VIEW FROM THE TOP

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CEO INDIA

JOURNEYS
of Abstraction

TROY: MYTH
& Reality

SENSING
The Dark

Changing the Lens and Language of Giving

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My Experiences From The Wild

THE CONVERGENCE OF NATURAL HISTORY PHOTOGRAPHY & CONSERVATION...

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS: DEBASHISH DUTTA

The forests were lush. The sky was almost grey with a few streaks of light breaking through. It was actually an odd time to be in Corbett's backyard. It was August 2007. Having entered the national park through Jhirna; I had an encounter that passionate photographers keep dreaming about. Back in the day; I had the same DNA – that of a passionate lover of wildlife and wilderness though I wasn't much of a photographer and in hand was a very humble and borrowed Sony point and shoot – no super telephoto, no fancy DSLR! Unlike today's meticulously planned trips armed with top of the line equipment; that day I was onboard a Gypsy with a bunch of strangers and just ambling along. I was stoked to be in the forests that I grew up reading about. It was almost as if my eyes were searching for Corbett lurking somewhere in the bushes tracking a cunning man-eater. Not Corbett but we finally came across a Tiger as he emerged from the thicket on our right and settled down like a lazy bum. That I was thrilled to bits would be an understatement! Here I was finally seeing Mr. Magnificent in real. We were in an open patch of the jungle. Given the time of the year there was no other safari vehicle around. What a rarity! I took a few snaps of the big cat and kept watching him in complete awe. My co-passengers were typical city dwellers and were mumbling seriously funny facts and figures about big cats. Perhaps 30 odd minutes had elapsed when suddenly the Tiger's attention was drawn to something worrying enough to make him emit growls that became louder and fiercer in the next 10 minutes. Our driver told us to keep quiet and avoid movement. He was essentially trying to figure out the cause of the sudden change in the Tiger's demeanor while being pretty still himself. I was sitting right behind him. Perhaps 2 more minutes had passed when the driver whispered to me to look at his right rear view mirror. And it became mighty clear why the Tiger – now in his haunches – was hissing with anger! Sauntering down – right from the middle of the forest fire line – a lone Bull Elephant with menacing looking tusks was heading straight down. Unmistakable was the fact that we were the filling of the sandwich that was taking shape rather quickly. The driver suddenly said," Sir...ye

hamari gaadi aur hamko tod ne aa raha hai" (meaning the Elephant is coming to smash us and our vehicle). Without hardly a pause after uttering those ominous words; he suddenly revved the engine and took an almost 90 degrees turn to the left and sped without stopping for almost 5 minutes. I was disconcerted and my co-passengers were almost yelling post that sudden rush through the undulating terrain of the jungle. Offering us a bottle of water; our experienced driver calmly told us that he was responsible for our safety and any delay in decision making could have potentially proved fatal. Phew!!

The desire to capture stunning natural history moments goes beyond obsession fueled as it is by a combination of passion and adrenaline. No doubt it is this passionate pursuit which has enabled serious Natural History Photographers to capture moments of awe in unsullied wilderness. In the process, I have also learnt that even the biggest cat has no malice and is only driven by natural instincts. That is why instances of attacks by big cats or large mammals in the jungle are rare and even those rare instances have resulted because someone crossed the circle of fear and made the animal feel threatened. The unparalleled beauty of nature is present in jungles in its sheer pristine form. Every time I am in the jungle; I am reminded of all the stuff that I would have read about how humans are indulging in wanton, deliberate, selfish acts of deforestation in the name of development and enhancing shareholder value. And my heart sinks with the fear of losing these gardens of Eden which have provided human beings with peace, serenity and the finest of natural resources. As I look out at the endless expanse of the beautiful blue sky through the wide windows of my office; I am often reminded of NASA's photos of our planet – so gorgeous from up above and so green once upon a time – but those images evaporate the moment I hit the ground floor to step out. Masses of concrete, noise pollution, air pollution, an ocean of humans jostling on the roads make me wonder – which shareholder's value have we enhanced? What are we leaving behind for our little ones? Come along with me to Jim Corbett National Park where I still drink water from the as yet untainted waters of the mountain streams. The guardians of these water bodies – jungles – are being steadfastly destroyed by misguided humans. Where will I go when the jungles are gone – for spending weeks tracking remarkable jungle dwellers, losing myself to the art of photography in delightful surroundings? At some point in time only photographs will be reminders of the natural wealth we had a long time after we are gone.

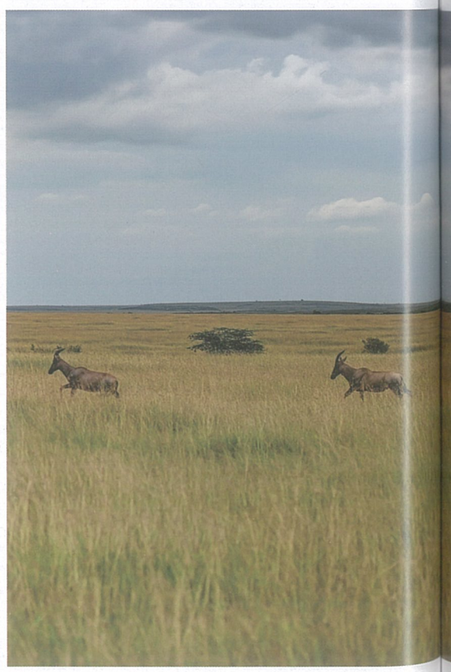
A pleasing photograph of a forest instantly puts me in a trance. But take away the wildlife and the soul would be gone! Gently driving through forests especially during sunrise and sunset gives me a sense of the vastness of God's kingdom. Those tall trees with the sunlight sieving through and resonating with beautiful songs of innocent little birds to be suddenly disturbed by the alarm calls of Chital - where else can I find joy this boundless? No wonder wilderness has such an intense hold on people who have had the good fortune of connecting with abstraction that is beyond human comprehension! And so I rush to the woodlands to become one with my soul for that which dwells in the city is only my body.

The truth also is that I go to the woods to bring back memories and stories for those that were never able to find their way to the wilderness. These are people whom I am able to influence positively by showing my photographs to them. A beautiful photograph says a beautiful story and invokes hitherto latent feelings. Humans are designed to love nature but the perspectives of a large majority have been blocked by concrete and have been misled to believe that they are proud inhabitants of a modern city. As I get into conversations about my photos; I sense a palpable realization amongst people that we might have destroyed the best that our planet had to offer beyond repair. The winter sunset of the wonderful wetlands of Bharatpur tells a story and so does the incredible experience of watching a Royal Bengal Tiger sunning itself amongst the historical ruins of Ranthambhore. The heart skips a beat as the eyes try to gaze as far and wide as they can in the expanse of the indescribable Masai Mara while one cannot stop marveling at the "White"

Elephants of Etosha National Park! Can anyone comprehend nature's abilities of design and sense of aesthetics and proportion? Rather, as a Natural History Photographer; I focus on celebrating nature's abilities. It's a difficult art – one that can never be perfected. It's a perennial thirst – the more you drink; the more the thirst increases. And therefore, a committed photographer becomes a nomad for he / she is forever moving in search of the next glorious landscape and the next magnificent animal.

As an art; Natural History Photography is extremely personal and it exemplifies what I as a Photographer like. My photographs reflect what my eyes found beautiful and exciting. As a science Natural History Photography is complex. The right combination of the art and science produces a photo that succeeds in presenting a compelling story. For me to succeed in influencing people positively about the urgent need to conserve wilderness and wildlife; I am duty bound to produce photos that say compelling stories. And this makes my work in the wilderness a very serious business. Therefore, understanding the subject, the landscape, the topography, the angles, the perspectives, animal behavior and the asks of serious wildlife photography is so important. Then comes the science of photography within the context of wildlife photography because shooting wildlife has completely different requirements vis-à-vis shooting humans. Imagine shooting a sprinting Cheetah across the grasslands of the glorious Selous Game Reserve in southern Tanzania. There is not a fraction of a second to be wasted. The Cheetah sprints only when it is sure that the target has been locked for good. Sprinting dramatically increases body temperature and exhausts the body's oxygen and glucose reserves, so a cheetah needs to rest after a chase. That means that if the photographer is not well prepared; he / she will have to wait a whole lot longer to get the next opportunity. Being patient in heat and dust is a prerequisite for a good wildlife photographer.

What does it take to be well prepared? If I am out to shoot a sprinting Cheetah – there are some fundamental requirements. For this subject; I will go prepared with a fast and high quality wide angle lens loaded on a full frame DSLR with high fps (frames per second). To get high fps; power your DSLR with a battery grip. Wide angle because a telephoto is a converging lens that might take you closer to the subject but in this case proximity to the subject is not as important as proximity to the entire landscape where the Cheetah is sprinting like there is no tomorrow. Your safari vehicle should have a clear unobstructed view of the action and should be aligned with the angle of light in a manner that enables you to see your subject in light. Stretch yourself comfortably on your safari vehicle whose rear seats should be removed and replaced with a thick mattress. Place your equipment on a thick pillow or bean bag positioned on the window frame. Your eye should be glued to the eye-piece and finger should be on the shutter. You should always shoot in manual exposure mode or shutter priority for capturing an over the top exhilarating event like this. If you are shooting manual; please ensure that you have the shutter set at least at 1/4000. Adjust the Aperture basis light conditions and guidance provided by your DSLR light meter. Activate all the focus points that your DSLR has, move them to focus on the right areas and set auto-focus on the continuous mode. Don't forget to load a fast data card on your DSLR. The Cheetah bolts out like a bullet and just like a bullet the duration of the sprint is short. With this sort of preparation; chances are high that you will end up with a great result. Of course your personal skills and level of comfort with the equipment will play an important role. Such is my life when I am in the wilderness but won't be once the Cheetah and its playground is lost. Will you join me in spreading the good word? Conservation of wilderness and wildlife is no more an option but an absolute necessity.



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