
HUMANS AND WILDLIFE MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Part 1

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SO FAR, YET SO CLOSE

I first set foot on the Galapagos Islands in June 2015 when I was invited to an IWC event. This field trip took me to Charles Darwin Research Station, which has been collecting numerous specimens from each island over the years. The collection ranges from birds and reptiles all the way to insects.

And when I looked closely at those specimens, which have been carefully categorized and recorded through the changes of time and environment, I found out that many of them had already perished from this planet after the 1960s.

I was amazed at the severe impact of the extinction of a single species on other organisms. And behind this effect, there is a mystical ecosystem at the mercy of a delicate and fragile balance beyond our imagination.

I was particularly shocked to learn that the giant tortoise, which is an icon of the Galapagos Islands, was at one point driven to near extinction by overfishing.

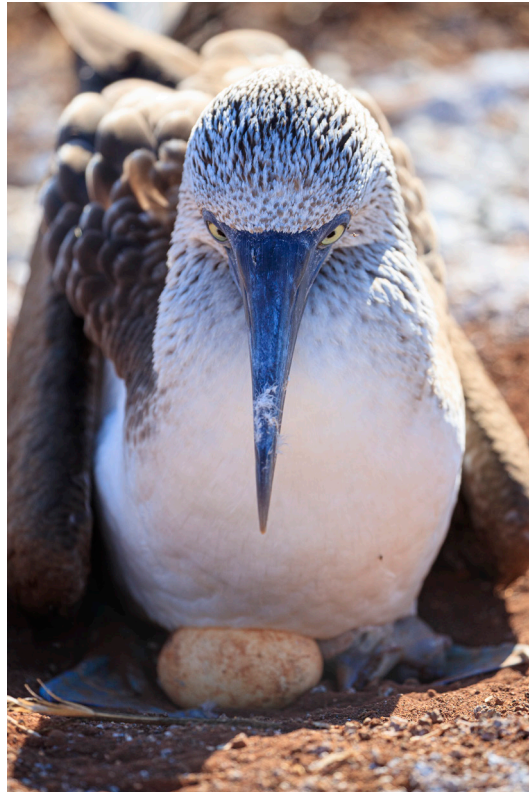
Initially, I had believed that the Galapagos Islands were remote, isolated islands in a world far, far away from where human influence could reach. It was the complete opposite. These islands have been bearing the brunt of human impact for many years. There is currently an island inhabited by people (*with a population of about 35,000*), equipped with an airport and roads that help fuel a fully functioning town.

I also learned that sometime during the natural history of the Galapagos Islands, local species became inseparable from humans and were driven to extinction. This was not through natural selection, but rather through something entirely different.

The near-extinction of the giant tortoise caused by humans is the most notable example. But there are plenty of other stories that I've learned.

Non-native species introduced by humans hundreds of years ago still continue to threaten the local ecosystem to this day. Several species of Darwin's finches (*a singing bird*) have seen a drastic drop in numbers due to non-native rats hunting their eggs.

And now El Niño and global warming are accelerating the gravity of the situation. Giant tortoise eggs are rotting due to heavy rains caused by El Niño. The amount of seaweed, which is the staple food for the endemic marine iguana, is declining due to global warming. The blue-footed booby population on the island has dropped to almost half of the previous records due to diminishing sardines.



And on my second private visit in May 2019, I learned from locals just how grave the problem of plastic waste in the ocean is. For example, the stomachs of seabird chicks are filled with a surprising amount of ingested micro-plastics. This plastic waste is not from local waters dumped on-site; rather, it is mostly plastic that has been carried by the current from all over the world. I was shocked at this dynamic picture.

Can you imagine throwing a plastic water bottle into the ocean because you couldn't find a garbage can and the bottle ending up in a sea bird's stomach in the Galapagos Islands thousands of miles away? And sentencing the bird to death by suffocation? Moreover, these plastics slowly

separate into micro-plastic particles, which are then ingested by fish. In the end, they are absorbed into the human body—two hundred fifty grams a year on average.

(The microplastic issue is a clear and present danger to both the ecosystem and humans. Plastic started being used in large quantities after the 1950s. It is said in the 70 years since then, plastic production has amounted to a staggering 9.2 billion tons. This is the equivalent of 1,600 Great Pyramids of Giza. And even if it all turns into some form of waste, it never dissolves naturally. So almost all of this waste is hidden under the surface of this planet, with its whereabouts unknown to the human eye.)

Another reality that I learned is that poaching is threatening the Galapagos Islands' ecosystem and it continues on a massive scale. In particular, the Galapagos Islands, which have the highest concentration of sharks, attract numerous Asian fishing vessels seeking shark fins for the Asian market.

This practice, known as shark finning, is conducted daily. Just one fishing ship can haul off a few thousand to nearly ten thousand sharks. Within those unbelievable numbers, fishers may find the critically endangered scalloped hammerhead shark tangled with others inside a fishing net. But mercy release does not occur in shark fin fishing. And so the caught hammerhead sharks end up in a delicacy called "shark fin soup."

Our seemingly harmless daily consumption is destroying the environment and the balance essential for the ecosystem to function, as well as triggering climate change globally.

And consumerism is driving several types of species – such as giant tortoises, sea turtles, Galapagos penguins, marine iguanas, land iguanas, Galapagos sea lions, and blue-footed boobies, as well as endemic species – to extinction.

I came to the painful realization that the Galapagos Islands are not remote, but rather a place that is closely connected to our daily lives.



But at the same time, I was able to witness the fascinating and majestic side of nature. After seeing the amazingly clear blue ocean, swimming with sea lions and fish, watching a pod of dolphins soaring out of the water, and embarking on a voyage accompanied by seabirds, I was mesmerized by this incredible world filled with abundant types of creatures, a vibrant sense of life, and the undeniable will to survive.

While I feel strong resentment towards what humans are doing, I want the environment to be preserved so that these beautiful creatures can continue to live on as long as possible, leaving their fate in nature's hands.

This wish gave me a sense of purpose.

And this purpose has led me to follow certain tiger families at Ranthambhore National Park in India as a wildlife photographer. My experiences in the Galapagos Islands have helped me discover my life's mission, which is to protect wild tigers.



THINGS I LEARNED FROM AN ENCOUNTER WITH A TIGER

The first time I began to think seriously about the need to preserve wild animals and nature and form a concrete image of what I could do, was upon my visit to the Ranthambhore National Park in India.

I saw the wild Royal Bengal Tiger for the first time with my own eyes in 2017. I spotted the tiger through the viewfinder, and its intensity far exceeded my imagination, as I remember my hands trembling with nervousness and my heart pounding. Even though there was plenty of distance between us, when I saw the tiger coming my way through the viewfinder, I couldn't fully grasp the distance. Without even noticing, I put the camera down out of fear.

I've photographed many wild tigers since then. Yet still, the second the tiger appears, I always feel that overwhelming presence that would make anyone feel nervous.

The tiger is the king of the forest. I was completely fascinated by their dignified behavior, the power and strength displayed when chasing prey, the adorable

cat-like gestures and expressions they sometimes show, and the close bond of love between mother and cubs.

My first experience with tigers came when I was going through a difficult period in my life. I was deeply moved by the tiger's earnest and resolute way of life, even in the midst of conditions that make mere survival difficult.

So I am indebted to the tiger's presence, which helped me to overcome a difficult time and move forward. And from that gratitude, I decided to do what I could for the tigers.

This is what led to my interest in the current situation of wild tiger locations and their history up to now, including Ranthambhore National Park. Throughout my journey, I have learned by listening to the stories of the local people. These include those who dedicate their lives to helping protect wild tigers and those who support conservation activities. I was deeply moved by their activities and their deep affection for the tigers. And this encounter has affected how I live.

The encounter with the wild tiger helped make me who I am now and helped establish what I do.



Tigers are at the top of the forest ecosystem.

In the world of nature, no living life form would dare attempt to attack these kings. Therefore, the threat to tigers was once nonexistent. However today, those same mighty beasts are facing extinction. Their habitat is being reduced by deforestation and poaching. *(The Asian black market attracts people who seek bones for Chinese medicine, pelts, and fangs for extravagant luxury goods.)* And so, the tigers are being wiped out—not by natural selection, but by humans.

These actions alone are serious enough to make tigers extinct. But there is also a new issue. In India, where many wild tigers live, the country's population increase fueled by economic growth is creating an overlapping area between human and tiger habitats.

And because of this overlapping habitat, livestock is being hunted by tigers, and in some cases, humans are even mauled. So there is a battle raging between tigers and humans. There seems to be no end to this war for survival.

There is no doubt that these tigers are the national animal of India with a certain degree of protection under Indian law. But at the same time, the tigers are seen by some as vermin that cause harm to human society. In other words, the reality is that they're in a very complicated and fragile position. And so the possibility of a dramatic change – whether good or bad – may happen, depending on decisions made by humans in the future.



A male tiger crossing a lake in an early winter morning. Moving with almost no wake in quiet deep water under dim light. This photo makes us feel as if the wild tiger is in danger of surviving as a species.

Just 100 years ago, an estimated 100,000 wild tigers were walking among this planet. At present, they are down to only about 3000. Approximately 97% have perished from the earth. Among the surviving tigers, 70% of them inhabit about 40 national parks across India.

Ranthambhore National Park, where I frequently visit, is the oldest tiger sanctuary park, designated as such in 1973. The massive park spans approximately 540 square miles *(equivalent to 16 Manhattans!)*. Still, even with this size, there are only roughly 70 tigers.

Why only 70 in such an enormous area? That's because they are territorial animals. A single female tiger requires 8 to 12 square miles. A male needs an astonishing 23 to 39 square miles of vast territory. And even with Ranthambhore's enormous land, the capacity is almost reaching its limit. Even if breeding is successful, ironically, the next threat can be the growing numbers of tigers themselves, hunting down each other for the last bit of space available.

So there is a dilemma within the conservation activity, where the issue is not just about confrontation with humans, but also about tigers themselves being territorial animals.



A mother and a three-month-old cub. The dawn's soft light is highlighting this mother licking her cub's face. It is an immeasurable love only a mother can provide to a child. And with a mother's affection, for a cub to grow naturally, forest preservation is another essential element for survival.



A tiger feasting on a farmer's cattle after a hunt. This indicates how human and wild tiger habitats are close to each other.

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HOW WILDLIFE AND HUMANS CAN COEXIST TOGETHER

Tourism measures that touch upon wildlife

A world where humans and animals can live separately, without crossing each other's paths, and without any human society influence on animals is ideal, but a fairy tale at best. Just as water, air, and land are all connected, we have to find a means of co-existing, not living separately.

The answer to that challenging goal is tourism.^{*1}

*^{*1} The tourism I speak of is only just viewing the wildlife. Of course, this does not include facilities that chain animals and a type of petting zoo where visitors can touch animals that seemingly roam freely but are actually chained and kept by the staff at night.*

This can be a very effective means of finding a way for wildlife and humans to co-exist together.

Of course, the introduction of tourism itself will involve a process that contradicts co-existing. There will be problems that arise from the development process.

However, with a proper system in place and the necessary restrictions, under the assumption that laws will be established for the environment surrounding the animals, I believe that using this method to its fullest extent is the best shortcut for preserving wildlife in modern times.

This is because, in the present age of rapid population growth and struggle for resources, economic development has become the highest priority, which is a fate shared among all the countries of the world.

Today, many humans do not care about what kind of animals there are or precious ecosystems. Humans only care whether the animal or specific place can be profitable. Countless irreplaceable species have already been lost to this business mindset.



However, if tourism and its great economic effects can be established in that location, and the site is visited by tourists all over the world, with animals being positioned as a tourism resource, what would happen? This would bring capital to the region. The locals could find employment as naturalists, guides, drivers, rangers, park administrative staff, and hotel staff. This would result in a certain flow of goods and consumption.

In other words, a mechanism to circulate people, goods, and money will be established.

A positive spiral would be created, where the local area would become enriched and have resources to maintain the necessary environment for plants and animals.

And based on that spiral, systems for managing and monitoring plants and animals would be established. This system could also function as a security measure against vandalism and poaching.

But if the choice is not having tourism with an economic benefit and no staff or profit gain, an opposition against deforestation and other developments will end up becoming quite powerless. And it will be brushed aside with very little resistance by the might of political power and the abundant financial resources of those who want to develop.

In reality, numerous valuable places inhabited by many creatures are being developed at an extremely rapid pace.



A tiger hiding behind bushes. A tension from the tiger is radiating in the air as if to deny all human entry to this tiger sanctuary. The vibe is so strong that it can actually be heard. Saying, "leave our forest alone."

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(Some excellent examples are large-scale palm oil plantation development on Indonesia's Sumatra and Borneo islands and Sarawak in Malaysia, as well as logging for tropical timber, afforestation for paper materials and pulps, and cutting down trees along the Mekong River for natural rubber resources.

Sumatra island has lost 50% of its forest in the past 30 years, and around the Mekong river, the forest has been cut down by 1.4 times the size of Japan's total land area^{*2}. *In these places, animals such as tigers, leopards, elephants, rhinos, orangutans, and others are being threatened with extinction. Incidentally, a sad reality is that our countries are a major customer of these tropical timber, paper materials and natural rubber. Palm oil is also used in most of our daily necessities and food products. There is an ongoing complex situation where our consumption activities are creating demand, which accelerates deforestation. We need to understand what is happening in these places and choose an appropriate and responsible action.)*

Therefore, I believe that establishing a mechanism that allows plants and animals to be positioned as a tourism resource and circulating capital into a certain business will be more important than anything else in preserving wildlife. The sad irony is that wildlife cannot be preserved and protected where there is no tourism.

I am convinced that this tourism will be the way to save wildlife because I have witnessed and reached the same conclusions on two issues: the reason why tigers are being killed and are now facing extinction, and the history of many species in the Galapagos Islands being affected by humans.

(Continue to part 2)

^{*2} Source:

<https://www.wwf.or.jp/activities/basicinfo/42.html>

<https://www.wwf.or.jp/activities/basicinfo/320.html>



A safari tour in India's national parks allows safari visitors to enjoy the real-life of wild tigers while maintaining a safe distance from them.

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PROFILE OF KŌKI YAMADA

Born in 1979. He is a wildlife photographer based in Tokyo. He specializes in Royal Bengal tigers in India.

His true calling as a photographer was relatively recent. He started photography in 2012.

Strongly motivated by a documentary called "BBC Earth," he was mesmerized with nature that was beyond human imagination found here on this very earth, just waiting to be captured through the lens.

With that as a starting point, he felt the significance of actually setting his foot in the most remote places on earth and seeing things for himself with his own eyes. He has traveled to places such as Antarctica, the Arctic, Alaska, India, Africa, and the Galapagos Islands and photographed various animals. Through these excursions, he has been captivated by Royal Bengal tiger families that inhabit the Ranthambhore National Park in India and has been following them for several years.

Through photography, he is trying to show the tough but also fragile aspect of wild animals and their mesmerizing beauty as he sees them.

AWARDS

The 8th Nikkei National Geographic Nature Photographer of the Year (2020).

Bronze Award in the 52nd Canon Photo Contest, Landscape Division (2018).

EXHIBITIONS

"The Fragile Existence of the Royal Bengal Tiger," at the Fujifilm Photo Salon Tokyo (*Tokyo Midtown Roppongi*). Over 10,000 visitors attended in one week.

Since then, he has held exhibitions at Fujifilm Salons in Osaka, Fukuoka, and Nagoya throughout 2019.

ATELIER

In March 2021, his atelier called "Atelier Rantham" opened in Daikanyama, Tokyo.

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