrand sees it.

Although he is convinced climate change and sustainable development are urgent matters, he is not an eco-warrior in the Steve Irwin or Greenpeace mould.

His images are his own brand of activism. They show the Earth as both fragile and dominant, a place of irreplaceable beauty and nurture, and which typically dwarfs those who are responsible for keeping it habitable, yet somehow manage to exploit it.

Arthus-Bertrand uses the pictures to draw people closer, to show "beauty at its best in order to appeal to what is best in us".

He then hopes they will read the information placards below.

These detail the statistical realities of our impact on the planet — an impact he believes

challenges us all to foster a more equitable world.

"I am very interested in why if we all want the same things, then 1 billion people have plenty and 5 billion people have little," he says.

Saving the environment and rescuing struggling countries is not impossible. "We have to do it now. People are responsible — don't wait for politicians," Arthus-Bertrand says.

The Earth From Above project had its genesis in 1990, when Arthus-Bertrand secured UNESCO patronage to record the state of the planet as the new millennium approached. He records the global positioning system co-ordinates of each job, so that future generations can return by air to the same spot and make visual comparisons.

Melbourne's Jane Hoiting was in Europe when she saw the free outdoor display that is now here.

Despite having no experience as an events organiser or publicity agent, she went to the project's website and made inquiries about bringing the exhibition to Australia.

Two-and-a-half years and plenty of hurdle-leaping later, she is relieved to have succeeded in exposing this city to something she regards as vital work.

Arthus-Bertrand is an engaging character with an easy charm and wry humour.

"Please talk slowly and without your Australian accent," he said yesterday, winning laughs as he took questions.

Mostly, his flying has been without mishap, but two crashes last year shook him up.

Photographing the devastation of New Orleans after hurricane Katrina, his helicopter lost its tail rotor and spun into an empty house.

Arthus-Bertrand and the pilot emerged, bloodied and shocked. Then they began weeping. It was, he said, simply the unbelievable joy of being alive.

Curiously, he does not say he is proud of his photos. He regards his ability as a gift, and enjoys giving back.

His main gift, he says, is being able to raise awareness among current generations so that the planet's beauty is handed on to future generations.

