NICK BRANDT: FROM ARTIST TO CONSERVATIONIST

INTERVIEW BY CONOR RISCH

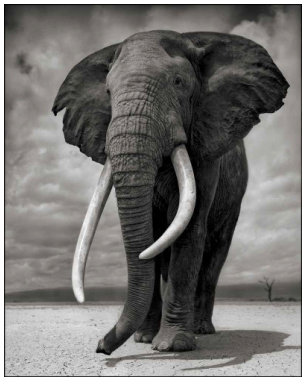
In the introduction to his new book, Across the Ravaged Land, which he calls an "elegy" to the "extraordinary natural world of East Africa, and the wild creatures" that inhabit it, fine-art photographer Nick Brandt tells the story of a gentle-buthuge male elephant named Igor. The elephant once allowed Brandt within a couple of feet to make a portrait, he tells his readers. That trust, Brandt says, may have contributed to Igor's death at the hands of ivory poachers. They hacked out Igor's tusks, just a couple of years after Brandt's encounter with him.

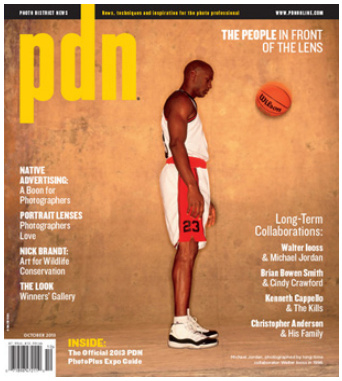
The chilling turnabout stands as metaphor for the changes in East Africa since 2009, when Brandt published *A Shadow Falls*, his second book of photographs made in the region (he released his first book of images from East Africa in 2005 and has photographed there since 2000). Animal populations are now being decimated at an alarming rate by poachers and other human predators, and Brandt's new work reflects that reality. In *Across the Ravaged Land*, his remarkable animal portraits, made on film without the aid of telephoto or zoom lenses, are interspersed with setup images of trophy heads, tusks and calcified birds—allusions to the causes and results of the rapid kill-off of wildlife.

Brandt's commitment to the region and its animals doesn't end with his photographs. Three years ago he established Big Life Foundation, which is currently protecting two million acres in the Amboseli ecosystem in Kenya and Tanzania. PDN spoke with Brandt about his new book, and the photographic work that led to his new role as a conservationist.

PDN: After your experiences making these three books, do you feel that photography has the potential to inspire a different understanding and appreciation for these animals?
Nick Brandt: Yes, I hope that the photos might have some emotional impact on people—that in a minor way, they come away more aware that there is a sentience to those creatures, that those animals are not so different from us. I often receive e-mails or talk to people who say, "I was moved to tears by the photos," which pleasantly surprises me, and makes me wonder: How much of that is because they're aware that those animals are being wiped out? And if those animals were flourishing, would those people be so emotionally affected? And my guess is, no they wouldn't. But I could be wrong.

PDN: To what do you attribute your ability to make photographs of this kind with wild animals? Have you ever felt in danger?
NB: No. As you know, I don't use telephoto or zoom lenses, and because I don't use a zoom, my placement has to be so very precise, which is where the skill of my driver-guides comes into play. But also patience: That's all it is, just patience.





PDN: In the book you talk about, in the past, being able to approach elephants because they are trusting creatures, and you also note that now they are wary of humans because so many are being killed off by humans. Was there something particular to your approach that inspired trust?
NB: You mean do I think I'm Doctor Dolittle? God, no. I don't have any sort of special connection to those animals. All it is, simply, for me, is that I'm not nervous. And they pick up on that lack of nervousness. So when I go close, they're relaxed, and if I was fearful, I think that would be different. Grizzly Man, Werner Herzog's documentary, is a great cautionary tale about the dangers of believing you have some special connection [to wild animals]. So far nothing has happened, no incidents to report whatsoever, because I'm not nervous, but I'm not cocky either.

DN: For this book you set up photographs for the first time. What prompted that shift in your work?
NB: I couldn't effectively show what I needed to show just by simply continuing to photograph living animals in the wild. And it's not enough just to simply photograph an elephant carcass with its face hacked off. That's purely documentary, and I want to go beyond that. So what is the by-product of some of this destruction? Tusks, trophy heads, for example. With all these photographs of animals that are dead, I try to photograph them as if they are still alive. With the lion trophy, for example, I'm hoping to create the feeling that it's looking across the plains where once it roamed. With the recovered calcified creatures, they haven't actually died at the hands of man, but nevertheless, I still found the idea of creating portraits of animals who appeared to be alive in death too compelling to ignore.

PDN: You have photographed in East Africa for more than a decade, as the landscape and animal population have undergone incredible changes. What has been the most difficult change to witness?

NB: Far and away the destruction of the elephants; back in 2009 when I published my last book, poaching was on the radar, but not nearly to the degree that it is today. The disastrous policy of allowing the legal selloff of stockpiled ivory from certain countries triggered a whole new wave of demand for ivory, exactly as so many conservationists predicted.

Ivory has gone from a couple of hundred dollars a pound back in 2004 to as much as $2,000 a pound today. You've got an estimated 35,000 elephants a year being wiped out. With about 350,000 to 400,000 elephants left in the whole continent of Africa, the elephants will be gone in the wild within ten years. The price of ivory has now reached a point where rebel militia groups are coming down from Northern Africa to plunder entire herds of elephants to finance their ongoing wars, to buy more weapons. It's reached the point where when I go back, every time I see an elephant that I recognize, I breathe a huge sigh of relief. It seems something of a minor miracle that that elephant, walking around in a poverty-stricken country with tens of thousands of dollars worth of ivory sticking out of its head, is still alive.

PDN: You've gone from photographing the elephants to taking an active role in trying to protect them through your organization, Big Life Foundation. What prompted you to take action?

NB: The vast majority of animals don't just stay in these neatly defined boundaries of African [national] parks; they spend most of their time outside them. So once they leave, as 80 percent of the animals do in Amboseli National Park, they instantly become incredibly vulnerable to poachers. And in those areas, there is no governmental organization to protect them. And in many key areas, preciously few NGOs. And that's why I started Big Life Foundation. We're now protecting up to two million acres in all those unprotected areas outside the park.

PDN: You mention in the book that collectors of your work are among the largest donors to Big Life. How big a factor has your work played in the effort to raise funds for the Foundation and promote the work you do?

NB: To my complete surprise, the work has played a significant [role] in the ability to raise funds. Initially, I thought it would be very self-aggrandizing to start a foundation, but some friends kept telling me that, given the wealth of some of my collectors, it gave me access to people who might already have both a compassion for the plight of these animals, as well as the money to help. They turned out to be right. Both [of] our largest donors were and are my biggest collectors, and major philanthropists. The photos have also provided a natural platform to enable me to highlight the crisis occurring in Africa right now.

PDN: In the book you say you are a "natural pessimist." Do you see any reason for hope in this situation?

NB: I'm now devoting large amounts of my life to running the Foundation. Which is, so far at least, pretty successfully protecting an extraordinary two million acres of ecosystem. I'm now personally responsible for more than 300 rangers. The Foundation is now the biggest employer in that area. I wouldn't be doing all that if I didn't think there was some kind of hope. But the only way that these ecosystems and these animals can survive is with the support of the local communities. As I write in the book, "People support conservation, conservation supports the people." That's basically the crux of it. I'm very pessimistic about the ability to preserve these places where there is no infrastructure of support from the people who live there. In the area that we're in, I felt when I started the Foundation a couple of years ago that we could achieve something because there was that infrastructure of support.

In areas such as these, there is literally almost no local economy, but one thing that is of huge economic gain and economic benefit for these communities is wildlife tourism. The problem one always faces—anywhere in the world, rich or poor—is getting people to see beyond the short term towards the long term. And right now, the destruction is happening so fast that we just had to go in and basically do short-term triage while we wait for the incredibly frustrating, slow, tortuous, frequently inept wheels of government to try and effect change on a more international level, through curbing demand for these animal parts. Because if we wait for that and do nothing, all those animals will be long, long gone. It's kind of a Sophie's choice; you've got to make these terrible decisions: We can protect this area, and we're going to end up sacrificing all these hundreds of ecosystems, all these populations of animals. Because without a dramatic, sudden change, there just isn't the money, there isn't the infrastructure [to protect them]. But where we're operating, there is hope.