

Connecting People and Wildness through Images  
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## **Connecting People and Wildness through Images**

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*“There’s no business to be conducted on a broken planet.”* David Brower

On 26 December 2004, the Moken people of Southeast Asia fled to high ground and escaped the tsunami that devastated much of the area. How did they know what was coming when so many others did not? Known as sea gypsies, the Moken have subsisted off the coasts of Thailand and Myanmar for countless generations. Of all the peoples of the world, they are among those least affected by modern civilization. It’s likely they didn’t know that disaster was on its way due to the magnitude and epicenter of the earthquake that triggered the tsunami, and the effects the seafloor topography would have on the powerful wave. What they did know was what their ancestors had passed down to them: when the sea recedes fast, it will come back fast and flood the earth.

The Moken read the sea’s warning signs because they are in tune with the natural world that sustains them. This cannot be said of much of the world’s people today. Whether it’s an industrialized nation’s automobile culture spewing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, or a South Pacific village dynamiting its coral reefs for fish, much of humanity has lost its connection to the natural world. When people lose touch with what sustains them, they act in ways that contribute to their own demise. But when people understand and value their relationship to their environment, they tend to behave in ways beneficial to themselves and the planet.

How can we as conservation photographers help people worldwide understand the connection between wildness and their own well being? First, let's look at why this connection is important, and then we'll tackle the challenges of how to accomplish it.

### **Healthy Planet = Healthy People**

Conservation photographers document healthy ecosystems and their importance to the planet, and also the effects of their destruction. We understand the complexities of forests, coral reefs, polar ice caps and more, and to see their unraveling is painful, particularly when much of the degradation is caused by man. But we know that if humans would change their destructive behavior, the planet's remaining life-sustaining ecosystems could stay intact, and perhaps we could restore those that have been damaged. Why else do we persist but to convince people to change? After all, the only species viewing our images is *Homo sapiens*.

In striving to protect wildness through conservation photography, we must strive to connect people to its importance. Our task may seem monumental because what we're doing, in effect, is changing a culture by convincing people to change their behavior. But deep inside all of us, embedded in our ancestral DNA, lies the connection to wildness. Our goal is to reawaken what is already there. And our images are a powerful tool to help accomplish this.

The beauty of our craft is that we can transcend culture, education and language. Powerful visual images need little explanation. The difficulty lies in how to create images that will have the intended impact.

### **Beauty and the Beast**

Not so long ago, it was enough to show beautiful images of wild places to decision-makers, which helped lead to the creation of protected parks, biospheres, and wilderness areas. The stunning photographs of Ansel Adams