

Paying the price

The list of Wildlife Photographer of the Year winners includes many illustrious names, but few have followed a path as arduous as **Brent Stirton's** to get there, as **Keith Wilson** discovers

On the evening of 17 October 2017, Brent Stirton sat on the edge of his seat at the Natural History Museum, London, as he awaited the museum director Sir Michael Dixon's announcement of the grand title winner of the 53rd Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition (developed and produced by the NHM). Earlier that evening Brent had been on stage to accept his prize for the Wildlife Photojournalist Award: Story category. As a category winner he

was now in contention for the grand prize. But the straight-talking South African had been in this situation on three previous occasions so why should this evening's outcome prove any different? Indeed, just a few days before the ceremony, the organisers weren't even sure if he would turn up.

As everyone now knows, when Sir Michael read out his name, Brent walked up to the stage, shaking his head in disbelief, and hundreds of people rose to their feet to applaud the photographer who has become



Conservation rangers from an anti-poaching unit work with locals to evacuate the bodies of four mountain gorillas killed in mysterious circumstances in Virunga National Park, Eastern Congo, 2007

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Anita and Sonia Singh explore the beginning of sight after undergoing eye surgery in West Bengal, India

synonymous with depicting the worst aspects of mankind's treatment of wild animals. Much has been said about his winning image, *Memorial to a Species* (see page 29), depicting a dehorned black rhino killed by poachers. But few knew how much he had been affected personally by the horrors witnessed over the years. That night on stage Brent revealed: 'My first child is going to be born in February; I'm 48. And I think I left it such a long time because I kind of lost faith in a lot of the work we see as photojournalists. You lose faith in humanity to some extent.'

Breakthrough moment

Brent's faith in humanity was tested on many occasions before he made his name as a leading wildlife photojournalist. Growing up in Apartheid-era South Africa, it was impossible not to be affected by the

country's deadly political troubles. 'South Africa was going through tremendous turmoil at that time,' he recalls. 'I went from wanting to become a doctor to wanting to be a journalist because I thought our communication with each other within the country was so poor at that time that I didn't think we understood each other as a nation.'

Brent's initial forays into journalism in the late 1980s saw him work as a freelance, writing for Reuters and local press, covering factional violence between the African National Congress (ANC) and other black liberation groups. It wasn't until he was encouraged to supply pictures as well as words that he decided to try his hand at photography. 'I couldn't find a photographer to work with so I bought a second-hand camera and spent the next year teaching myself how to use it.' His first published

photo story featured kangaroo courts in Kwazulu Natal, where people would be judged by the local community and then, as he matter-of-factly puts it, 'either killed or released based on what was happening in the politics at the time.'

I ask Brent if he now sees those first published pictures as a breakthrough moment – a turning point in his career. His response reveals that, like many of his celebrated peers, photography has become far more than a career. 'Was it a breakthrough moment? Once I found it, it's been my life, you know. Without a hesitation, I've had a great deal of focus on that, detrimental to other aspects of my life, but definitely from the moment I found photography that's been it; that's been my focus.'

Of course, his focus in recent years has been Africa's beleaguered

Memorial to a Species. A black rhino bull is seen dead, poached for its horns less than 24hrs earlier at Hluhluwe Umfolozi Game Reserve, South Africa



© BRENT STIRTON/WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR

wildlife, particularly the elephants and rhinos systematically butchered at unsustainable rates by well-organised gangs of poachers. Brent has also turned his camera to documenting South Africa's controversial canned-hunting industry that breeds and raises



A slum child plays on a bamboo bridge over flood water outside a hastily erected shelter in Bangladesh

lions in captivity with the sole objective of producing high-priced targets for wealthy trophy hunters. Each of these stories requires a circumspect and delicate approach – such is the danger posed by a possible confrontation with well-armed poachers or the volatile temper of a canned-hunting operator. So how does he keep his head down or hidden when he is in the field?

‘I try to be as honest as I can be,’ he replies. ‘There are times when I am in disguise, or I will literally dress up as someone who is not a photographer or make a very clear attempt not to be a journalist, but that’s when I’m dealing with people who are clearly breaking the law. They are criminals you know, and you can’t go in there as a journalist. But 99% of the time I’m just trying

to have a discussion where I go. [I say to them:] ‘Look, you have a perspective; you have your own point of view. Let me represent that point of view because I’m not here to take one picture. I’m here to create an essay and that essay should be something that provokes discussion and allows people to arrive at their own conclusion, so let me represent your point of view.’ I believe in that. That’s where we’re supposed to be as journalists as well. It’s supposed to be an objective profession.’

Working on assignment

As well as being one of the 21st century’s most awarded photojournalists, Brent is also one of the most prolific. Every year he travels to 15 countries or more and spends around 9 or 10 months in

the field, usually on assignment for *National Geographic* or Getty Images. To be this efficient, he has honed his technique by using flash outdoors for many of his pictures, thereby guaranteeing a consistent light source, whatever the weather. He explains: ‘The thing is I get asked to do a story that takes in

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six to seven countries in the space of five weeks. That happens. That’s the modern reality of a lot of *National Geographic* stories, so you really don’t have time to wait for perfect light. You just do not have that time.’

But this doesn’t mean his photography is solely a record of what he sees. Flash, he explains, enables him to ‘make celebrities’ of some of the people he meets. ‘A lot of the people I photograph are remarkable people, and I want to photograph them in such a way that is above and beyond just a normal snap. I like to think I have evolved (the lighting) to a point where it contributes to a documentary narrative.’

Assessing the future

Ironically, the narrative of many of Brent’s most successful images is bleak and bloody. While he stresses the need as a journalist to maintain objectivity, I wonder if he does not feel anger towards those he believes are responsible for every poached rhino he photographs? ‘When it

comes to rhino, what you’re really talking about is the commercialization of wildlife. You know, there’s a certain statement we’re making as a civilization by going down that route. Is this really where we want to be? I mean, why is it that we permanently take one step back towards the cave than one step away from it? That’s how I see humankind a great deal of the time. It’s amazing that we don’t see the value in trying to coexist with the environment and with nature.’

Listening to the force of these words, I feel compelled to ask him the obvious question: how does Brent Stirton see the future? He doesn’t hold back: ‘We’re idiots! We’re idiots! I think the truth is that mankind is not far from the cave, and we have consistently ignored what is right in front of us. We’ve not learned from history and unfortunately nature and the environment are right at the forefront of paying the price for that. What fools we are.’

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Camera choices

A long-time Canon user, Brent’s winning image in Wildlife Photographer of the Year was taken with an EOS-1D X and 28mm f/2.8 wideangle lens. Apart from the flash lights, the rest of his kit is kept to a minimum. More recently he has used an EOS 5D Mark IV and 5DS R, with 24-70mm f/2.8 on one body and a 35mm f/1.4 on the other. ‘That is basically it,’ he says. ‘I would shoot 99% of my pictures with those two. I’m trying to veer towards the 35mm stuff more and more. [In] a lot of the scenes we need to shoot something a bit wider, but 28mm to 35mm is where I live.’ On occasions Brent will also use a Canon EOS M5 because, as he says, ‘It just looks like a tourist’s camera but it gives me a professional file.’ An ideal choice for the photographer who wants to work quickly and discreetly.



Brent Stirton is a senior correspondent for Getty Images and Verbatim, and shoots mainly for National Geographic. His awards include nine from the World Press Photo, ten from the Pictures of the Year International competition and four Wildlife Photojournalist of the Year awards. Born and raised in South Africa, Brent now resides in California, USA. Last year’s Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition attracted almost 50,000 entries. An exhibition of 100 images from the competition is on display at the Natural History Museum in London until 28 May. Visit www.nhm.ac.uk.

despair and frustration from someone who has all but given up on his fellow man, but with fatherhood around the corner and the biggest prize in wildlife photography to his name, Brent’s sense of purpose is far from waning. In accepting the award, he acknowledged the help it would give to raising awareness of the story across the globe. ‘For me to win this, for the jury to acknowledge this kind of picture, it’s illustrative that we are living in a different time now. I am grateful that the jury would choose this image because it gives this issue another platform. The great thing with this competition is [that] it just means your work gets another life. It gets seen by that many more people [and] the issue gets a certain longevity.’

Whether or not the future holds more awards and prizes, Brent’s photojournalism will always demand our attention if we want to better understand the human predicament and our impact on the planet. By honouring Brent Stirton, the Natural History Museum – organisers of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition – have taken one important step forward.

AP

A villager who objects to oil prospecting and drilling poses in an undisclosed location as part of the Draw the Line campaign



A local man showers underneath a waterfall in the rainforest near his village in the mountains of Papua New Guinea. Traditional ways of life are under threat