

# THE RACE AGAINST EXTINCTION

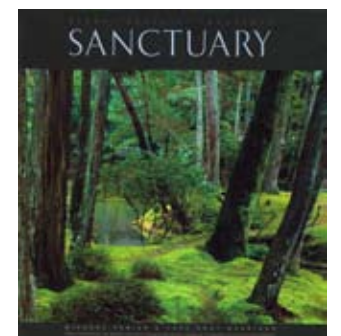


“The microcosm of life on Earth for millions of years has been taking up the pen of Shakespeare and the brush of Picasso – these are just the iconic retrospections of our species celebrating life”

Dr Michael Tobias

Mitre Peak in Milford Sound, New Zealand

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.



**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 callings to transform modern societies based on extraction and exploitation into a unified global culture of economic and ecological restoration.

"The time to act is now. Never have the stakes been so high, so much biodiversity at risk. World leaders, community organizations, scientists, NGOs, philanthropic organizations, individuals, students, volunteers... everybody needs to address this crisis as the most pressing challenge any generation has ever faced. We can, we must change the paradigm to save what is left," Dr Tobias says.

## A QUEST FOR TRUTH

Impressing him most about Bangkok's Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel & Towers at the Riverside was the latest newcomer to the family of peacocks living in the lush hotel gardens along the banks of the Chao Phraya River. Arriving for the interview with a small backpack filled with fruit he nicked



Dr Michael Tobias



Her Majesty Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, Queen of His Majesty the Fourth King of Bhutan

from the breakfast buffet (for the peacocks, naturally), camera in hand, he starts roaming the gardens to find and proudly show off the little chick – as if he personally sat on the egg for days on end until it hatched. Here's an extraordinary man, I instantly realize, whose actions speak of the same passion visible in his eyes – an unconditional love for all living creatures, big and small.

Born and raised in San Francisco, Dr Tobias vividly recalls a visit to a local zoo with his father. "I was three years old, and it was a foggy Sunday morning. I saw a wolf in a cage pacing back and forth in desperation, and wanted to know from my dad why the wolf was in jail. My dad couldn't answer, and I've been searching for the answer ever since." It is this quest that led to his lifetime dedication. As the author of 37 books and writer/director/producer of over 100 films pertaining to environmental, cultural, social or scientific issues, he has been called 'the Carl Sagan of the humanities'.

His research has taken him to 80 countries, he has received a Courage of Conscience Award for his commitment to animals – amongst many other awards and accolades – and his films have helped shape public policy in numerous instances, from green space land reform and clean-up protocols to hydrogen as an alternative clean energy source. His wife Jane's accomplishments are equally impressive.

## VOICE OF THE PLANET

A former opera singer and now executive vice president of Dancing Star Foundation, she is possibly best known for the ten-hour docudrama *Voice 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 biography of the earth, starring William Shatner and Faye Dunaway, and detailed



Jane Gray Morrison

such themes as water, chemical and oil pollution, animal cruelty, deforestation, the population explosion, the history of imagination in the wilderness, alternative energy and ecological anthropology."

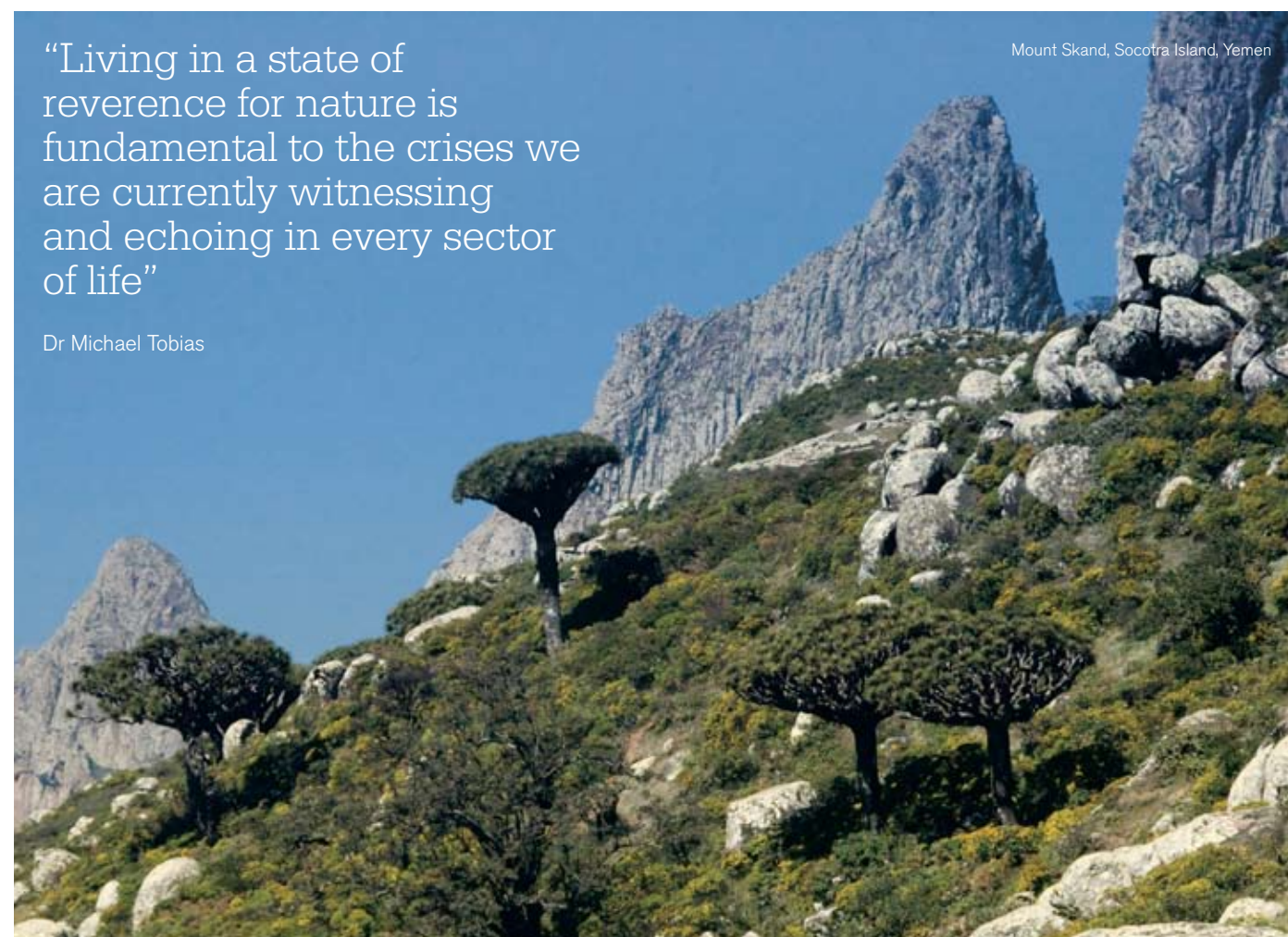
Jane is an amazing woman," Dr Tobias says of his wife, partner and soulmate. "I'm married to a genius – she's like an encyclopaedia. Her tragedy is her unconditional love; she feels everything, she sees and hears everything. It was her idea not to put captions for the photographs in the book, so that people looking through the book can also 'feel' it – making it an impressionistic palette."

## PRIME EXAMPLE

He stopped over in Bangkok on his way back home after 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. "More than 60 percent of prime forest remains – by constitution and by Buddhist governance. It is the most innocent and the purest country on earth, truly setting an amazing example in terms of environmental sustainability. There's no crime, no greed, no ego... I have never seen such happiness – even in the eyes of stray dogs. Bhutan rates as one of the greatest conservation success stories in the world."

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Dr Michael Tobias



Mount Skand, Socotra Island, Yemen

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."

## REVERENCE FOR NATURE

Dr Tobias shares these sentiments. "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 clearest."

"We need to stop collaborating in killing. We need to say no to those who tell us it's okay to go to a grocery store and buy a fancy-packaged steak. We need to say no to those who are killing billions of creatures – and we can do it in the privacy of our homes, without having to go out there protesting, brandishing placards. The best way to do it is with our vote, with our wallet, and with our personal intentions and actions."

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 80 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 livestock) 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 against wildlife poaching, while a tremendous amount of reforestation has taken place. Thailand has become one of many models in Southeast Asia." Dr Tobias adds that he was very impressed a couple of years back when a wedding ceremony took place between two cows and more than 2,000 people turned up. "I went through a lot of trouble to track down



Taksang Monastery, Bhutan



**Top:** Cheetah, Harnas Wildlife Sanctuary, Namibia  
**Far Left:** Grey Crowned Cranes, Al Areen Sanctuary, Bahrain  
**Left:** Two Burros in the Socotra Highlands, Yemen  
**Bottom:** Cinnabar Tree, Yemen

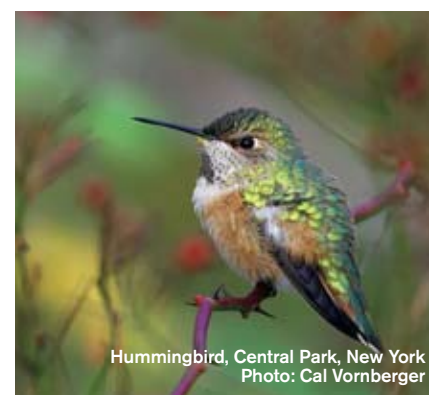
the home video," he laughs.  
 On a more serious note, *SANCTUARY* highlights the fact that – of the 302 known species of mammals in Thailand – at least 37 are in danger of extinction. Rapid development in the country has long been viewed as one of the great international biodiversity emergencies, given that some 87,000 faunal species are thought to exist in the country (though no more than 18,073 have yet been described, including a spectacular 982 birds, 350 reptiles, 1,376 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 Moia, 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



Dr Russell Mittermeier, Central Suriname Nature Reserve



Hummingbird, Central Park, New York  
 Photo: Cal Vornberger

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 safe this living island laboratory. Madagascar is an isolated evolutionary experiment underway for 160 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 optimistic field guide. Supported by 20 years of compelling science and critical data, *HOTSPOTS* goes to introduce viewers to many of the world's lesser-known species far and wide, and the conservationists committed to bringing them back from the brink of extinction. These are places that if lost will result in the extinction of half of the plants and vertebrates alive today.

**CLOSING THOUGHTS**

With our time (and space) running out, it's time for Dr Tobias to sum up. "I'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 been taking up the pen of Shakespeare and the brush of Picasso – these are just the iconic retrospections 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 illiteracy 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. **2**

*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 31,000 species already threatened with extinction. The wave of extinction and ecosystem destruction is an irreversible tragedy."

**(Klaus Toepfer, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director, UNEP)**

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 1960 to 2000, the world's population doubled.

**(World Wildlife Fund)**

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is the first global agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, established by UNCED 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 humankind. 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).