Tim Flach’s new book is a dazzling series of images of endangered animals and natural habitats. He tells David Clark about the serious ecological concerns that inspired his latest work.
This intimate shot of a hippo was taken through the glass of a cichlid tank at St. Louis Zoo, Missouri. In the wild, hippos are hunted as food and for their teeth and skin.
When did you start taking photos?
My first photographs were at London Zoo in 1977, while on an art foundation course at North East London Polytechnic. 40 years later, I’ve found myself back at London Zoo, shooting images for a book. So it’s gone full circle. Had I envisaged that? I don’t quite think so.

Afterwards you studied at Central Saint Martin’s College. Then did you go straight into shooting commercial work?
The week I finished my course, some friends asked me to photograph the Swedish aeronautical engineer Per Lindstrand, who later became famous for his record-breaking hot air balloon flights. That started me on the journey to becoming a commercial photographer.

However, I wasn’t a trust fund kid or someone who had parents who could set me up. While I was getting established, every evening I cleared out rubbish from The Royal Lancaster Hotel in London and served in bars; then during the day I took pictures. I didn’t get much of a social life.

I earned enough to have a square meal now and again while I bought the kit and built up my work. It was a very simple way to get established.

What made you start shooting your own personal projects?
Like the majority of photographers, I need projects to immerse myself in, to force me to go somewhere I wouldn’t otherwise go. Initially that
“I would always encourage others to build a part of their life where they give time to their own work”

“controlled chaos” of photographing them?
Yes, everyone gives you a little bit of accommodation when you’re photographing animals. There might need to be a back-up animal because one decides it’s not going to work that day, or is going to pee in the studio or whatever. So I think that affords you a little bit of flexibility.

Then, often, during the process of photographing, something about the animal reveals itself and you think, “That’s more interesting than I could have imagined.”

How did you begin your Endangered series?
I started interviewing and meeting up with quite a few people who were international authorities on conservation, such as Jonathan Baillie, who was then head of conservation programmes at the Zoological Society of London. I asked them about their thoughts on conservation and what they thought the issues were. This helped to shape the project on endangered species.

In the book, you mix stylised portraits of animals with images of them in their natural habitat. What made you choose this particular approach?
In a 2011 study on animal portraiture by Kalof, Zammit-Lucia and Kelly [The Meaning of Animal Portraiture in a Museum Setting: Implications for Conservation], it was found that images done in a context more culturally associated with human representation were more likely to make people want to take action to preserve those species. So I combined portraits, which give us an emotional connection with animals, with photographs of habitats, where the ecological systems have to be preserved if we want future generations of those animals to exist. I also wanted to engage the audience by making a book in which you can’t predict what’s coming on the next page – where they don’t quite know what they’re looking at, whether it’s real, or alive, or underwater or whatever. You have

was just helping friends out with a theatre poster or something.
I was always doing projects alongside making a living and that’s never really stopped, even when financially things were more difficult. I would always encourage others to build a part of their life where they give time to their own work, and not always be commercially driven.

Animals have been big part of your personal work. Do you enjoy what you’ve called the

Above __ A close-up of vividly-coloured chalice coral polyps, which are found in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Rising sea temperatures and ocean acidification present major threats to their future.
to constantly shake it up and challenge the viewer.

How long did it take to take the images for *Endangered*?

It took several years in total. I just had to prioritise the story of the natural world and the animals and put aside my interest in the art world or even commercial interests. I turned a lot of work down and just put aside some years to what I feel really passionately about. I included some images from previous projects, but about 140 of the 160 were originated for the book.

It took about 20 months of shooting, but I probably spent about six months faffing around trying to think of how it would ultimately work as a book. I was able to do the project because I benefited from the fact that I had a journey behind me. That opened doors and I had the resources and the tools. It was a privilege to have all that come together.

Did using today’s digital cameras enable you to capture images you couldn’t have got in the past?

The technological developments of recent years have been really important in enabling me to get a high quality of imagery at very high speeds. If you’re chasing animals that are on the edge of extinction, they’re not always going to be available for modelling sessions. Shooting on a Canon EOS 5DS, I was able to shoot in the field at ISOS of 1,600 and 3,200 and get a 50MP file. I could take pictures of gorillas from a boat that look almost like studio shots and do a lot of things that would have been really difficult in the past.

Are you hopeful about the future for the endangered species in your book?

We’ve lost half of our invertebrates since the 1970s, and 20% of all animals are on the edge of extinction. But if we’re pessimistic about it, we don’t take action: we just get depressed about it.

The real challenge is to animate and in a sense engage people around the natural world. We’re at a really unique time in the planet’s history; and, as Jonathan Baillie says in the epilogue to my book, “Never before has it been so important to connect people with nature - our future depends on it.”

Do you think photographers have an important role to play in raising awareness of what’s happening to nature?

People like myself, who are interested in visual communication, realise we’ve got to become better at communicating, so we can deliver the stories that encourage people to act effectively. Artists have always had to prioritise the story of the natural world, if we want it to act effectively. Artists have always had an important role to play in raising awareness of what’s happening to nature.

How do you feel about the finished book?

Ultimately I’d like to think this book is the most complete of any project I’ve done, in the sense that it’s really trying to work the story and the images as a form. I’ve picked the subjects not because they’re fearsome, cute or whatever, but mainly because I’m prioritising telling the big ecological stories.

The book is about the value of nature and the idea that culturally we have to change our relationship with the natural world. We’re at a really unique time in the planet’s history; and in a sense engage people around the natural world.

“People like myself, who are interested in visual communication, realise we’ve got to become better at communicating, so we can deliver the stories that encourage people to act effectively”
the natural world influence other things.

I think there’s a sense of wonderment about the animals in the book. You can have all the best science in the world, but if it doesn’t have an emotional dimension, it’s not very relevant. We can know something, but we don’t act on it until it touches our hearts and minds.

*Endangered*, with photographs by Tim Flach and text by Jonathan Baillie, is published by Abrams, price £50.

[www.timflach.com](http://www.timflach.com)

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**Above** A cluster of Monarch butterflies. The caterpillars feed only on milkweed plants, but millions of acres of milkweed are destroyed by herbicides every year.

**Right** In Wapusk National Park, Canada, the polar bear was waiting for the ice to freeze to find food.

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**TIM’S KIT BAG**

Tim says: “For the *Endangered* series, I shot some images on my Hasselblad H4D-60, but mainly used a Canon EOS 5DS; it was more practical in the field. The lenses I used most were the Canon EF 200-400mm f/4L, which has a built-in 1.4x extender, and the Canon EF 800mm f/5.6L.”