The protection of biodiversity is now the biggest issue on Earth – much bigger than global warming. We are currently witnessing the sixth major extinction event in the history of our planet, and the greatest since the dinosaurs disappeared, 65 million years ago. The co-producer of a new television documentary that takes cameras deep inside critical conservation areas around the world spoke exclusively to 2magazine while on a brief stopover in Bangkok.

**THE RACE AGAINST EXTINCTION**

“The microcosm of life on Earth for millions of years has been taking up the pen of Shakespeare and the brush of Picasso – these are just the iconic retrospections of our species celebrating life”

Dr Michael Tobias

**JUST AS HUMANITY** comes to grips with global warming, the world’s leading biologists now warn that a larger evolutionary event looms on the horizon – an unprecedented mass extinction already underway that threatens to exterminate up to 60 percent of all life forms on Earth before the end of this century.

But, says award-winning writer/director/ecologist and president of the Dancing Star Foundation, Dr Michael Tobias, we have the power to completely transform this world into a better place. He and his wife, Jane Gray Morrison, are the producing team behind the sobering but optimistic two-hour television documentary *HOTSPOTS* that will be premiering in the US this month.

The couple, who have been married for 20 years, recently also launched the coffee table book *SANCTUARY: Global Oases of Innocence*, an urgent reminder that extinction of life on Earth has accelerated up to 10,000 times its normal, natural rate, putting our modern consumer culture in a league with...
super-volcanic eruptions and catastrophic asteroid impacts earlier in Earth’s history.

Pictured on its pages — over 800 photographs taken in 20 countries — are species whose numbers are so low that every last individual is known by name. From microbes to mammals, the academically-acclaimed conservationist couple re-examines humanity’s role in the natural order of life on Earth, and our responsibility as a sentient species to consciously care for creation in ways that integrate best science, public policy, spiritual values and sustainable economics.

From wildlife habitats set aside to save rare species on the brink of extinction to urban shelters set up to rescue abused farm animals, SANCTUARY is an epic photographic journey to many of the world’s most exquisite sanctuaries, complete with in-depth science-based case studies that inspire a sense of awe at both nature’s beauty and the damage we have already done to her. But far from a tome of doom and gloom, SANCTUARY celebrates living examples of one of humanity’s highest values.

“Living in a state of reverence for nature is fundamental to the crises we are currently witnessing and echoing in every sector of life. The direct link between the protection of biodiversity and ourselves is our hearts, more than our minds. And this is where Buddhism and Asian spirituality has led the way for thousands of years. It is not science, but the heart which is echoing in every sector of life.”

Dr Tobias says vegetarianism is a good place to start. “It’s the last frontier for us as a human race, the beginning of a new age for non-violent behaviour. Vegetarianism is environmentalism to the core.”

GRAND PERSPECTIVE

An unlikely sanctuary to be included in a book about ecological sites is Thailand’s Grand Palace and Wat Phra Kaew, Dr Tobias admits. “What Jane and I focused on is that it has the longest mural in the world, a celebration of nature and Buddhist convictions which is at its core about non-violence. But it is also the world’s largest gathering of mammals, with nearly 8 million people visiting it every year. That’s more than all the leopard seals in Antarctica,” he says. “That’s incredible.”

He also speaks highly of conservation efforts in Thailand, praising the national park system. “Thailand’s Biodiversity Plan is superb. Since the kauprey (an ancient breed of wildcat) went extinct in the ’30s, there’s been a wake-up call signalled in this country, and it has stepped up its efforts on government level to put a state of reverence for nature and Buddhist convictions which is at its core about non-violence. But it is also the world’s largest gathering of mammals, with nearly 8 million people visiting it every year. That’s more than all the leopard seals in Antarctica,” he says. “That’s incredible.”

He stepped over in Bangkok on his way back home following a trip to Bhutan, where an exhibition of their photographs opened at the end of October, and where he is also chief advisor to a Biodiversity Action Plan under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. He was in Bhutan to facilitate a project to plant ten million hazelnut trees to stabilize fast-eroding slopes, and that will also provide additional supplemental income. “Bhutan is brilliant,” he says. “It is the most innocent and the purest country on earth, truly setting an amazing example in environmentalism to the core.”

A former opera singer and now executive vice president of Dancing Star Foundation, she is possibly best known for the ten-hour documentary Wake of the Planet, produced a few years ago for Turner Broadcasting, and which involved filming for nearly two years in 25 countries. The series was a veritable encyclopedia. Her tragic is her unconditional love; she feels everything, she sees and hears everything. It was her idea not to put captions for the photographs in the book, so that people looking through the book can also feel it — making it an impressionistic palette.

PRIME EXAMPLE

In the foreword of SANCTUARY, Her Majesty Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, Queen of His Majesty the Fourth King of Bhutan writes: “With over 114,000 protected areas on earth, human endeavours to protect sacred places have spawned an environmental and spiritual renaissance. SANCTUARY profiles dedicated examples of that remarkable collective passion and suggests that our need to revere and celebrate nature may be a key to our own survival as a species.”
the home videos," he laughs. On a more serious note, SANCTUARY highlights the fact that – of the 372 known species of mammals in Thailand – at least 37 are in danger of extinction. Rapid development in the country has long been viewed as one of the great international biodiversity emergencies, given that some 8,700 fauna species are thought to exist in the country (though no more than 18,073 have yet been described, including a spectacular 392 birds, 3,702 reptiles, 3,176 amphibians, 720 freshwater fish and 2,100 estuarine and marine fish). As of 1987, no large wild mammal has survived outside a national park.

SETTING THE SCENE

The HOTSPOTS documentary opens against the backdrop of some of the few things still standing on Easter Island, the Moai, megalithic man-made monuments that cast dramatic shadows over the now near-barren landscape of this once island paradise – an isolated place pushed to the point of total ecosystem collapse by early human activity. The action begins at Conservation International’s satellite-imaging facility in Washington DC, before heading to the film’s first hotspot, Madagascar.

Located off the East Coast of Africa, numerous local and international conservation initiatives are working to save this island laboratory. Madagascar is an isolated evolutionary experiment underway for 140 million years that has produced a prolific population of globally unique plants and animals, 80 percent of which are found nowhere else on Earth. The film chronicles a rare primate called the Indri, the world’s largest living lemur, and the Blue-Eyed Black Lemur, marking the first time this critically endangered species has ever been filmed. Explorer and conservationist Dr Russell Mittermeier, president of Conservation International, serves as the documentary’s narrator and guide. He is the preeminent authority on Madagascar’s unique fauna, and has named 982 birds, 350 reptiles, 1,376 amphibians, 98,700 freshwater fish and 2,100 estuarine and marine fish. But of the 372 species of mammals in Thailand – at least 37 are in danger of extinction. Rapid development in the country has long been viewed as one of the great international biodiversity emergencies, given that some 8,700 fauna species are thought to exist in the country (though no more than 18,073 have yet been described, including a spectacular 392 birds, 3,702 reptiles, 3,176 amphibians, 720 freshwater fish and 2,100 estuarine and marine fish). As of 1987, no large wild mammal has survived outside a national park.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

With our time (and space) running out, it’s time for Dr Tobias to sum up. “We’ve come to realize that every square inch of soil contains up to hundreds of thousands of micro-organisms,” he says. “The microcosm of life on Earth for millions of years has brought alive the poetic imagery of Shakespeare and the brush of Pissarro – these are just the iconic retrospectives of our species celebrating life.”

“Research in the States has shown that kids can name brands by the thousands, but living organisms only by the dozens. We’ve got to build environmental stewardship in children. Our planet is in deep trouble, and ecological literacy is scary. But at the same time we have a lot of critical work to do in this generation – we can’t leave it to our kids. There’s just so much to do,” he says. No wonder this remarkable man copes with only two to three hours sleep per night.

Dancing Star Foundation (www.dancingstarfoundation.org) is a nonprofit organization devoted to global biodiversity conservation, animal protection, and environmental education. The foundation is also involved in active ecological restoration efforts, field research, filmmaking, publishing, lectures and symposiums. The goal of the foundation is to help sensitize people throughout the world to the critical importance of biodiversity, animal protection and conservation – and to instill a respect for all life, which can be demonstrated by even the most modest gestures of kindness, compassion and love in our everyday lives.

Harsh Realities

According to the Global Biodiversity Assessment, species extinction since the year 1600 has occurred at 50 to 100 times the average estimated natural rate. This is expected to rise to 1,000 times the natural rate, with more than 30,000 species already threatened with extinction. The wave of extinction and ecosystem destruction is an irreversible tragedy.

The Living Planet Index (LPI) is an indicator of the state of global biological diversity. Between 1970 and 2003, the index fell by about 30 percent. The main reasons for species extinction are pollution, farming, urban expansion, over-fishing and hunting. Meanwhile, during the same period from 1950 to 2000, the world’s population doubled.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is the first global agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, established by UNEP at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992. Its objective is to develop national strategies for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. It recognized – for the first time – that the conservation of biological diversity is a common concern of mankind. Parties of the treaty include 191 countries. Non-party countries are Andorra, Iraq, Somalia and the USA (the United States has signed, but not ratified the treaty).