

Conservation Photography

Art, Ethics, and Action

BY CRISTINA MITTERMEIER



Article author Cristina Mittermeier at work in Australia.

Nature photography is one of the most versatile artistic endeavors. It allows practitioners to specialize in myriad particular subjects within the natural world, from numerous different perspectives—from the journalistic documentation of a species or a landscape, to gallery-quality printed pieces of fine art depicting flora or fauna, macro- or microscale, realistic or impressionistic. The possible subjects and areas of specialization are as diverse as nature itself.

However, there is an additional step that can be taken by the nature photographer, one in which the practitioner is not just interested in documenting nature or creating works of art, but in making images that, in fact, protect the subject they depict. This is conservation photography.

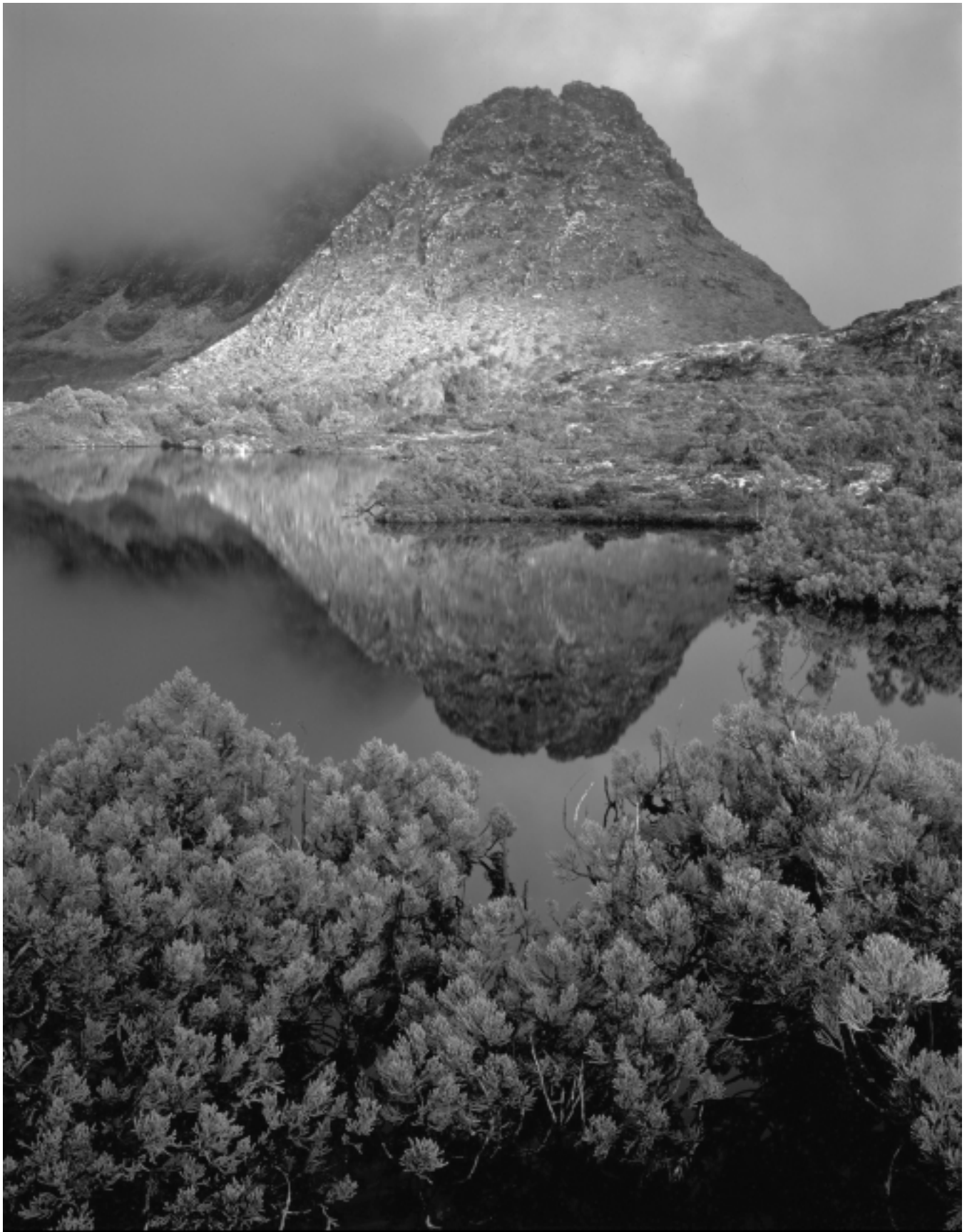
Conservation photography showcases both the vanishing beauty of our planet and its disappearing spirit, and it puts the image “to work.” It is the pictorial voice used by many conservation organizations to further their messages. For many purposes, amateur photos are good enough to do the job, but professional quality is needed to create images that inspire people and empower them to change behaviors and take action. Anyone can purchase the equipment, travel to interesting regions, and learn the secrets of wildlife behavior well enough to capture it on film—or in pixels. The empathy, sense of urgency, and the personal commitment necessary to create awe-inspiring images, and to discover avenues through which those images can help ensure that the wild world persists cannot be purchased. Conservation photography is the result of photographic

talent combined with environmental understanding and conservation commitment.

In recognition of the importance of images for conservation and of the growing numbers of professional photographers who specialize in producing those images, the first-ever Conservation Photography symposium will convene from September 30 to October 6, 2005, in Anchorage, Alaska, during the 8th World Wilderness Congress (WWC). Conservation-minded photographers from all over the world will assemble with scientists, policy makers, government officials, lawyers, writers, indigenous leaders, and others to help craft local and global conservation solutions. The significance of this event is not only that it is the very first time nature photographers have been offered a working seat at an international conservation forum, but it will also allow photographers themselves to decide if creating a new and distinct discipline in the field of nature photography is justified.

Numerous items are on the agenda, including the critical importance of professionally executed images to achieving conservation outcomes; how to harness the market potential of the tens of thousands of amateur nature photographers around the world who are yet not involved in conservation—and need to be; and recommending that conservation organizations legitimize their reliance on images by adding line items to their budgets for the service of image professionals.

With the exception of the most technical, peer-reviewed scientific journals, photographs are a necessary and constant element of conservation communications. Be it to document, illustrate, compare, or inspire, images are an indispensable element of the conservation toolbox. Nevertheless, despite their critical importance in the crafting and delivery of messages, conservation professionals often opt for “homemade” amateur or poorly executed images, based simply on the argument of cost. The advent of easy-to-use digital cameras has exacerbated the situation by giving the impression that taking pictures is a simple undertaking.



Morning light on Little Horn, Cradle Mountain, Lake St. Clair National Park, Tasmania. Photo by Peter Dombrovskis, courtesy of Liz Dombrovskis.



The highland cultures of Papua New Guinea were not discovered by Westerners until the 1930s. Although much has changed since then, some things thankfully remain the same. This playful moment during the annual cultural sing-sing at Mt. Hagen reminds me that children are the same all around the world, even in some of the most remote regions of our planet. Photo by Cristina Mittermeier.

But learning photography is like learning a new language: amateur snapshots are the few words necessary for elemental communication, whereas the images created by gifted professionals, those that inspire and enrich our soul, are the equivalent of poetry.

Of equal concern as the poor use and selection of visual materials for conservation, is the unfair practice of requesting donated images from professionals. Too often, after a project is finished and no usable images are found on the nongovernmental organization's inaugural digital card of its brand-new camera, organizations often resort to the charity

of photographers. Professional photographers justifiably feel that if everyone else has a budget line in conservation proposals, photographers—particularly given the significance of their contribution—should have one as well. Thankfully, there are a few conservation organizations leading the way that already understand the importance of photography and are serious enough to dedicate staff and resources to acquiring images and paying professional photographers. This effort is evident in the high-quality materials they produce and in the achievement of their conservation goals.

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However, it is essential to acknowledge the importance of donating images, time, and talent to small grassroots conservation organizations and other environmental causes that may lack the resources to carry out large, complex projects and for whom it is much harder to find funds to hire the services of professional photographers. This is a matter of civic duty and a personal commitment to help those causes we believe in. Although the donation of images is a great way to begin on the road toward making a living as a photographer, we need to be able to aspire to make a decent living from our craft.

It is clear that much discussion on these matters will be needed at the 8th WWC. We will need to clearly articulate the irreplaceable contribution of images to achieve measurable conservation outcomes, and we will need to become active participants in the conservation process in order to create the images most relevant to the ever-evolving conservation agenda. The symposium's mission is to make the case for the recognition of our craft as an indispensable instrument in the conservation arena, not just in terms of artistic appreciation, but monetary compensation as well.

Conservation Photography in Tasmania

But how does conservation photography differ from nature photography? Although the similarities are many, the most outstanding difference lies in the fact that conservation photography is born out of purpose. From the early achievements of Ansel Adams in capturing the imagination of the American public with his well-crafted images of wild America, to the brilliantly executed images made by National Geographic's "Nick" Nichols during an epic trek across the Congo that has recently led to the

creation of an entirely new protected area system in Gabon, conservation photography has a well-established, yet seldom recognized record.

The significance of conservation photography was evident to me when I first saw the work of Peter Dombrovskis, a Tasmanian photographer who was instrumental in saving the Tasmanian wilderness from massive destruction wrought by proposed dam construction. Working with intuitive commitment and professional talent, his became one of the finest examples of conservation photography.

When I first encountered Dombrovskis's work, most of my own photographic education had been focused on learning the specialized techniques and endless paraphernalia photographers employed. At the time, I was making progress in technique, but I felt my images were lacking an elemental, visceral quality. The discovery of Dombrovskis's images during my first trip to Tasmania gave me a clear vision for my own career, both in terms of craft and—most importantly—in terms of mission. His philosophy was a clarion call for photographers to create technically superior, enduring images, that also demand that the wild world endure. His philosophy is the guiding principle in my photographic career, and the context in which lives the spirit of conservation photography.

I discovered Dombrovskis's genius among the tourist souvenirs of the Hobart (Tasmania) Airport gift shop. His images, like paper jewels, stood out from the surrounding Aussie paraphernalia. The perfect scene of a beautiful morning-lit outcrop in Cradle Mountain National Park was beautiful and technically perfect in and of itself, but it had something else. It contained an invisible sense of the fierce fight that had been waged just a few years before

to save the jagged contours of the wild landscape it depicted. I felt it. That story, as it turned out, was just one chapter in the long history of Tasmania's environmental struggles.

Tasmania, like most European colonies, has seen its share of ecological and ethnological blunders, many of them devastating. Its first irreversible loss came in 1876 with the extermination of the last Tasmanian Aborigine—less than a century after Europeans first arrived. Its next major tragedy came in 1936 with the extinction of its largest endemic mammal, the Tasmanian tiger, which was followed by the careless introduction of hundreds of invasive species that to this day continue to threaten the delicate native flora and fauna of the island. But it was the obliteration of Lake Pedder, a magnificent and ancient glacial lake—centerpiece of a national park, and one of Tasmania's most outstanding natural wonders—that finally spurred public indignation. It has been said that had it not been destroyed, Pedder would occupy today as prominent an iconic place in Australian lore as Ayers Rock and Kakadu.

At the center of the opposition to dam Lake Pedder was Lithuanian-born photographer and conservationist Olegas Truchanas, a man who eventually became a mentor and father figure for Peter Dombrovskis, who was himself a Latvian immigrant. Armed



Frost on Snow Berry (*Gaultheria hispidula*) leaves, Milles Track, June, Mount Wellington, Tasmania. Photo by Peter Dombrovskis, courtesy of Liz Dombrovskis.

with photographs and films of the area, Truchanas took the fight to the government and the people. To raise public awareness, he called public meetings in the Hobart Town Hall and, in his now-famous audiovisual displays, played to capacity audiences breathtaking scenes of what was about to disappear forever. Sadly, despite an impassioned fight, the government succeeded in damming the Huon and Serpentine Rivers, and in doing so they drowned both the cries of the protesters and the exquisite beauty of the wild lake. Devastating as this defeat was, the silver lining came in the birth of a major movement to use photography for conservation.

The fight over waterpower, however, was not over. Despite being less than 1% the size of Australia as a whole, Tasmania possesses half of the country's

Beyond documenting nature as an art form, conservation photography responds to the mission of protecting nature.

hydroelectric potential, much of it from the powerful, free-flowing rivers that surge through the island's rugged western half. And so, soon after the dramatic loss of Lake Pedder, another proposal emerged to dam the Franklin River and thus flood one of the last great wilderness areas in the world. This time, however, the idea was met with a mighty opposition. At the center of the battle was a well-organized protest that took the fight to the court of international opinion, including the 2nd WWC in 1980, with the support of world-class photographs by numerous artists, including Peter Dombrovskis.

When Australian premier Robin Gray declared the wild river "a brown leech-ridden ditch," Dombrovskis—a shy, quiet man—chose to raise his camera instead of raising his voice. Despite the devastating loss of Truchanas, who had died in a kayaking accident, Dombrovskis headed out into the wilderness to illustrate his personal disagreement with the premier. He did not intend to make campaign images, but inevitably his images became the center of a massively successful public movement. He eventually remarked, "In any sort of campaign where you are trying to get people to feel for an area, to make some sort of decision about it, you need powerful images to show people, to give people an idea of what those areas are like."

Like Truchanas before him, Dombrovskis succeeded in capturing the soul of Tasmania in images. He, too, was able to show the people of Tasmania what they were about to

lose. In the end, the modest beauty and tranquility reflected in his images—still published extensively even years after his death—were enough to turn public opinion.

The opposition prevailed, and the federal government compensated Tasmania for the estimated lost revenue of the hydroelectric dam, and then took it one step further by creating the Franklin–Gordon Rivers National Park. This new park became the major piece in a series of contiguous, north-south national parks that cover a major portion of Tasmania's western half.

It became clear to me that the magical quality in Dombrovskis's images came from his passion to convey a profound sense of place for an area he loved, one that was at great risk, rather than only through the flawless technical merits of his work. I also understood that it was this special mission that invested his images with "soul." Peter once said that something of the photographer himself should be evident in every image; something of how the photographer felt should leap from every photo. Otherwise, the photo is just a piece of paper. You can catch glimpses of Dombrovskis in all his photographs: the father, the naturalist, the son, the poet, the gardener, the husband, the conservationist, and, yes, the photographer. "An ethic of the land is needed because remaining wilderness is threatened by commercial exploitation that will destroy its value to future generations," wrote Dombrovskis when his beloved

Tasmanian wilderness came under attack. An ethic of the land is indeed what we need as conservation challenges gather speed. Our images need to inform and galvanize to action, as well as inspire.

When asked, Peter would say about his own work: "I am not a photographer, I am just making a statement." Today other photographers, hikers, adventurers, the people of Tasmania, and those from around the world are able to enjoy the beauty of one of the most pristine Wilderness World Heritage Areas on the planet. Tasmanians also realize the benefits from an expanded and thriving nature tourism industry, and prosper from the many ecosystem services provided by the wildlands that cover most of the island. A fine statement, indeed.

Mission of Protecting Nature

Tasmania provides a clear example of the power of images for achieving conservation outcomes. Can the success of this model be replicated to protect nature and indigenous peoples in other regions? In today's interconnected global society, perhaps the Web should be the equivalent of the Hobart Town Hall, where images can alert people to what is being rapidly lost all over the world.

Beyond documenting nature as an art form, conservation photography responds to the mission of protecting nature. After Dombrovskis's death people remarked that it was not so much that he photographed in protected areas, but that protected areas were created where he photographed.

In conservation photography, the subject is conveyed by aesthetics and defined by conservation priorities. Although limited to specific places and issues, conservation photography's purpose is to elicit concern and

Full-time Pro Photographers: The Ultimate Endangered Species?

BY WENDY SHATTIL AND BOB ROZINSKI

The number of nature photographers has increased exponentially in the past decade, and the trend shows no sign of changing. Many are hobbyists who love taking pictures of the outdoors, or those who do not need to generate a substantial living from selling nature photos. This is a boon to conservation organizations with low or no budgets for photo use, but a detriment to seasoned full-time professional nature photographers whose sole source of income is through the sale of their work.

No one goes into the field of conservation photography to make a fortune, but, if the bills aren't paid, pros can't afford to keep creating images. Longtime pro photographers have the vast knowledge and field experience to document a critical species or location, and to tell a conservation story. Experienced professional photographers have the ability to communicate with all involved, from scientists to administrators, and often have the opportunity to add to the story's exposure through their long-established networks.

The rigors of freelancing make it difficult for the pro to invest the time and money in creating images that are useful to conservation groups but are of little interest to general photo buyers. An image of a rare or endangered

plant may be of great value to a particular biodiversity group, but of no interest to editorial publications. With time and resources, however, a pro is capable of creating a diverse body of work that thoroughly documents that plant and its habitat, and provides an in-depth story that advances the conservation cause through higher visibility in the mainstream media.

Professional photography is a proven catalyst in creating public conservation awareness. In the 1870s the Hayden expeditions to Yellowstone hired William H. Jackson to record images that eventually influenced Congress to create America's first national park. The work of today's professionals is visible in books, magazines, and countless conservation publications, spreading the word through their photographs.

The key to protecting the environment is to motivate those who are in a position to do so. Politicians, private foundations, the general public, and corporations are impacted by great photos by great photographers. Let's make sure that the photographers can continue to do this critically important work!

WENDY SHATTIL and BOB ROZINSKI'S work can be viewed at www.dancingpelican.com. E-mail: wendy@dancingpelican.com.

emotion that can direct human behavior. Photographers also need to shoot the whole scene and not just the select pieces that we, the architects of the image, choose to show the public. We also need to work with editors and publishers to convince them to make available the layout room that may be the single most important factor in eventually saving an area or a species. In fact, conservation photography needs to have a dual strategy: on the one hand, showing the world the beauty and inspiration found in wild

places and, on the other, the raw, uncompromising reality of their destruction.

As conservation challenges increase, the need is growing for images that touch people's hearts and change their minds. Photographers of great conviction have already blazed a trail for us, and it is our job to do the same for the legions of new photographers who must become an indispensable part of the conservation movement. **IJW**

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