

The New Big 5: How Wildlife Photography Can Help Save Threatened Species

By [Graeme Green](#), [Earth/Food/Life a project of the Independent Media Institute](#)

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Shooting animals with cameras, not guns, is one key path forward in wildlife conservation.

Throughout the long, dark, difficult days of the COVID-19 crisis, many hopeful voices have been arguing against us slipping back into business as usual post-lockdown; this wake-up call is a chance for our relationship with the natural world to change. The virus is thought to have originated [from pangolins or bats](#) sold for meat in Wuhan, China. Scientists warn that a [future pandemic could be even worse](#) if we don't change course—not just in terms of the sale of wild animals for meat or 'medicine,' but the [destruction of habitat around the world](#), which brings people into closer proximity with animals.

The pandemic has also increased attention on the little-known pangolin, the [most trafficked mammal in the world](#). [200,000 pangolins](#) are killed and trafficked each year, primarily to China where they are sold for meat and their scales are used in traditional Chinese medicine.

But pangolins are just the tip of the iceberg. According to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, around [a million species of animals, insects and plants are at risk of extinction](#), many in the next few decades, whether it's from the illegal wildlife trade, habitat loss, bushmeat hunting, climate change or other factors. How do we go about communicating the urgent need to protect the world's wildlife? With photos, for a start. Photographers like [Brent Stirton](#), [Jen Guyton](#) and [Paul Hilton](#) have helped introduce the world to the pangolin, a species many people had previously never heard of. The tentatively hopeful news earlier this year that [China was removing pangolin scales from their list of approved ingredients for traditional medicine](#) (the keratin scales have [no medicinal properties](#)) is thanks to [pressure from wildlife organizations and global attention](#), aided by the fact that people have now seen pangolins in photos, read about them, cared about them and understood the threats to their existence.

As a photographer and journalist, I've seen the impact photos and words can have. I've also seen the damage humans are causing to wildlife and the planet, which is why I decided to create [the New Big 5](#) project, an international conservation initiative supported by more than 150 photographers and conservationists, including [Dr. Jane Goodall](#), [Ami Vitale](#), [Pavan Sukhdev](#) and [Art Wolfe](#), as well as wildlife charities, such as [Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund](#), [Save the Elephants](#), [Lion Recovery Fund](#) and [WildAid](#).

The project is [asking people around the world to vote](#) for five animals they want to be included in a 'New Big 5' of wildlife photography, rather than hunting. Shooting with a camera, not a gun. The original Big 5 lists the five toughest animals in Africa for colonial trophy hunters to shoot and kill ([lion, elephant, rhino, leopard and buffalo](#)). Today, the idea of hunting animals like lions or leopards for 'sport' is meaningless and outdated to most people, and offensive to many others, especially when many of the prized species to hunt are endangered. Though many [debate](#) the economic and conservation arguments for trophy hunting. In 2020, it's an idea that feels like it should be consigned to history. Instead of death and suffering, the New Big 5 is about life. "I wonder what the final choices will be," said Dr. Goodall. "There are so many incredible animals in our world, all fascinating in different ways. Any project that brings attention to animals, so many of whom are threatened or endangered, is truly important."

Based around the idea of a New Big 5 of wildlife photography, we've built a website with a series of podcasts with photographers and conservationists, plus interviews, articles, education packs and, of course, photography. The goal is to highlight the threats facing animals around the world and serve as a platform where people can talk about possible solutions.

Many of the photographers working with the New Big 5 project see photography going hand in hand with conservation. National Geographic photojournalist [Ami Vitale](#)'s photos have communicated serious problems facing wildlife, and conservation solutions, to the world, from China's pandas to West African giraffes. [Tom Svensson](#) has used his

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photography to highlight the plight of rhinos, elephants and chimps, on issues from poaching to habitat loss. [Tim Laman](#) combines photography with research and conservation work alongside his wife, biological anthropologist [Cheryl Knott](#), with [Save Wild Orangutans](#) in Indonesia's Gunung Palung National Park. The list goes on.

A photo can draw people into a story or a topic. Wildlife charities and environmental organizations, from WWF to Greenpeace, use photography to reach people. In our accelerated culture, where we all flick quickly between web pages and where more than [95 million photos are uploaded to Instagram each day](#), getting people's attention is a battle. A powerful photo can cut through and get a response. "Conservation photography has the power to revolutionize people's relationship with the planet," said Jamie Joseph, founder of [Saving the Wild](#), which works to close down rhino poaching syndicates and protect elephants. "An image of an orangutan in a burnt forest is a window into the destruction [caused by the] palm oil [industry]. To see a stranded, starving [polar bear on a floating ice shelf](#) is to see the face of climate change. Photos can help people to feel a sense of urgency rise up inside themselves and to hopefully act on that feeling. As a writer and wildlife activist, if I really want to get a message out to people online, I lead with an emotive image and then, just as the image hits people like a lightning bolt, I roll in with words like thunder."

Many photos used by charities are donated by photographers. Money is also vital to wildlife charities, with photographers often donating proceeds from prints or books. It makes sense to help protect what you love. The recent [Prints For Wildlife](#) print sale that I was involved with, created by photographers Pie Aerts and Marion Payr, raised \$660,000 for [African Parks](#). Another new campaign, [Prints For Nature](#), set up by Ami Vitale and supported by more than 85 international photographers, which I'm also helping, is currently raising money for [Conservation International](#). The next phases of the New Big 5 project will also focus on raising funds for wildlife charities.

Photography can reveal harsh truths about the world: [rows of shark fins from butchered sharks](#); [dead, dehorned rhinos](#); [emaciated tigers in cages](#). But it's also a way to celebrate wildlife and highlight the need to protect it. Photos by [Thomas D. Mangelsen](#), [Marina Cano](#), [Xi Zhinong](#), [Greg du Toit](#) and others show animals' family bonds, playful moments, or fascinating behavior and abilities. With my own photography too, I want to show how remarkable the animals we share the planet with are, and to remind people what we stand to lose if wildlife keeps disappearing.

Many photographers see the need for their work to carry a message. "I want to tell people what's going on," [says](#) Cano. "As photographers, we have to tell people, beyond our photography, what is behind the pictures of beauty. You tell them the hard reality. People are moved by what's going on, and that means they'll take action and spread the word to others." The New Big 5 project is a creative way to help spread the message that every single species—from iconic giants to little-known insects, frogs and birds—is too valuable to lose. Each deserves to exist in their own right, but [every creature is also vital to the balance of nature](#) on the planet and the [future of humanity](#). A recent United Nations [report](#) has warned of a possible "[biodiversity collapse](#)" if species continue to be removed from their ecosystems.

We've certainly used photography to reach people, whether it's through articles about habitat loss and species extinctions, or photo galleries that included messages about conservation. Of course, photos haven't brought an end to all habitat loss, poaching and illegal wildlife trade. But the spotlight, the awareness and the money that photos have helped bring to the cause have made a significant impact. Hard-hitting journalism and powerful wildlife photography both have a part to play in helping get messages out to more people. With the Earth's [sixth mass extinction](#) of wildlife accelerating and scientists warning that more than [500 species of land animals could become extinct in the next 20 years](#), now is the time for lightning and thunder.

Learn more at [the New Big 5](#).

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Graeme Green is the founder of the New Big 5 project. A photographer and journalist, he's been traveling the world for 15 years reporting stories and photographing wildlife, people and places for international publications including the Sunday Times, BBC, the Guardian, the Sunday Telegraph, National Geographic, Wanderlust, South China Morning Post, the New Daily and more. He has photographed wildlife in many of the world's most incredible locations, including Antarctica, Tanzania, Mexico, Venezuela and Malaysia, and his work covers diverse species, from lions, elephants and gorillas to lizards, frogs and birds. As well as wildlife and conservation, stories he has worked on have ranged from human trafficking to Indigenous land rights. He also occasionally leads photography workshops. Find him online at www.graeme-green.com.