

Joel Sartore

Best known for his work with *National Geographic*, Joel Sartore is devoting the rest of his life to Photo Ark, a project that involves photographing more than 7,000 threatened wildlife species, kept in the world's zoos. It is, he says, his attempt to get people to look these animals in the eye – and save them

Interview by Keith Wilson

Did you always want to be a nature photographer?

The thought of making my living as a nature photographer never really occurred to me, but I always liked nature, thanks to my parents. My father took me hunting and fishing often during my childhood, and my mother loved birds and flowers. Their enthusiasm was infectious.

Where is your favourite location to photograph wildlife?

I loved working in Antarctica and South Georgia because the animals are not afraid of humans. It makes picture taking relatively easy. Getting there is the hard part, of course.

Which animal has been the most challenging subject to photograph in the wild?

Grey wolves. They're smart, fast and nervous around people. Given our penchant for killing them, I can't say I blame the wolves a bit.

What are the biggest changes you have seen in your profession as a photographer and how have they changed what you do?

The virtual collapse of paid assignments and stock photo usage in the editorial market. Every photographer I know now has to do many other things besides photography to make a living these days. I make more of my living speaking these days than shooting.

What has been the single biggest improvement digital has made to the way your work?

It's made flash photography easier in that we can see instantly whether or not we're ruining our photos with flash or making them better. Of course, nobody has a clue how we're supposed to store those pictures long term, but for now that's how it is.



A black and rufous elephant shrew photographed at Omaha Zoo, Nebraska. Found only in the coastal forests of Tanzania and Kenya, this little shrew is listed as vulnerable by the IUCN

Nikon D3 with Nikkor 105mm f/2.8, ISO 200, 1/250sec at f/16

“I’m heartened to see that more people know what’s wrong and what to do about it. I’m disheartened to see that we’re on our way to eight billion people on the planet”

What exactly are you trying to achieve with Photo Ark?

To get people to look these creatures in the eye and get people to care, while there’s still time to save many of them. If the public doesn’t wake up and realize there’s more to our existence than sports and the price at the pump, it’ll be game over, so to speak. We must have a healthy planet to survive ourselves.

It’s an ambitious undertaking, will Photo Ark be a life-long pursuit for you?

Absolutely, until I can’t shoot any more.

So, how can the public help, and how can they benefit?

By visiting www.photoark.com and telling all their friends about it, then donating to help keep it going. Funding is always an issue when you’re talking about photographing animals around the globe.

Why did you choose to photograph animals in studio conditions?

Black and white backgrounds and studio lighting give every species the same weight and consistency. A mouse counts as much as a tiger in this series. It’s a great equalizer.

Gladys, a six-week-old western lowland gorilla photographed at Cincinnati Zoo, Ohio. In 2012, scientists fully decoded the DNA of a western lowland gorilla and discovered that humans and gorillas differ in just 1.75% of their DNA. The species is listed as critically endangered by the IUCN

Nikon D4 with Nikkor 28-300mm f/3.5-5.6 zoom at 48mm, ISO 250, 1/250sec at f/18

Feature

A clouded leopard at the Houston Zoo, Texas. Also referred to as the "modern-day sabre tooth", a sub species of this big cat, the Formosan clouded leopard, was declared extinct in 2013

Nikon D3 with Nikkor 105mm f/2.8, ISO 320, 1/200sec at f/9

"Black and white backgrounds and studio lighting give every species the same weight and consistency"





Some must be more difficult and others. Can you describe a typical shoot for me, if that's possible?

We set up lights, and backgrounds and shoot anything and everything that the zoo staff thinks will be able to tolerate the process. You can see a pair of videos that show the process exactly here:

<http://photoark.com/portfolio/behind-the-scenes-small/>

<http://photoark.com/portfolio/behind-the-scenes-large/>

Do you have a favourite image from the Photo Ark series?

Yes...it's always the next one. That's because I consider all animals equal in terms of being amazing, graceful and impressive. I'm always looking forward to the next shoot, and being privileged enough to add each and every one into the Ark.

Which critically endangered species would you least like to see become extinct in the next 10 years?

I'd hate so see anything go extinct. Not one more extinction is acceptable to me. Not one.

An endangered loggerhead sea turtle photographed at Riverbanks Zoo, South Carolina. In the wild it will spend its whole life in the open sea and can swim the entire width of the world's oceans

"I'd hate to see anything go extinct. Not one more extinction is acceptable to me. Not one"



An endangered baby Malayan tapir photographed at Minnesota Zoo. Less than 2000 Malayan tapirs survive in the wild
Nikon D4, Nikkor 28-300mm f/3.5-5.6 at 70mm, ISO 250, 1/250sec at f/13

Have you become more optimistic or pessimistic over the years about the conservation of our planet?

Well, I'm heartened to see that more people now than ever know what's wrong and what to do about it. I'm disheartened to see that we're on our way to eight billion people on the planet. The consumption of resources will only increase from here on out, yet it's just not a priority. Even when we see the direct consequences of it, like climate change, we still do very little to change it. This will be our undoing.

If you could go anywhere in the world to photograph any wildlife species, where would you choose and what would it be?

The Javan rhino. It's down to very few animals now, and needs some attention.

Among your peers, who is the photographer you most admire and what is it about their work or persona that inspires you?

Favorite artist was John James Audubon, who was a superb naturalist and drew natural history the way I'd like to try and shoot.

One photographer that I really admired Richard Avedon. He reinvented himself several times throughout his career, and worked right up until the moment he died. He also took the time to correspond with me when I was starting out in the business, and I'll forever be grateful for that.

I also like David Burnett's work tremendously because he's always pushing the envelope in terms of seeing well, plus he's one of the good guys working in the business today. He's who I want to be when I grow up!

And in the areas of conservation?

In terms of the conservation photographers whose work I admire, there are many. To name a few in no particular order: Steve Winter, Vince Musi, Tim Laman, Christian Ziegler, Paul Nicklen, Nick Nichols, Frans Lanting, Chris Johns, Stefano Unterthiner, Jim Brandenburg, Michael Forsberg, Tom Mangelsen, Brian Skerry, David Doubilet, David Liittschwager, and the list goes on and on...



A pygmy slow loris photographed at Omaha Zoo, Nebraska. Greatest threats are deforestation and live capture for the pet trade
Nikon D3 with Nikkor 24-70mm f/2.8 zoom at 56mm, ISO 200, 1/250sec at f/16

Editor's note

This interview took place in October 2013. *Wild Planet* has been running one of Joel's Photo Ark images in every issue since our launch nearly two years ago. I wanted to hold back from publishing this interview until I felt there was a suitable time. In June, the publication of a scientific report led by Stanford University announced that the sixth mass extinction on Earth had begun. What could be a more suitable time than now? In the two years since this interview took place the Formosan clouded leopard has been declared extinct and earlier this year it was confirmed the Sumatran rhino had disappeared from Sabah, one of its last 'strongholds' in the wild. Not long from now, all we will have of some species will be Joel's photographs.

With a surviving wild population of less than 50, the orange-bellied parrot is one of the world's rarest birds. Joel photographed this specimen at Australia's Healesville Wildlife Sanctuary, centre of a captive breeding programme to save the bird from extinction

Nikon D3 with Nikkor 105mm f/2.8, ISO 200, 1/250sec at f/20



Joel Sartore is a veteran of more than 30 assignments for *National Geographic* and the founder of Photo Ark, a conservation initiative based around his striking images of thousands of species taken in the world's zoos. So far, he has photographed more than 4000 species, many of which are threatened with extinction. Joel is also a much sought after public speaker and teacher.

www.joelsartore.com
www.photoark.com

