

A close-up photograph of a tiger leaping through a snowy landscape. The tiger is in mid-stride, with its front legs extended forward and its back legs pushing off. Its orange fur with black stripes is clearly visible against the white snow. The tiger's eyes are focused forward, and its mouth is slightly open. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white, suggesting a snowy environment.

CHRIS WESTON PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CHRIS WESTON AND ART WOLFE

ANIMALS ON THE EDGE

REPORTING FROM
THE FRONTLINE OF EXTINCTION

ames & Hudson



30805941

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CHRIS WESTON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS WESTON AND ART WOLFE

With 179 colour photographs



Thames & Hudson

◀◀ *Bornean orangutan mother and baby. The population of Bornean orangutans is estimated to be less than 14% of what it was in the mid-20th century.*

*For Leo – look what we did!
And for Miss Langley – know that
to this child you made a difference.*

The views expressed in this book do not necessarily reflect those of IUCN.

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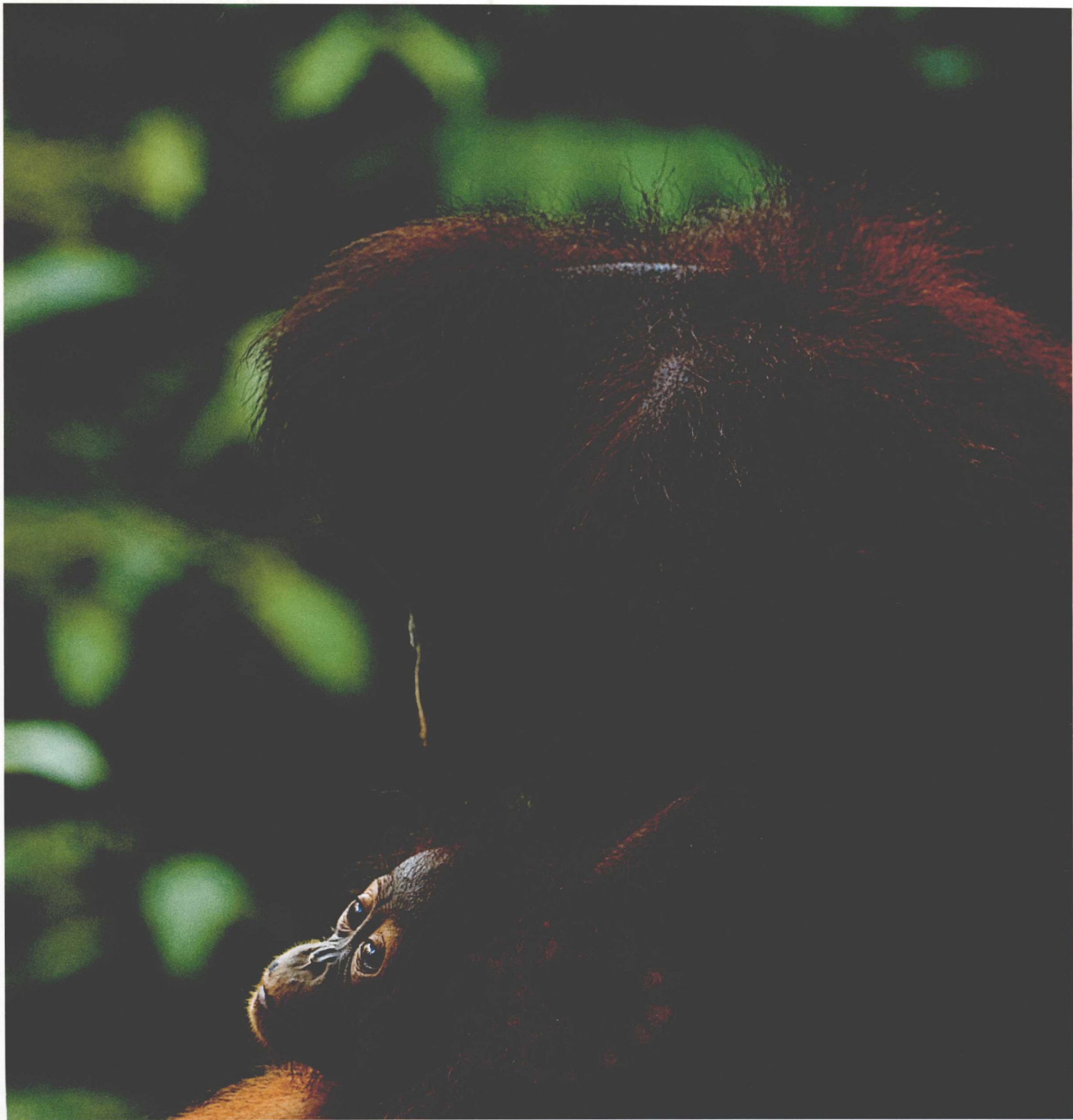
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FOREWORD

DR JANE SMART, IUCN

The diversity of plants and animals that exist in today's world are the product of 3.5 billion years of evolution. These species are the result of evolutionary processes which in more recent times have included the impact of human beings. Current estimates of the number of species range from 5 to 30 million, with a best estimate of 8 to 14 million; of these, only around 1.8 million have been named or 'described'.

While scientists debate how many species exist, there are growing concerns about the rising tide of extinctions. This book focuses attention on some of the terrestrial mammals that are categorized as Endangered or Critically Endangered on The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™. Although only 2.5% of the world's described species have been assessed so far, The IUCN Red List provides a useful snapshot of what is happening to species today and highlights the urgent need for conservation.

The IUCN Red List is the world's most comprehensive information source on the global conservation status of plant and animal species. It is based on an objective system of assessing the risk of extinction for a species, should no conservation action be taken.

However, The IUCN Red List is more than a register of names and associated threat categories. It is a rich compendium of information on the threats to the featured species, their ecological requirements, where they live, and proposals for conservation actions that can be used to prevent extinctions. It is increasingly used by scientists, governments, NGOs, businesses, and individuals and organizations across civil society for a wide variety of purposes.

The captivating images in this book take us on a journey through many countries, highlighting some of the issues that put these species at risk, meeting people whose daily lives are interlinked with them, and explaining the need for conservation action.

Species *can* recover if we make concerted conservation efforts. In 2008, 37 mammal species improved their conservation status on The IUCN Red List and an estimated 16 bird species have avoided extinction over the last 15 years due to the targeted actions of conservationists. Wildlife conservation works – but to halt the extinction crisis much more needs to be done, and quickly.

Dr Jane Smart OBE

Director, IUCN Biodiversity Conservation Group

Head, IUCN Species Programme

www.iucn.org/species

www.iucnredlist.org

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- ◀ Northern white-cheeked gibbon photographed at dusk. This critically endangered ape, occurring in parts of Southeast Asia, is threatened by habitat loss as well as hunting for food, the pet trade and traditional medicine.



INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, early in my career as a wildlife photographer, I was on assignment in a then little-known region of Kenya called the Taita Hills reserve. Lying to the west of the Mombasa–Nairobi highway, the reserve is a volcanic landscape, rich in wildlife. More importantly, it dissects East and West Tsavo National Parks, forming part of a wildlife corridor that is an important elephant migration route. I was working on a story about the impact of human encroachment on elephant populations in the region. A few days into my visit we got a call from an official at the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) to say that an elephant had been found dead on the edge of a nearby settlement, apparently killed by villagers. As I set off with my guides and camera, I was full of anger at yet another example of human intolerance of wildlife.

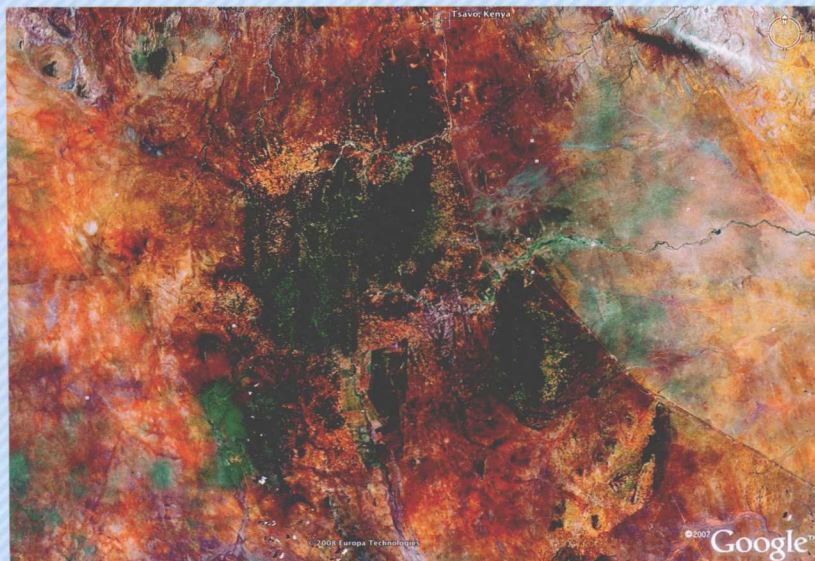
At the scene of the incident I took some images amidst the ebb and flow of impassioned, sometimes fiery conversation between the KWS authorities and the villagers. After a time I began mingling with the locals and, with the help of an interpreter, started asking questions, seeking the inside story. That was when I met Matunde, a man who, in one short exchange, was to change entirely my attitude towards the subject of animal/human conflict, and conservation in general; and who, although I didn't know it at the time, was the catalyst for the *Animals on the Edge* project.

Matunde is an uneducated but intelligent man. When we met, he lived in a small hut on an only slightly larger plot of land – about the size of a tennis court – with his wife and five children. On his allotment, to provide for his family and to earn the meagre fees needed to send his two eldest children to the local school – their

only hope of a brighter future – Matunde grew lettuces, which he then carted several miles to sell at the nearest market. 'Look at my land,' he said to me. 'I can tell you the value in [Kenyan] shillings of every square foot. If an elephant wanders through here and tramples half my crop, that's not just a few lettuces it's destroyed that I can replace with a quick trip to the local supermarket. That's half my annual income.' He continued: 'Let me ask you, Mr Chris: if someone or something came to your home and took half of your annual income, how would you react? What action would you take – honestly?'

Matunde opened my eyes to the real issues surrounding wildlife conservation. It is no coincidence that the majority of endangered species inhabit areas where people struggle simply to survive. In essence, we will never remove the threats to wildlife unless we fully understand that their root cause, in most cases, is linked to human poverty. That afternoon, during the drive back to camp, I determined that one day I would tell Matunde's story in the context of my work.

I embarked on this book in 2007. Since then, my working life has been a flurry. Few people outside of the photography profession grasp the amount of time and effort – in research, planning and execution – that



◀ *Taita Hills in Kenya, as revealed by Google Earth satellite photography. It was during an assignment in this part of Kenya that the seed of the idea for this book was sewn.*

◀◀ *In Madagascar, home of the red ruffed lemur, the average wage is less than US\$1 a day: it is no coincidence that most endangered species exist in regions where people face a daily struggle to survive.*

► *Chris Weston with children in Kenya. Meeting with and talking to local communities was a cornerstone of research for the Animals on the Edge project.*



goes into the creation of each image. My life has been a blur of airports and aeroplanes interspersed with jungle camps and backstreet hotels. I have visited almost every continent, climbing mountains, crossing plateaus and traversing rivers. I've shinned up trees a hundred feet high, hacked my way through jungles, dug man-size holes, and crawled on all fours across inhospitable terrain. I have ridden elephants, paddled canoes and rafts, and flown in contraptions that should have been grounded long ago. I have been too hot and too cold and many times I've been exhausted and ill. I've been lost, held up at gunpoint, and been stranded in the middle of nowhere with just my cameras and the shirt on my back. I have seen countries transform from kingdom to republic and governments change from left to right. Through all this I had one mission in mind: to visit for myself the frontline in the battle against extinction.

Before embarking on any travels, my initial task was to determine the scope of the project, and to that end I contacted the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ classifies nearly 17,000 animals as threatened to one degree or another; too many to contemplate. I decided to focus on terrestrial mammals categorized as Endangered or Critically Endangered, the two gravest classifications before extinction. Using these new criteria the revised list of subjects extended to over 600 species and subspecies. The final selection in this book runs to over 50 species. Many are iconic, others less well known. Collectively they are only the tip of the iceberg of our contemporary conservation crisis.

With the scope of the project determined, next I spent hours researching species, habitats and locations. This was a long, drawn-out task involving a great deal of time sitting in front of a computer typing variations of search strings into Google, wading through thousands of pages of written material (not all of it well written), and dialling phone numbers to far-flung destinations. I called in favours, conferred with biologist friends and

colleagues working in conservation, and spoke to friends of friends and even to the odd government minister. As time went by a plan emerged and a vision for the book took shape. Finally, in December 2007, I booked my first plane tickets, bound for central India to photograph tigers.

I also enlisted the help of my good friend and esteemed colleague Art Wolfe, one of the world's most accomplished nature photographers and a vociferous advocate of the conservation message. I first met Art in London several years ago, when we spent a day exploring the 'nature' of Britain's capital. Since then, our paths have crossed several times and I am both delighted and honoured that he agreed to contribute to and support this project.

Talking of external contributors, the critical input of the many people who have aided the project along the way must also be recognized. Wildlife photography is rarely a solitary pursuit. In India, I was greatly indebted to my fixer, Nanda Rana, who talked our way into opportunities that would certainly otherwise have passed me by. In Nepal, it would have been impossible to photograph the Asiatic buffalo without my 'Buffalo Soldiers' – the team of herders who coaxed the animals towards my hidden cameras, at great risk to themselves and in conditions far from conducive to the physical exertion required. There are many such stories associated with this project – from tracking primates in Africa to big cats in Asia and beyond – and I am grateful to all the people who helped me in the field and who are acknowledged at the end of the book.

This project has proved to be an unceasing journey of discovery. During its course, I have been both encouraged

and disheartened by what I have encountered. I have marvelled at the success of efforts to halt the decline in the population of mountain gorillas in Rwanda, a country that as recently as 1994 endured one of the most horrific genocides ever recorded, and yet is now a stable democracy. Similarly, in Gabon, one of the world's poorest countries, President El Hadj Bongo in 2002 set aside 25,000 km² (10,000 miles²) of the country's land to form a national park system protecting some of Africa's last remaining pristine wilderness, forsaking the easy dollar to be gained from logging and agriculture in preference to preserving the beauty of his country's natural resources. This was an immensely courageous decision that should protect an abundance of wildlife for generations to come.

At the same time, I have been profoundly disturbed by the prevalence of corruption, hypocrisy, self-interest and posturing; and by the weakness and Machiavellian machinations of many of the governments and organizations on whom the future of our wildlife and natural resources depend. And while there is undoubtedly reason to point the finger at commercial corporations, big business isn't alone in its culpability. Even conservation charities sometimes contribute to the problems they purport to fight: I have heard first hand how the actions and subsequent inactions of one led to an increase in poaching and illegal logging in Africa (see pages 96–97). Observations elsewhere on my travels reveal that this is not an isolated incident.

Between the animals and the authorities are the people, villagers trying to eek a subsistence living out



◀ Art Wolfe, contributor to this book, is a hugely talented and prolific photographer of the natural world, and a passionate advocate of wildlife conservation.

of inadequate resources; who are themselves living on the edge. It is these people who have most amazed me, through their tolerance, their optimism, their ideas and their hopes for the future. In the developed world, it is easy to talk about conservation and even to get involved. We have money in our pockets and time on our hands. But if you are living in abject poverty, your children starving, your home a mud and stick hut, conservation

is a luxury. And even in the developed world, when hard times strike, conservation swiftly suffers. In the aftermath of the global economic crisis of 2008, when tens of thousands of people lost their jobs, the value of savings and pensions collapsed, and house prices crashed to values lower than the mortgages owed on them – when we faced our own version of poverty – contributions to charities fell by over US\$500 million. It was not that

◀ The photographs in this book would never have happened without the help of a great many people who lent their skills and effort, such as my team of 'Buffalo Soldiers' in Nepal.



people lost sympathy with charitable causes; it was simply that they no longer felt able to fund them.

Yet in the developing world, even among those who have nothing, the overwhelming impression I have gained from my time in the field is that the majority of people would work hard to support their natural resources. Even those who illegally harvest natural resources more often than not take such actions as a matter of last resort – a last-ditch step between survival and starvation.

► *In the developing world, with its extremes of poverty, conservation is a luxury that few can afford.*

Unfortunately this is rarely grasped by people in the developed world, where a thriving populist media, more interested in sentimental simplifications than complex realities, is largely responsible for the misconceptions held by many people, particularly in the West.

This was borne out by an encounter in India with a group of super wealthy Western businessmen on safari. One of them took an interest in my work and we fell into conversation. I explained that I was looking to interview tiger poachers so that I could understand their motives.

‘What’s there to understand? It’s simple,’ the man asserted. ‘It all comes down to a five letter word – g-r-e-e-d. Poachers are simply greedy.’

I’m unsure whether this individual, who by his own admission had spent the best part of his working life pursuing the accumulation of more wealth than he would need in several lifetimes, saw the irony in his observation, but, more importantly, his views showed a grave lack of understanding of the realities faced by people inhabiting countries less wealthy than our own. He is not alone in his opinion, and I don’t mean to judge him for it: such notions are the easy fictions of our times.

But for those prepared to delve behind the media rhetoric, as I have done during the course of this project, it becomes increasingly apparent that there is always more than one side to the story. I am no apologist for poachers. I abhor what they do. But I have talked with them and listened to their experiences, in an effort to comprehend their actions (see pages 152–53). I responded to the



businessman by explaining that a tiger poacher earns between US\$7 and \$15 for a pelt – hardly a lavish amount – and went on to describe the conditions in which most poachers live, and the literal life-and-death struggles they face each day. I also recounted the story of Matunde and explained how a revolutionary approach to conservation by an American businessman, Mike Korchinsky, had effectively solved the problem of human/elephant conflict in the region. By combining protection of wilderness habitats with local job-creation, school- and factory-building, Korchinsky’s Wildlife Works company radically changed the way the local community views its natural resources. Wildlife became to them an asset worth much more alive than dead.

As he listened, I could see the man’s opinion beginning to change. And herein lies the purpose of this book. It is my belief that a solid foundation for a sustainable action plan for wildlife conservation is only possible once we truly grasp the issues facing the people who coexist with the animals we seek to protect. If we can educate the men and women who have the power and wherewithal to instigate change, if we can show them a better way, it may just be possible to modify the behaviour of the people living on the frontline – the place where policies translate into effective results.

I am not alone in this view. A 2008 report by Johann Eliasch, the UK’s special representative on deforestation and clean energy, and commissioned by UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown, stated that: ‘Deforestation will

continue as long as cutting down trees is more economic than preserving them.' He's right. Frances Seymour of the Centre for International Forestry Research, an international research and global knowledge institution committed to conserving forests and improving people's livelihoods, was equally blunt in a 2008 *National Geographic* article about Borneo's rainforests: 'Let's be clear here: Why do people cut down trees? For the money. If you give people the opportunity to make the same amount of money or more by leaving the trees standing, there's your answer.'

Fortunately, there are people who not only agree, but who are developing ideas and strategies to bring this about. People such as Mike Korchinsky, or Eric Kimmel, designer and founder of America's Rich Hippie boutique, who is pioneering a commercial fashion industry in Sierra Leone, West Africa, to bring work and hope to that country's people. Or others such as Hylton M. Philipson and Andrew Mitchell, Managing Director and Executive Director respectively of Canopy Capital, a London-based investment company that is attempting to give financial value to the services rainforests provide – services such as rainfall generation, moderation of extreme weather, carbon storage and biodiversity maintenance. 'Putting a price on these services,' says Canopy, 'is like taking out an insurance policy to maintain our life support system and has the potential to generate billions of dollars for forest-owning nations.'

Marrying capitalism with conservation may be the only realistic way forward in the fight against extinction. There is no doubt that we live in a world driven by economics, as was underlined by a recent case involving Donald Trump. The US tycoon wanted to develop a US\$1 billion golf resort near the town of Balmedie on the east coast of Scotland. The area the resort was to be sited includes an extensive system of sand dunes, a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest stretching for 22 kilometres (14 miles)

and supporting a vast array of plant and animal life. After due consideration of the plans, the local authority, Aberdeenshire Council, denied the planning application. Unhappy with the verdict, ministers of the Scottish parliament called in the application, effectively taking the decision out of local hands. Furthermore, councillor Martin Ford, who had used his casting vote to reject the original application, was sacked from his post as chairman of the council's Infrastructure Services Committee. Scottish Finance Secretary John Swinney subsequently approved the application at national level. Commenting on the case, First Minister of Scotland Alex Salmond stated: 'The economic benefits substantially outweigh any environmental impact.'

Whether or not one agrees with the decision to approve the development (and many do), the message is clear: a nation's economy is more important than its wildlife. This attitude is not exclusive to Scotland, nor indeed to the developed world – it's an attitude common to every government of every country in the world. Make no mistake: the principal reason that Rwanda's gorilla conservation programme is so successful is the fact that gorilla tourism is the country's third-highest earner of foreign revenue.

If anyone doubts the precedence the economy takes over all else we have only to look at the events of October 2008 and the global financial crisis. Within a matter of days, the United States had approved US\$700 billion of funding for its banking sector, a figure almost double



◀ A Google Earth satellite image showing part of the system of sand dunes near Balmedie, Scotland, a Site of Special Scientific Interest and soon to be the location of a billion-dollar golf development.