Call of the Wild: Minnesotan’s Journey to Conservation Chronicled in Toyota-Sponsored Film

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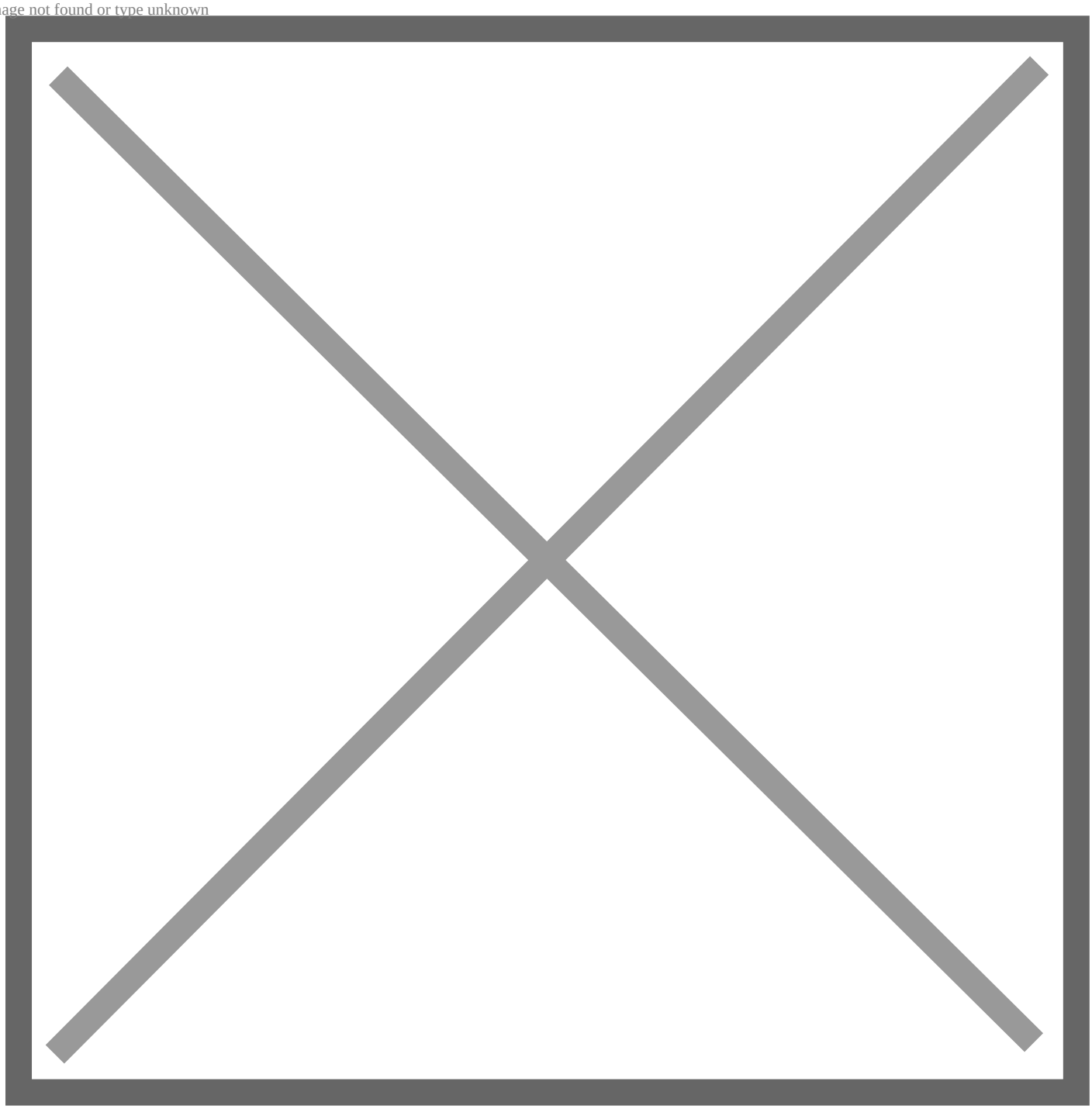
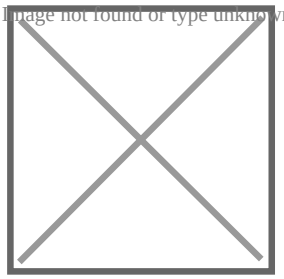


Six years ago, Keng Yang didn't give much thought to the outdoors, even though his father had long used hunting as a source of food in his native Laos and now rural Minnesota. This all changed when Keng acquired a hunting dog, named Kaiya, bridging the generational divide between a father and his American-born son, and forging a newfound appreciation for the natural world.

Keng's tale has been chronicled in a 16-minute short film, "Kaiya," which recently launched publicly and virally through Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever, a non-profit wildlife habitat conservation organization based in Saint Paul. The film was directed by fellow Minnesotan Matt Addington, an award-winning photographer, videographer and storyteller in the outdoor realm. Addington met Keng in 2021 at the Professional Outdoor Media Association's (POMA) national conference. Keng was being hosted by POMA and Toyota as a "Toyota Let's Go Places" scholarship recipient, acknowledging his potential in the outdoor industry.

"Keng's story intrigued me from the start," Addington said. "After hearing how he was originally opposed to hunting, then transforming into such a champion for the industry and conservation, I knew I had to tell his story. Incorporating his unique Hmong culture into the story was also a big part of my desire to share it."

According to Keng, his reluctance to hunt, early in life, came from a compassion for animals and the fact that very few of his friends engaged in the sport or nature, in general. That all changed six years ago when his father gifted him Kaiya, a female German Wirehaired Pointer.

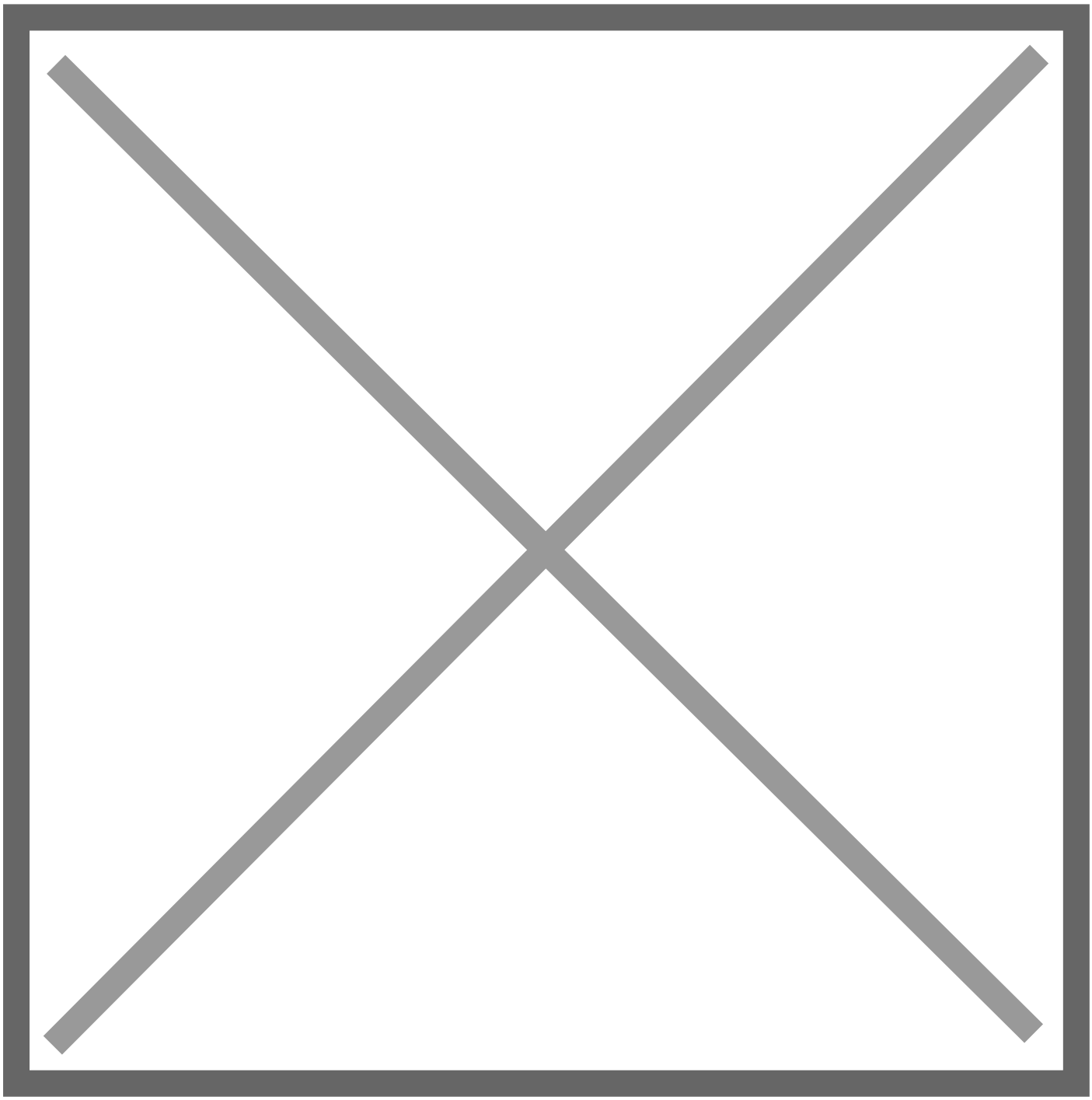


"My dog was my gateway into the hunting community. She helped me understand what it means to have a purpose," he said. "As a hunting dog, her purpose is to hunt; that's what she was born to do. My connection with Kaiya gave me a greater appreciation and connection with the natural world."

That sense of connection also extended to his father, Tony.

"Before hunting, my father and I had no similar interests, whatsoever," Keng said. "He taught me how to hunt pheasants and I'm grateful for that knowledge. We've shared a lot of things on our hunts and I cherish every time we are in the field together."

Besides hunting, another passion the Yang family shares is a love for Toyota. The family owns several vehicles, including Camrys, a RAV4, a Tacoma and a Tundra. In fact, the Yangs' trucks make a few cameo appearances in the movie.



“Kaiya” made its public debut in mid-February at a film festival hosted by Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever, as part of its three-day National Pheasant Fest & Quail Classic convention in Minneapolis. Toyota served as a sponsor for the film festival which drew a few hundred spectators. Reaction to “Kaiya” was extremely positive.

“With more than 200 attendees, you could hear a pin drop midway through the film,” said Bob St. Pierre, chief marketing and communications officer for Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever. “It demanded the audience’s attention and captivated their imagination. At its conclusion, there wasn’t a dry eye in the place.”

For Keng, the notoriety garnered from the film, as well as his growing reputation, has now earned him the moniker of “outdoor ambassador.” He doesn’t take the responsibility lightly.

“My main goal for conservation is to be a voice for protection and access to public lands. Hunters are among the biggest conservation groups in the nation and the world, but there’s room for everyone to get involved and support the outdoors,” he said.

To view the film, “Kaiya,” visit www.pheasantsforever.org/KAIYA