



Confiscated rhino  
horn (© Britta  
Jaschinski)

# PHOTOGRAPHERS AGAINST WILDLIFE CRIME

As the ground-breaking photographic collection is reprinted with a special Chinese-language edition, *Geographical's* resident photography expert, **Keith Wilson**, recounts how a group of 32 award-winning photographers has launched a movement to fight wildlife crime using cameras, social media and a unique book



Chained tiger,  
Phuket Zoo  
(© Aaron Gekoski)



**F**or over 30 years, my journalism has focused almost entirely on photography, but I am not a professional photographer. I have launched and edited photo magazines, lectured to photography students and judged international photo competitions.

As an editor and writer, I track down photographers by phone, email, text, even on foot, to speak to them, win their trust and conduct in-depth interviews for magazines and websites. Sometimes, we collaborate upon something bigger, working together to bring to life a major photography project, exhibition or book.

Since the summer of 2017, I have worked with the wildlife documentary photographer, Britta Jaschinski, on a project called *Photographers Against Wildlife Crime*, which uses photography to raise global awareness about the illegal wildlife trade. Unknown to most people, the trade in wild animal parts such as elephant ivory, rhino horn, pangolin scales, bear bile, shark fin and tiger bone is estimated by the UN to be worth upwards of \$23bn a year, making it the world's fourth largest organised crime. Only the trafficking of drugs, firearms and people is worth more to the criminal gangs and cartels cashing in on a deadly trade where the profits are enormous and law enforcement is weak.

#### A FRACTURED EXISTENCE

My first meeting with Britta in September 2015 was a chance encounter. The venue was a major London art gallery for the opening of a photo exhibition in aid of a big cat charity. She was one of many other UK-based wildlife photographers in attendance, each with a print for sale for the fund-raising campaign. In Britta's case, it was her award-winning black and white print, *Out of the Ashes*, featuring a cheetah walking briskly over the singed earth soon after a scrub fire. Britta looked around the gallery and expressed shock that wild animal pelts adorned some of the gallery furnishings, including a zebra skin rug that we both inadvertently found ourselves standing on as the speeches commenced.

The irony was not lost on us that a fund-raising event for an endangered big cat was taking place in a room decorated with products of the global wildlife trade. Not caring who was watching, she stepped back and took a picture of my boots on the black and white striped pelt. An unusual introduction perhaps, but it was entirely appropriate to the character and mindset of a photographer 'devoted to documenting the fractured existence of wildlife, which suffers in the names of entertainment, status, greed and superstition.' Britta's photos are far from conventional. As she says, they are troubling, unsettling and unashamedly hard-hitting.

After our meeting, I was determined to interview her and we agreed to meet again a couple of months later at a nature photo festival in France where she was screening a short multimedia show of her images called *Made in China*. Running on a loop throughout the day, it comprised a series of shocking black and white images exposing the plight of 'bile bears', many of which are held for years in crush cages, their stomachs tapped daily with a catheter to remove the bile for use in traditional Chinese medicine. It is a horrific practice and one not just confined to China; bile bear farms also exist in Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and South Korea.



Rangers carry a mountain gorilla killed by poachers in Virunga National Park, DRC  
(© Brent Stirton)

#### MULTI-BILLION DOLLAR CRIME

Made in China also showed Britta's undercover work from one of China's notorious tiger farms, where thousands of the endangered big cats are bred and caged for life. These tigers are eventually starved to death and their bodies harvested for profit: skins for wealthy buyers, various body parts for traditional medicine and whole skeletons steeped in large vats of alcohol for bottling as tiger bone wine, an expensive tipple often drunk in business and party circles as a celebratory toast.

Although barely 4,000 tigers remain in the wild, their plight has gained extensive global attention thanks to the dedicated work of photographers and journalists such as Steve Winter and Sharon Guynup, who have spent years trekking through Asia's jungles trying to find and photograph these endangered big cats. And yet, images of the estimated 7,000 tigers that exist behind



Carved helmeted hornbill casques  
(© Tim Laman)

Unknown to most, the trade in wild animal parts is estimated to be worth \$23bn a year, making it the world's fourth largest organised crime



Shark fins bound for  
the restaurant trade  
(© Paul Hilton)



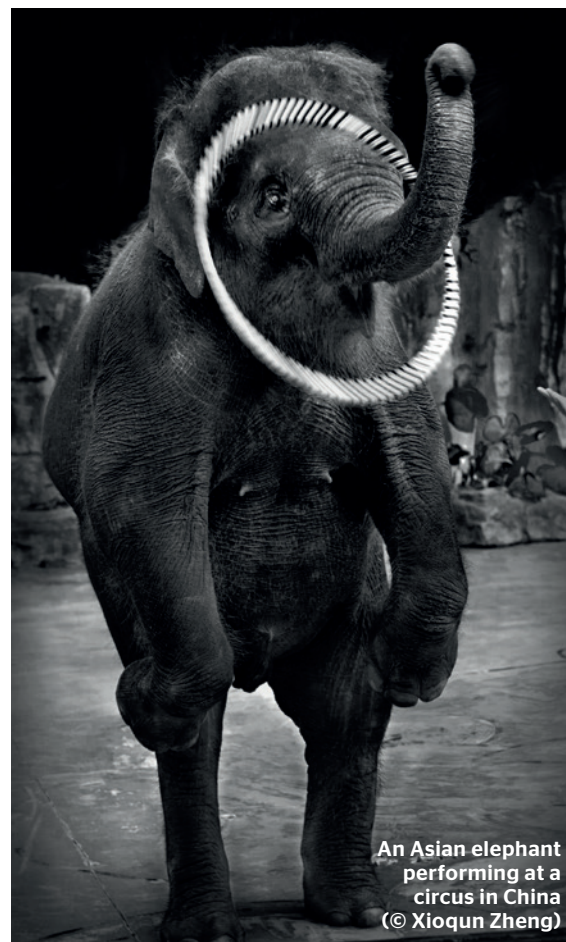
A long-tailed macaque  
dressed as a clown for  
street shows in Indonesia  
(© Joan de la Malla)

bars in China, raised purely for human consumption, were even scarcer. The world at large knew little of this story. Yes, it would be controversial, but surely nothing could be more hard-hitting than a book about this trade featuring Britta's stark and dramatic photos?

Back in London we met and talked – many times. She emphasised that the wildlife trade was so much bigger than tiger farms and bile bears in crush cages. Her proposal was that we combine our talents to publish a book about the illegal wildlife trade, featuring the award-winning work of the many other photographers who are covering this subject, usually through their own initiatives. More importantly, she stressed that the book shouldn't be an end in itself, but represent the start of a global movement using powerful photography, social media and global publicity to help bring an end to the illegal wildlife trade in our lifetimes.

Of particular concern to us was China; as the world's largest market for wildlife products, getting this message and the work of these photographers to the Chinese consumer was our ultimate objective. Together, we would choose the stories and photos to create a unique book that would expose the reality of this multi-billion-dollar crime. And so, the concept for *Photographers Against Wildlife Crime* was born.

Britta built a website, I started a Facebook page and then we launched an online crowd-funding campaign to raise the necessary finance for producing the book. But even before taking those steps, we had to get the photographers on board. As first recruits, Britta believed it important to gain the support of two of the most prominent photographers working in this area,



An Asian elephant  
performing at a  
circus in China  
(© Xioqun Zheng)



A bile bear crush cage  
(© Britta Jaschinski)

former Wildlife Photographer of the Year winners Brent Stirton and Michael 'Nick' Nichols. Not only did they agree almost immediately to have their images included, but they also shot their own promotional videos.

Another experienced photojournalist who agreed was Paul Hilton, who shot much of the undercover footage for the documentary film *Racing Extinction*. Paul has spent over 20 years based in Southeast Asia documenting the region's worst wildlife crime excesses from shark finning and the trafficking of pangolins to the destruction of Indonesia's rainforests and subsequent

killing of orang-utans. Paul stressed that only by getting as many like-minded photographers working together could we possibly begin to make a difference in China. He knew what it was like to work alone for so long, often unheard. 'Sometimes I do feel like walking away and not documenting these wildlife atrocities,' he admitted, 'but at the same time it's so important for the world to see, and often it's just me with a camera. It's an important job, but it comes with a price.'

## HORROR AND HEROES

For any photographer's work to gain public attention, mainstream media coverage is vital. The book's launch was announced on the *Guardian's* website in October 2017, with an extensive gallery of 20 images. It proved pivotal to the success of the launch as there was immediate pick-up from other online and print media outlets around the world. The subsequent sharing of links to our website and crowd-funding pages saw a steady stream of pre-publication orders and our funding target was reached nearly twice over. From that moment printing the book was no longer a dream.

Even though this was an English-only book, we received orders from more than 50 countries, including China. In early April 2018, we travelled to Italy to see the presses roll: 184 pages, with 100 photographs by 24 of the world's most committed wildlife photojournalists documenting the deadly reality of animal abuse, poaching and trafficking. The book also included poignant studies of the heroes on the ground who rescue and rehabilitate the survivors of this deadly trade. Depicting this contrast of horror and heroism



was an important element of the overall content and the ease with which the photographers switched between the two also provided further evidence of their exceptional abilities.

These are no ordinary individuals: each has extensive experience of recording the harsh and upsetting realities of wildlife crime. Karl Ammann has been documenting the hunting of Africa's great apes for more than 30 years; Stirton and Nichols are renowned for their coverage of the systematic slaughter behind the trade in rhino horn and elephant ivory; others, such as Adam Oswell, have established their own NGOs, in his case a Southeast Asia-based conservancy that monitors wildlife conservation issues and provides enforcement assistance to counter illegal trade.

Interestingly, Brent Stirton may be best known for winning wildlife photography's ultimate prize in 2017 with a stark, flash-lit image of a dead rhino butchered



Asiatic bear cub  
confiscated in  
Thailand  
(© Adam Oswell)

for its horn, but he is also the author of one of the most heart-warming and sensitive photos in the book: a young volunteer from the NGO, Care for Wild Africa, wraps her body around an orphaned and wounded rhino calf like a mother would comfort her child. This image is an unabashed tear jerker, yet it captures a moment of positivity that backed up his statement of hope from our publicity video: 'It's still solvable. The amazing thing with the environment is that it is the greatest unifier on the planet. Whatever happens to the planet affects us all.'

#### ENGLISH INTO CHINESE

The English edition was officially launched in May 2018 with an accompanying exhibition at the Leica Gallery in London. Since then, exhibitions and speaking engagements have followed in Switzerland, Germany, France, Spain, Norway, South Africa and the Netherlands. The book sold out within a year, which meant we could keep our promise to produce the

bilingual edition for the Chinese market.

This new book is far more than a translation of English into Chinese. We have added 64 pages and 41 new photos with contributions by nine more photographers. Among the new stories are Tim Laman's expose of the trade in helmeted hornbills for 'red ivory' and Aaron Gekoski's searing images of animal abuse in Southeast Asia's zoos and wildlife parks. There are new stories of hope too, including Marie-Claire Greve's account of elephant translocations in Africa and Roy Mangersnes' uplifting tales of Chinese conservation efforts to preserve a newly discovered species of gibbon and the only valley in China where three species of hornbill can be found.

As I write this, the first copies of this unique 248-page bilingual book are being boxed for delivery. It is an exciting moment and, as with the first English-only edition, orders are coming in from all over the world. Most importantly, orders have been received from China and other Asian countries where concern and disapproval about the wildlife trade is growing daily, especially from the younger generations.

Of course, there is more to informing the public and raising awareness than through copy sales alone. Since the beginning of this year, some of the images and stories from our book have been used in a social media campaign in Hong Kong to educate the public and inform justice and legal professions about the city's role as the world's largest transit hub for the illegal wildlife trade. Seizures of wildlife contraband, especially ivory, rhino horn and pangolin scales, have increased significantly this year and local campaigners are seeking tougher penalties and powers of enforcement for Hong Kong's police and administrators.

We have also launched a Weibo social media account in China to post images and stories from the book and Britta has used her connections to introduce the participating photographers to journalists, media, NGOs and other photographers to mainland China. To use an analogy, the book is like a key that is opening the door to dialogue about a major global crime to an audience thousands of times larger than our print run. The early signs are that China is listening: Britta has been invited to China in November to speak to an independent media platform called YiXi Talks, which translates as 'Get Inspired' and is China's equivalent of TED Talks.

China may be the primary destination for much of the illegal wildlife trade, but singling out China will not solve this crisis. The fact is that we are all culpable. The UK, Europe, Australia and North America are also massive consumers of illegal wildlife products – how else do 1.3 million contraband items end up in a warehouse in Colorado, confiscated at borders and airports by the US Fish and Wildlife Service? Britta has the pictures to prove it, some of which are in the book. She even has a photo of a rhino horn confiscated by customs officers at London's Heathrow airport.

It is only fitting therefore that the photographer who convinced me to join her upon this movement over two years ago, should have the last word: 'How can it be that a small part of the body – a piece of horn – has more value than the living animal itself? Our images are the proof that photography matters. Without photography, the world's conscience will wither.' ●



An orphaned black rhino  
comforted after treatment for  
injuries sustained after her  
mother was killed by poachers  
(© Brent Stirton)



The view inside a vault of  
confiscated ivory, Zimbabwe  
(© Adrian Steirn)



• *Photographers Against Wildlife Crime (special English and Chinese edition) will be published in September 2019. Price £50. Order online at [geog.gr/pawc-ec](http://geog.gr/pawc-ec).*