



In a recent interview, Animals on the Edge photographer and Director of Field Research, Chris Weston, talks about the Animals on the Edge project.

Where did your passion for wildlife and conservation come from?

When I was younger I was fascinated by nature and how things work. I used to ask why things are the way they are – why do zebras have black-and-white stripes when they live in a yellow savannah, and things like that. I also had an interest in photography and so I started using the camera to record animal behaviour in order that I could understand it better. My fascination with wildlife and habitat grew from there. And, as I came to understand how the whole of nature is linked I came to realise that humans cannot live in isolation from nature. In these modern times, when global warming is hogging the headlines, we often talk about our need to save the planet. In reality, what we mean is we need to save ourselves. Earth can and will survive without humans but humans cannot survive without the Earth.

What do you hope to accomplish through your work as a photojournalist?

I see photojournalism as a way to motivate and educate people. The Animals on the Edge book is a good example. The aim was to use photographs to make people want to help; the text is there to tell them how. But more than that, I want to connect with people who aren't able to automatically engage in the conservation discussion. One of the problems I see with those working in conservation is that we spend too much time talking to conservationists – preaching to the choir. I want to give people outside of that core group a chance and, more importantly, a reason to get involved.

What was the underlining goal for the Animals on the Edge project?

The belief that underlies the Animals on the Edge project came to me during a chance meeting with a Kenyan farmer some years ago. I was working on a project concerning human/elephant conflict when I met Matunde, an uneducated but intelligent man. He described to me how, if an elephant trampled and destroyed his crops, he would lose his entire annual income and how he would no longer be able to afford even the most basic necessities in life, such as clean water, food and heating, let alone luxuries such as schooling for his children. It was the first time I had considered conservation in human terms. Over the years, as my career developed I came across more people all of whom had similar stories of how sharing land with wildlife threatened the wellbeing of both humans and animals. In Animals on the Edge I wanted to tell these stories, to show how poverty drives people to take action against wildlife that we condemn but that is not without reason. I also wanted to show that there are solutions to the problems that benefit both people and wildlife and that the best way to protect wildlife is to help those people living on the frontline of the human/wildlife conflict.



How did you go about completing the project in terms of research, planning and execution?

I guess something that people rarely see in a photograph is the amount of effort – research, planning and execution - that goes into its creation. Before any photography began, the initial task was to determine the scope of the project. There are over 33,000 animals classified as threatened to one degree or another. So, to help narrow the list, I contacted the IUCN World Conservation Union and consulted their Red List database. In the end I settled on a scope that focused on terrestrial mammals that are categorized as endangered or critically endangered, the two highest classifications before extinction.

With the scope of the project determined, next I spent hours researching the species, habitats and locations. It was a long, drawn-out process involving a lot of time sitting in front of a computer typing variations of search strings into Google, wading through thousands of pages of written material and dialing phone numbers that invariably began zero-zero. I called in favours, spoke with biologist friends and colleagues working in conservation, spoke to friends of friends of friends and even to the odd government minister. As time went by a plan emerged and the book took shape.

The next two years were a blur of airports and airplanes interspersed with jungle camps and the odd backstreet hotel. I visited every continent, climbing mountains, crossing plateaus and traversing rivers. I shinned up trees a hundred feet high, hacked my way through jungles; dug man-size holes, and crawled on all fours across inhospitable terrain. I rode elephants, paddled canoes and rafts, and flew in contraptions that should have been grounded long ago. At times, I was too hot and too cold and often I was exhausted and ill. I got lost, held-up at gunpoint, was stranded in the middle of nowhere with just my cameras and the shirt on my back. I saw seen countries reconstitute from Kingdoms to Republics and Governments change from left to right. It was without doubt an adventure.

How did you prepare physically for such adventures?

I'd like to tell you that I ate healthily and exercised regularly but the nature of the job doesn't always allow for that. I'm often flitting from one airport to another, or on the move between one location and another. I guess the work itself keeps you fit.



In the book you talk a lot about human/wildlife conflict. Can you expand on how this impacts wildlife and conservation?

Human-wildlife conflict (HWC) occurs around the world, affecting many species, in particular large, often endangered, mammals. It is not restricted to particular geographical regions or climatic conditions and, almost without exception, it has negative implications for wildlife, as it creates deep and passionate animosity amongst rural communities that, in impoverished regions of the world, manifests through encroachment on protected areas, poaching and excessive resource use, threatening and undermining conservation efforts. In more developed countries, such as the United States and Europe, it tends to result in retributive or preventative killing of wild animals that threaten livestock or perceivably human life.

In terms of conservation, while the financial and social cost of HWC to farmers and communities remains excessive, the negative impact on wildlife will continue. For example, while researching for *Animals on the Edge* in India, I came across a report that attempted to quantify the cost to families of living in close proximity to Sariska Tiger Reserve by estimating crop and livestock losses. It concluded that, in monetary terms, the annual average value of crop losses equated to between US\$67 and US\$91 per household. While such figures may seem trivial to you and me, when your average wage is less than US\$1 a day a mean loss of US\$79 is a significant sum. In real terms the cost to families and communities living within the designated buffer zones and on the borders of protected areas, and already living in abject poverty, is significant and sufficient enough to be the root cause of HWC.

What are the factors standing in the way of conservationists?

To my mind, factors that stand in the way of conservation can – indeed must – also be a part of the solution. The problem with conservation is that the general aim of most conservation programs is to stop people doing what they feel they have a legitimate right to do, often threatening peoples' livelihoods at the same time. In Congo I met a former worker of a logging company that had been shut down after one of the big conservation charities had allegedly put pressure on the government. The closure resulted in the loss of 450 jobs and directly affected the livelihoods of 4,500 people – an entire community. No regard was given to how these people would provide for their families with no alternative means of income. In the end, they did what they had to do to survive – illegal logging is now rife, poaching of wildlife has increased. The forest is less protected than it was before the closure. My contact described how he understood the need for conservation but the manner in which it was done in this case was equivalent to invading Iraq without a plan for the aftermath of the war. In order for conservation to be successful in the long term we must understand that all sides need to benefit – politicians, the big corporations, local communities – not just the environment and the wildlife.



Define the phrase “Conservation is a luxury only the rich can afford” — a theme that resonates throughout the book.

People are motivated by the existence of unsatisfied needs. For wealthier people, those needs tend to be social or esteem based – the need to belong, to gain self-respect, to achieve and gain recognition, a need for meaning, truth and justice. But when you have nothing your needs are more physiological – the need for nourishment, warmth and shelter or, in other words, the things humans need to sustain life. In Nepal I interviewed a convicted rhino poacher. He told me that the first thing he did each morning was check to see which of his children were still alive. The day he turned to poaching was the day he awoke and found his 18-month old son had died of starvation. His motivation for killing a rhino was not greed, it was not the thrill of the hunt or sport, or the need to be recognised as a great hunter. Simply it was the very immediate need to feed his family. When a person is starving and freezing they will do anything to feed and warm themselves, including killing an animal for its meat, the warmth of its pelt or the money it provides to buy such things. When food is plentiful and the home safe and warm, when people have what they need to survive, they can be motivated by charities and NGO’s to act against the injustices suffered by wildlife and habitat.

Tell us about the idea of marrying capitalism with conservation?

People protect that which is valuable to them. In the developed world our cars are fitted with alarms and immobilizers, our houses have security cameras and deadbolts; we buy health insurance for our families and our pets, and safes for our important possessions. Therefore, if we capitalize nature, make wildlife more valuable alive than dead and trees worth more standing than felled, then people will protect nature. It’s a simple fact. Rwanda’s gorillas are a perfect example. Through controlled and sensitive eco-tourism, gorilla trekking has become the country’s third largest export, surpassed only by the tea and coffee industries. It provides significant and vital wealth for Rwanda’s economy, and employment, schools, clinics, clean water and income for the communities that have to co-exist with the gorillas. Because gorillas are such a valuable resource for the people and government of Rwanda, they protect them, and the country’s population of gorillas is increasing as a result.

What did you learn about the poachers and villagers you interviewed during your travels?

Almost without exception, the villagers and communities I spoke to felt an affinity to the land and the wildlife that lives there. They consider themselves belonging to the land, not owners of it. Most see the benefits of conservation, of retaining what they consider to be their natural heritage and none of those people I spoke to who had been involved with illegal land use and



wildlife crime became involved not out of greed, insensitivity or egotism but simply because they felt they had no alternative – they were typically crimes of last resort. All they are asking is for life to be a little simpler, so every day doesn't feel like their last or their children's last. Really, is that so much to ask?

What is your most vivid memory associated with this project?

There are many that stand out – some related to people, others to wildlife. But there are two that hold lasting memories: one that reveals the worst of mankind the other that inspires me to continue the work we are doing at Animals on the Edge. While I was in Sumatra working with orangutans, I had spent some time photographing a particular male. Orangutans are incredibly intelligent creatures – the most intelligent of all the apes – and especially inquisitive. Having spent some time with this individual, I had developed a special bond with him. One morning, during breakfast, we heard news that an orangutan had been found in the forest with 28 air gun pellets embedded in his body and head. I went to investigate and found that it was the male with whom I had spent so much time. Two days later, he died of his wounds. There was no rhyme, no reason. It was just a senseless killing. I felt like I'd lost a friend.

On a positive note, when I was photographing gorillas in Rwanda we were following a lone female – an unusual site, as gorillas are social creatures that live in a group called a band. She was being particularly secretive and we were keeping a respectful distance so as not to disturb her. She made her way through the forest into a clearing and sat, initially with her back to us. We stopped and watched her. After a while, she slowly turned her head, regarding us with her intelligent eyes. Then she turned her body, opened one of her enormous arms and revealed a baby, asleep at her breast. The baby was just a few days old and my guide and me were the first humans ever to see it. I took a single photograph and then watched in awe. There are some experiences in the wild that transcend photography. It was an incredible moment of connection and, the one image I did take is perhaps the most iconic of all the images in the book.

How have your thoughts about conservation and the man/wildlife dichotomy changed throughout the process of this book?

If anything, the outcome of my research and my encounters with people on the ground has affirmed my beliefs that in order to protect wildlife and habitats in the long term we must also help those people who share their lives and their land with the animals we want to protect. Where there are examples of this happening, in Rwanda and small areas of the Amazon, for example, there are obvious signs that the natural resources in those areas are thriving. Where we are failing people, for instance in India, both animals and wildlife habitat are facing utter destruction. For me, the evidence is overwhelming.



With a partner you have set up Animals on the Edge as an NGO. Can you tell us about the organization?

During the course of writing and photographing for the book I was unearthing all these solutions to the problems I was encountering – many of them simple and immediate. I was talking about them with my partner in the project, Leo Grillo – a Los Angeles-based film producer, actor and conservationist – when he suggested that we should get more involved on the ground. From that discussion, we set up Animals on the Edge as a 501(c)(3) non-profit in the US and a registered charity in the UK, with the aim of not only implementing many of these solutions, as we have done notably in India, but also to continue researching new and innovative methods of conserving wildlife and proposing to corporate and governmental decision makers sustainable real-world solutions to conservation challenges.

And what current projects is the Animals on the Edge NGO working on?

The Animals on the Edge NGO is now involved in several projects around the world. In India, for example, we have completed a project to create new tiger habitat in Kanha National Park, and are now working with a local NGO to provide a solution to the problem of human/wildlife conflict using chili peppers. In Slovakia we are investigating ways of utilizing technology to reduce conflict between local people and carnivores, especially bears. In Zimbabwe we rescued 74 lions that were at risk due to the ongoing political and economic problems in the country. And in Borneo we are working with a community co-operative to help protect several hundred acres of primary rainforest using a capitalism-based model.