

Survival/Extinction:

Endangered

Tim Flach

All images from Flach, Tim with text by Jonathan Baillie and Sam Wells, *Endangered*, Abrams, New York, 2017

Opposite: *White-bellied pangolin: Bushmeat and trafficking*

A young white-bellied pangolin from equatorial Africa, clinging to the base of its mother's tail. Pangolins are solitary, shy, nocturnal creatures that breed far too slowly to meet the demands of illegal harvesting, for bushmeat in Africa, and in Asia, for their scales, used in unproven medicines. Pangolins are endearing and useful to farmers, being insectivorous, but they are easy to catch and the most trafficked mammals in the world, traded by the tonne. The local species in Asia have been hunted to the brink of extinction, and those in Africa are now particularly vulnerable due to the recent Asian-led expansion of transport access through their forest habitat.

Human civilisation is destroying natural habitats at accelerating rates, bringing Earth to the brink of a sixth mass extinction of animal species. Meanwhile, science continues to reveal how humanity depends on healthy ecosystems. It has never been more important to reconnect with the natural world. Critical anthropomorphism is an aesthetic technique that employs potent emotional stimuli, accentuating human characteristics, to arrest attention and force engagement with non-human subjects. Recent scholarship by Linda Kalof and her collaborators demonstrates that viewers respond more empathetically to anthropomorphic animal portraits than traditional wildlife photographs. Feelings of kinship elicit support for conservation action, as do 'negative' feelings, such as pity, fear and shock. But wonder, alone, is insufficient.

Traditional wildlife photography views anthropomorphism as stylised and unscientific – an aversion inherited from ethology, which is meticulously objective. In wildlife photographs, undomesticated animals live 'wild and free'; their natural habitat fills the frame. Yet this is equally contrived; photographers are journeying to increasingly remote and specific locations to avoid markers of human activity entering their images, although humanity is, in fact, encroaching further into natural habitats. Critical anthropomorphism artistically represents the complex and disconcerting relationships between humans and animals. Wildlife photography remains an indispensable educational tool, but 'art by conservationists is a key translator of information from science into culture'¹, and developments in science are rapid and shocking.

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¹ Whitley, Cameron Thomas, Kalof, Linda and Tim Flach, 'Using Animal Portraiture to Activate Emotional Affect', *Environment and Behaviour* 1–27, 2020



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Opposite:
Ploughshare tortoise:
Illegal trafficking

The critically endangered ploughshare tortoise from Madagascar is on the brink of extinction in the wild. When smugglers began stealing tortoises from a successful local captive-breeding-and-release programme, to sell to the lucrative international market for exotic pets, the desperate solution was adopted of defacing the shells by engraving them as seen here, a process which is painless to the animal but which renders it worthless to collectors. In one of the poorest countries in the world, a commitment to saving the endemic wildlife is vital.

Right:
Saiga antelope:
Hunting, disease and climate change

Hunted for its meat and horns since prehistory, the critically endangered saiga antelope of Central Asia, an ancient mammal that co-existed with woolly mammoths and sabre-toothed tigers, has proved incredibly resilient, thanks to its successful breeding in the wild, together with recent protection after a drastic population decline in the early twentieth century. Its numbers had returned to six figures when a bacterial disease, not normally fatal, struck in 2015/16, killing more than 100,000 animals, possibly because climate change had affected their normal range. There are now too few males to pull the species out of endangerment, and stringent protection is necessary for its survival.



Following pages:
White-backed African vulture:
Poisoning

'Gore-encrusted carrion-birds that gobble putrid flesh', vultures are 'icons of death in popular culture, but are in fact great symbols of life'. Not only do they keep disease out of innumerable communities and ecosystems, they protect endangered mammals by helping wardens to locate poachers. Throughout most of the world, the death of a large animal is quickly marked by a circling kettle of vultures. Poachers, however, to evade detection, have learned to lace their kill with cyanide, so that one dead elephant may directly kill hundreds of adult vultures. Almost half the world's vulture species, like this one from Sub-Saharan Africa, are now critically endangered, and losing their contributions to waste management is costing governments enormous sums every year.

