

Shooting to protect

Paddy Fowler talks to **Tim Flach** about the process of taking photographs for his most recent book and exhibition, *Endangered*.

Tim Flach is a photographer based in London. He describes himself as an animal photographer rather than a wildlife photographer because he is most interested in how we, as humans, engage with animal imagery and how that engagement can be used in visual storytelling, particularly in relation to conservation.

We spoke to Tim about his latest project and the role photographers play in protecting the environment they catalogue.

Your latest photographic book project, *Endangered*, shows us animals on the edge of extinction. While in other projects you often captured your animal subjects in a studio setting, in *Endangered* you physically had to go out to meet the animals in their natural habitat. Why did you choose that approach for this project?

For the most part, I had no option but to photograph the animals in their habitat, as they could not be found in zoos or could not be brought into the studio. When I started looking into producing a book on endangered animals, I was most interested in how to tell stories strongly and how to connect with people to create the desired change. I started by looking at research conducted by people such as Professor Linda Kalof,¹ who has investigated the effect of pictures of animals against plain backgrounds as opposed to in their natural settings. From meaning maps (pre- and post-exhibition evaluation tools used to analyse emotions), it was found that people were more likely to find a sense of kinship when the animals were represented in a style that is culturally associated with human portraiture. Has the environmental movement unwittingly separated us from the connection to wildlife by removing the emotional connection to other living things, by often creating a distant non-human world?

This influenced my approach for my book: I could create images that created character, personality and engagement with empathy as a priority. This is contrary to traditional wildlife programming, which seeks to make manufactured situations look real – I do the opposite and make it look as if the photographs are taken in a studio when they are actually taken in the natural environment.

The anthropomorphisation of animals has often been shunned by the scientific community – romanticised depictions of animals in beautiful picturesque habitats. Why have you chosen to include emotive images in this series?

We often view words such as ‘anthropomorphism’ in a derogatory way. The word originally came from giving human attributes to the gods and it was later used to interpret human characteristics in animals. In practice, it isn’t often us seeing the human manifest in an animal, but seeing our world in theirs, our communication and social structure. This is more linked to anthropocentrism, the way we look outwards from a human perspective and apply this to the outside world. So, we see something, for example, in a photograph of an albatross by Chris Jordan² in which he shows the plastics within the carcass to show the result of their presence inside the animal. What brings it home is not only the carcass of the dead animal, but that you can identify all the bottle tops that we see in our fridge. The great challenge, I believe, isn’t humanising animals but bringing the sense of otherness to a sense of sameness, showing their world colliding with ours – this is the distinction I want to bring forward.

I think the word ‘kinship’ is interesting because it suggests that we are part of an extended family and that we have that sense of shared commonality. Obviously, we already live in a world that is so separate from the one that our ancestors inhabited, our digital world is vastly different from theirs and we are moving further and further away from the more natural world in which they lived. I think of the Cambridge study³ in which children of 4–12 years old were asked to identify British wildlife from images. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they could identify more Pokémon characters than British wildlife. I think it is quite clear that unless we culturally redefine our relationship with nature, humanity doesn’t have a future.

For us to really be touched by the stories and to engage with what is often difficult scientific information, we need emotion. It was George Schaller who said, “you can do the best science in the world, but unless emotion is engaged it is not very relevant”.⁴ I take this on board. I really think that as artists we should work more collaboratively with scientists to connect the subconscious and the conscious, to take these things that really touch people and create the desired change.

The photography of endangered animals shares a number of traits with hunting, including terminology and techniques (shoot, tracking shot, stalking, camera traps etc.). As the hobby of hunting, especially of rare and endangered species, continues to decline in popularity, is the photography of rare animals taking its place, with the perfect photographic ‘shot’ replacing the perfect ‘shot’ to mount on the wall?

We also see many projects in conservation where there is a change in how a community interacts with nature, often where outsiders have brought wealth into a local community. I remember one project where raptors following certain flight paths through a community were being decimated by hunting groups that were bringing money into the community, but it was clearly unsustainable. Now they have a much more sustainable revenue, as ecotourists are encouraged to take photos of the birds on their migratory journey. This change happened in a matter of years, so the local hotels filled up quickly and money poured into this particular village. There was a clear changeover from killing to photography, which offered a different type of tourism without impacting the revenue of the local community.

Clearly, we are in a time when we take pictures to prove that we were in front of a rare animal. It is certainly not a new subject area. Susan Sontag wrote about the topic in the 1970s in the book *On Photography*⁵. She mused on using long lenses to shoot animals on safari versus the traditions of shooting the animals. Even I say I go out to shoot animals when I am on a photography trip – in fact, I am often questioned about whether I am actually shooting animals when travelling. I think that it almost





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goes back to our primordial sense of the adventure in finding the animal, tracking, stalking etc.

A number of the species you have photographed in *Endangered* are in their situation because of climate change and other human-linked destruction of habitats. What impact do you think an increase in tourism for photography to these areas will have on their recovery, in terms of the impact of travel and the presence of more humans in their habitat?

I think that one of the greatest challenges we have is land-use change. Here we are in the sixth extinction, so how do we go forward and make better decisions? Having spent quite a lot of my time in other parts of the world, where half the people live on less than the equivalent of £1.50 a day, it is naïve to think that with good governance they won't just use the land for livestock, leaving that land with no ecological system in place. So I would say that I'm not suggesting the trade-off is the right one, but the trade-off where we have pristine forests with ecotourism instead of those forests being logged and turned over to livestock is a much better option even if there is an ecotourism impact.

Of all the mammals on Earth, humans contribute 36 per cent to the overall biomass, livestock 60 per cent and wild animals make up only 4 per cent.⁶ That puts things into perspective. It is undeniable that ecotourism can harm the environment, but we are dealing with just trying to save areas from land-use change and turning wild habitats over to pasture. If we don't value the ecosystems and culturally redefine our relationship with them, are we going to be able to make that desired change?

Many governments, on the surface, sound as if they are concerned about protecting ecosystems, but this is often driven by economic interests. We have really got to concentrate on the big picture and avoid a certain degree of sentiment in certain situations and really try to work out how we can move forward in an intelligent way. To really connect with the influences of the planet, whether financial, political, economic or artistic, we must have cohesion; without this, we do not have a future.

Victorian collections of rare and exotic animals were instrumental in scientific advances. Today the focus is less on discovery and more on the recovery of rare and endangered species; what part do you think photography plays in the conservation of endangered species?

We are living in the age of the ascendance of the image – photographs have a more important role to play than they have ever had before. So, interestingly, when you look at the many different image makers out there, there are more exploring the connection between people and the natural world in the last few years than in history. We are seeing a seismic shift, this is happening quickly and must do so to address the challenges we face. Can

we respond fast enough and with enough urgency? Will we know when we reach the tipping point?

In *Endangered*, you have not only focused on the popular endangered species, but also on the less-charismatic faces of the endangered species world. What was the reason for including these less-attractive yet equally endangered species?

When I was looking at the ecological drivers, I didn't take a picture for at least three months, while doing research. All I did was speak to people, not just conservationists but communicators for conservation organisations too. They were, in a sense, relaying to me the disappointments and failures that they had experienced, that certain types of image don't reach certain people and that other images do. I also asked people what must-haves I needed in the book, what stories needed to be told – climate change, land-use change, coral, vultures, pangolins, saigas – all these are stories that you have to tell. I wanted to represent some of the key stories within the 300 pages of the book. It only contains 160 images – clearly we had to pick the candidates carefully. For example, the pied tamarin (which comes from Manos in South America and is largely unknown), actually looks a lot like Yoda, so instead of an animal, you see *Star Wars*.

The insects were included as they are the small majority. Clearly, they are incredibly important but also you have got to look at the cultural relationship of how we transform animals that are very familiar to us. I needed to show the Lord Howe Island stick insect, once thought extinct then rediscovered in a bush on a rocky outcrop not far from the island itself. Conversely, I included pandas in the book to be able to talk about the fact that we give a strong cultural meaning to pandas and their link to conservation. The animals were chosen to represent storytelling around different ecological drivers, rather than simply taking the most exotic and beautiful animals and putting them in a book.

Continuing from that, were there any animals that you personally wanted to include in the project?

Well, I had must-haves rather than would-likes – for a book you need to have the really key stories to build from. People would constantly tell me that I must look at saigas, but the saigas were not easy to get hold of as they are not kept in captivity and their numbers are very low. I had to pursue them as a really key animal to include.

Has producing *Endangered* changed the way you take photographs of other animals?

In terms of how I take pictures and the influences on my work, each project is like a journey. You forget things and learn new things. The key is that when you are introduced to what is happening out there, in nature, you can't ignore it.



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When talking about *Endangered*, I am often asked why I chose to involve science in my practice. When you see the reality of the situation some of these animals are in, there is no option but to pursue that journey. I am a different person for going on the journey and witnessing these animals on the edge of extinction around the world. Meeting the people around the issues and understanding the situations that many of these animals are in, such as where the populations of vultures or pangolins had collapsed, you can't really go back because you're a different person with that knowledge. I am more mindful of where we are going and how we plan to go about it.

Where do you see the future of photography and how we tackle the problems you have mentioned today?

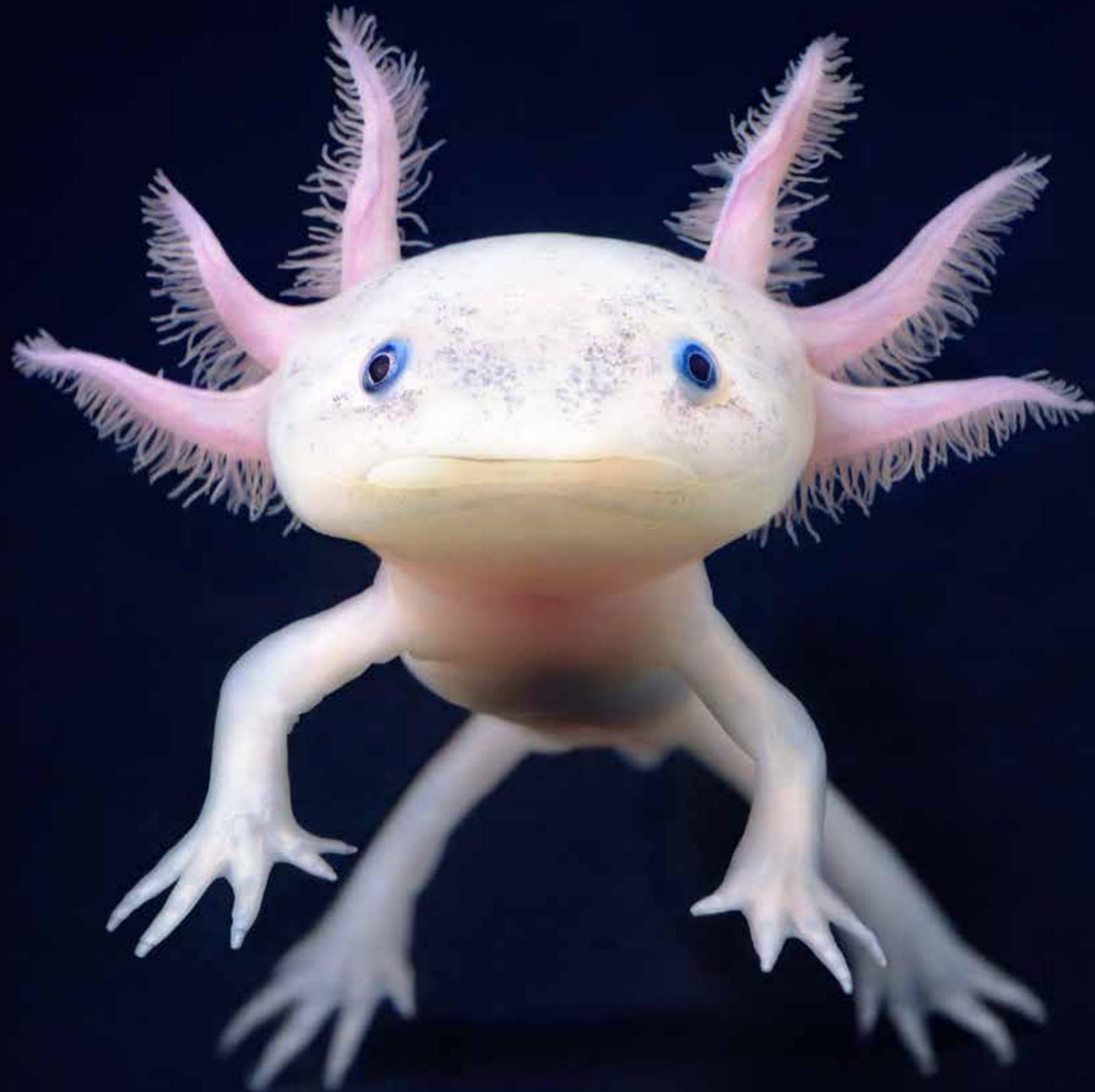
One of the areas where we are seeing massive changes in our understanding is in neuroscience. There are certain traits that we often react to before rational thought. A study undertaken at Oxford University⁷ showed that our reaction to cuteness is faster than we could have imagined. This can give us a better understanding of how we interpret images. Speaking to scientists makes me a more effective communicator as I am able to use their research in the creation of images.



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When you are a visual communicator, in a sense you have got to be thinking about whether you want to reach the unbeliever, or what you may call the egotist, compared to the altruist. The altruist is always easy to bring on board and they will back you up on a campaign: when they see an image of a polar bear foraging, they'll help it to gain traction in the public sphere. It is the egotist that you really want to start to engage with through the storytelling and emotion. So understanding the very mechanisms of visual communication allows us the possibility of engaging them with the visual storytelling before they have a conscious thought and a chance to think otherwise. **ES**

Tim Flach has published five books: *Endangered*, *Evolution*, *More Than Human*, *Dogs Gods and Equus*. He can be found at www.timflach.com and on instagram at @timflachphotography. Tim was interviewed by **Paddy Fowler**, Publications Officer at the Institution of Environmental Sciences.

Page(s)	Species	Conservation status
58–59	Monarch butterfly cluster	G4*
61	Polar bear	VU
62	Crowned sifaka	EN
64 △	Pied tamarin	EN
64 ▽	Lord Howe Island stick insect	CR
65	Saiga antelope	CR
66	Axolotl	CR

*The species is not currently listed on the IUCN Red List, however, their numbers are in significant decline and the clustering phenomenon is becoming rarer every year.

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