

Reconnecting to nature

Five years after their first *Sacred Nature* book, Jonathan and Angela Scott have a renewed energy to use their photography to inspire change. **Keith Wilson** finds out about the couple's quest and new book

Not by choice, the Covid-19 pandemic has given people across the world unexpected moments of reflection to contemplate their lives and re-evaluate priorities. Weeks of imposed lockdowns, quarantine and self-isolation have forced many of us to seek out green space and parkland to exercise the body and refresh the mind. As a result, we have taken greater notice of our natural surroundings, and reconsidered the value of the flora and fauna, woodland and water that we had blithely taken for granted. 'If there's a silver lining to come out of the pandemic,' says wildlife photographer and TV presenter

Jonathan Scott, 'it is that people are being reminded of the vital importance of nature to their lives. Nature creates us. We can't survive without nature. We used to be connected to nature in a way that made us feel that it was not just essential, but something to glorify.'

For Jonathan and his wife Angie, nature is sacred, but in over 40 years of photographing the world's wild animals and places, with a primary focus on the vast savannahs of East Africa's Mara-Serengeti ecosystem, the Scotts have witnessed humanity defile the nature they have sought to glorify through their images. With 40 per cent of the world's wildlife wiped out in the past 50 years, the Scotts know that time is running



out. To help save what's left, they believe their photography must do more than glorify, it needs to provoke. And so, their Sacred Nature Initiative was born.

A global view

Key to this project is the forthcoming publication of their new book, *Sacred Nature Volume 2: Reconnecting People To Our Planet*. Coming five years after publication of *Sacred Nature 1: Life's Eternal Dance*, the new book adopts a more global view than the first volume, which focused almost entirely on the Mara-Serengeti. 'There were a few images from Namibia,' Jonathan explains, 'but we basically looked at the wonder of the Mara-Serengeti to say, 'look at what is going to disappear if we don't think it's of value'. We basically

looked at how life was from a place and a time when humanity was so connected to nature, and we cherished it. Hence, sacred.'

Over time that connection has been lost, Jonathan argues, so the key objective of the Sacred Nature Initiative has been spelt out on the cover of the new 288-page volume: 'reconnecting people to our planet'. He explains: '*Sacred Nature 2* has taken the ethos of *Sacred Nature 1*, that is to take an ecosystem-landscape approach by covering the whole globe. Angie said, "Let's break it up into savannahs, mountains, forests, deserts, polar regions, and let's look at the beauty and wonder of each of those areas, and then point out the importance of them and the reasons for concern." The climate crisis is one thing, but it's hand in hand with our other big

Above: Elephants at salt lick, Musiara Marsh, Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya

Left: Young female tiger hunting, Bandhavgarh National Park, Madhya Pradesh, India

impact, which is there's one million species at risk, and we're in the Anthropocene, and in just 50 years over 40 per cent of life on Earth is gone. And we will be next.'

Images that connect

As you would expect from the Scotts, the new book is packed with images that are brazenly spectacular, such as Angie's perfectly timed shot of an airborne sprinting cheetah. But there are many others that require greater attention to the scene, inducing an almost meditative response from the viewer. It is these photographs, notably Angie's symmetrically framed study of a tiger stepping into the water while hunting, or Jonathan's pensive portrait of a silverback mountain gorilla sitting by a stream in a rainforest, that succeed in connecting the viewer to

the subject's vulnerability. In the case of Jonathan's photo of Handsome (the name given by rangers to this placid mountain gorilla contemplating his jungle home), death is never far away.

'Handsome was a part of the group led by another silverback, Rafiki,' he says. 'Rafiki was killed, stabbed, in June 2020. Now Handsome has since disappeared.' The photograph was taken on a visit to Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, one of the last strongholds of the world's mountain gorillas. Barely a thousand survive in the wild, so the loss of one to human conflict is significant for the whole group. 'If we're going to do well by these creatures, if we're going to really love them, then we have to ensure that they remain wild, and the only way to do that is to protect the habitat.'

▶ Aptly, it was the setting rather than the animal itself that provided the inspiration for this photograph. Jonathan had crossed this stream several times when he realised its potential. ‘I think this is the key to good photography – you’re always visualising the picture that you hope you’ll get. Every time we went into the forest and crossed that stream, there was light, the very thing you hope for and want as a photographer, and of course there was the water itself and this wonderful setting. You enter a rainforest, you don’t just step into it, you immerse yourself in it. It’s like a cathedral, it’s the most incredible piece of architecture.’

Great iconic cats

Like the first book, *Sacred Nature 2* is a large, heavyweight hardback, beautifully designed by their son, US-based creative director David John Scott, whose clients include Netflix, Sony, Apple and Google. Through their previous books, exhibitions and TV programmes, especially the globally popular TV series, *Big Cat Diary*, Jonathan and Angela are synonymous with African wildlife. But it is not a lion, leopard or cheetah that takes star billing on the cover of *Sacred Nature 2*; instead, India’s regal predator, the Bengal tiger, stares menacingly out from the cover.

‘It’s a picture taken by Angie. I remember when she brought it up on screen and instantly I thought, “that’s it!” It works because one, it’s the most endangered of the big cats, and two, it took us out of Africa which we very

much wanted to do with this book. Straightaway, we wanted to transport people out of Africa, and we wanted to have a picture of an animal which is iconic, which is a universal symbol of how enthralled we are with nature and in particular with these great iconic cats. Also, the patterns mean it works so well as a black & white.’

There are many other powerful black & white images in the book, and remarkably no photograph jars as a result of the change from colour to black & white, or vice versa. Such seamless image sequencing is a mark of first-class visual story-telling and editing.

Unsurprisingly, books such as this are expensive to create. The first volume was privately funded; this time the Scotts supplemented donations from a network of individuals and companies, including Canon (one of the backers of the first book), with a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign that raised in excess of \$130,000. Some of the money was used to establish the Sacred Nature website, ‘so we could really be a force for good and actually create projects and put money towards them,’ says Jonathan. ‘I think the reason why the Kickstarter was so successful was because we’ve worked hard to build our social media presence, and the reason we have that level of interest is because of our television work. After the success of 12 years of *Big Cat Diary*, and to create with Abraham Joffe two seasons of *Big Cat Tales* recently for television, and to have other television projects now in the pipeline, these all resonate

How does the Sacred Nature Initiative work?

‘SNI is a new entity incorporated in the UK and dedicated to conserving the planet’s natural wonders. Its approach is holistic and targeted, committed to rigorously analysing needs and feasible interventions in areas of concern. To achieve this, it will assess likely outcomes and create or support donor-funded projects with designated results, time frames and accountabilities. Solutions in ecosystem restoration and maintenance must be sustainable and significant.

‘It is essential that everyone – children, parents, teachers, business leaders, politicians – understands the importance of nature, that the natural environment sustains all life. Equally, we must adopt a new convention that says we do not own nature, that land isn’t a commodity to be used as we please. Nature is something to be respected and nurtured, held in trust by each generation for the benefit of future generations. Something sacred.

‘Though the SNI is global in its scope and ideals, Phase 1 will focus on the place we know best: the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem spanning the border between Kenya and Tanzania. By purchasing the book, you have already supported SNI because a percentage of the profits from the sale will be donated to projects supported by the Initiative.’

To learn more about SNI and how you can reconnect to nature please visit: www.sacrednatureinitiative.com.



Above: Silverback, Nkuringo mountain gorilla family, Uganda’s Bwindi Impenetrable National Park
Below: Young black-tipped reef shark, Velassaru, Maldives

with the message of the Sacred Nature Initiative.’

Pictures with purpose

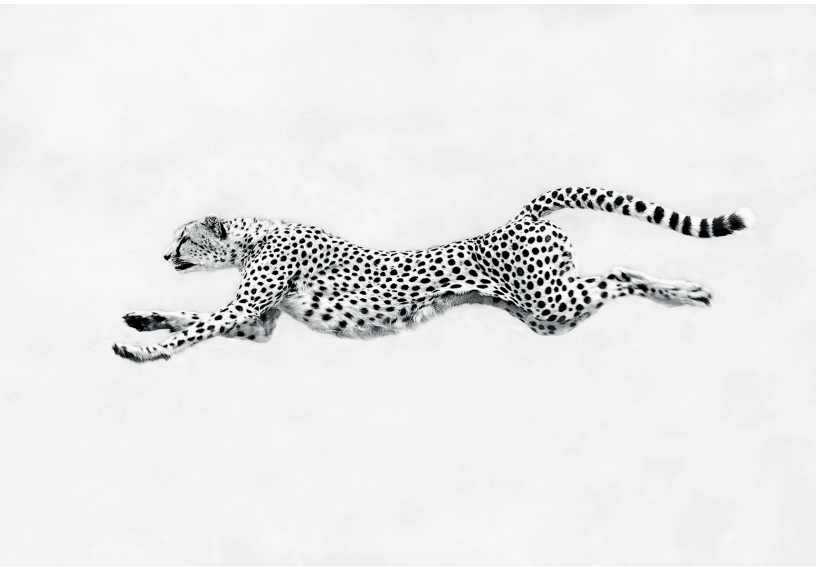
The idea of taking the message of the first book, published in 2016, and expanding it into a global multiplatform conservation initiative, was taken three years later.

By then, the couple felt a renewed urgency about the need to use their photography as a means to inform the public about the value of nature and to inspire the changes needed to conserve what remains. ‘We want to be out with a purpose and a mission,’ says Jonathan, ‘and to use our photography, our voice –

whether it’s in lectures, social media or on television, we want to use it for the good of the planet and join everybody else who’s beginning to realise that we can’t take it for granted any more.’

The Scotts have identified ‘three pillars’ to define the ethos and objectives of the Initiative. Jonathan

Below: Female cheetah, Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya



Home of the mountain gorilla

While hiking in the mountainous jungle terrain of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda, Jonathan saw the picture potential of this jungle setting. ‘From the moment we saw the location, we began thinking, “imagine this with a gorilla!”’ Luckily, the opportunity arose on another visit when he saw the gorilla heading down to the water’s edge. Having already imagined the scene, and camera ready, he composed the picture at the wide end of a 24-105mm zoom. ‘I wanted to capture the sense of this extraordinary piece of forest and to have a silverback sitting there, and to feel that he was just in his world and you weren’t unduly affecting his behaviour. It’s so important if you’re a photographer to capture a sense of where the animal lives. What is it’s natural setting? What would the world look like from that animal’s perspective in terms of its home? This silverback was perfectly relaxed and he was at home.’

explains: ‘The three pillars are to inspire, which we hope we do through our work; to educate, because so many kids now are disconnected from nature. They used to run around and had the freedom to have adventures in nature, but parents are too scared, or the kids are too much into a virtual world where they’re frightened of losing battery power or not being plugged into their device!’

Yes, I think to myself, the question on everyone’s lips these days seems to be, ‘what is the Wi-Fi password?’

Jonathan continues: ‘What you don’t know about, you can’t care about. How can you care if you don’t know? This is an alert, a way to wake people up, but wake them up in a way in which we can say there are still things of wonder out there.

And the third pillar? ‘Conserve. Inspire, educate and conserve. Nature creates us. You won’t conserve it if you don’t know about it and you’re not feeling good about it. The photographer Yann-Arthus Bertrand said, “Look, it’s not the planet that needs saving, it’s humanity”.’

