

# HEAVEN ON EARTH

*Throughout the world, there are places where Mother Nature is honoured and protected. These sanctuaries are a step towards conserving our biosphere.*

Words by **Michael Tobias & Jane Gray Morrison**

**F**or most of our lives we have searched the world for those rare places where humans have worked passionately to save remnants of the original Eden. There are, as it turns out, more than 114,000 protected areas on Earth. Some of them are enormous, such as Alaska's Wrangell St Elias, the largest national park in the US at over 5.3 million hectares. Others are as tiny as the hectare comprising one of Japan's most symbolic sanctuaries, the sand garden of Ryoan-ji, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in Kyoto's remarkable greenbelt.

What these protected areas share is the critical and timely lesson that celebrating nature may be the key to our future survival as a species, not to mention the survival of millions of other species that share this miraculous planet with us.

This year we published a book titled *Sanctuary* that chronicles the many kinds of sanctuaries throughout the world. For the book we were focused on sampling representatives of this diverse landscape under human stewardship. We wanted geographic, cultural and biological juxtapositions from all kinds of conservation and animal protection projects in many countries, recognising the constraints within any one book. We spent about three years on the project, formally releasing the results as part of the 2008 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington DC.

Scientists, animal rights activists, national park biologists and educators, NGOs and government representatives collaborated with us in some two-dozen sanctuaries in 20 countries to realise this book. Collectively they convey wisdom, humility and integrity. These cohorts

have dedicated their lives to making this a better world by doing everything in their power to restore native forests and save both iconic and little-heralded species.

From Namibia to Manhattan's Central Park, from Brigitte Bardot's animal sanctuaries in Normandy, France, to a bear sanctuary near Utrecht, the Netherlands, from Arabian oryx in the United Arab Emirates to butterflies in downtown Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from the untouched jungles of Brunei to an entirely vegetarian city in the Rajasthan desert, India, our findings, as recorded in *Sanctuary*, have given us hope that humans have what it takes to get things right, to step forward into the joyous confluence of evolution and regard all creatures, great and small, with respect and love.

There is no better barometer of these feelings than the existence of so many protected areas on the planet, with more than 12 per cent of the terrestrial Earth enjoying some level of protected status. However, we need to do more – more parks, more refuges and more corridors – if we are to combat what has been described as the “sixth extinction spasm” in the history of life on Earth. We also need to expand the network of “no kill” marine reserves.

*Sanctuary* is testimony to the fact that we can do better; that people everywhere have awakened to the promise of biodiversity. Everyone can plant a native tree to attract native pollinators, insects and birds. Everyone can take every opportunity, every day, to exercise non-violence in their actions, thoughts and intentions. This is the true legacy of conservation and animal rights – the ultimate inheritance we hope to leave to our children and their children.

## **WRANGELL ST ELIAS NATIONAL PARK, ALASKA, US**

We open *Sanctuary* with one of the largest in the world. Mount St Elias is the heart of the vast Wrangell St Elias National Park in Alaska that connects with half a dozen other protected areas in the US and Canada. Together these parks comprise a UNESCO World Heritage Site that is designated “the largest internationally protected wildland on Earth”.

Nine of the highest peaks in the US are found in the park. Mount St Elias, which is the fourth largest in the US after McKinley, Logan and Cook, has the most impressive sheer wall of any peak on the planet in terms of height, rising 5489m out of the waters of the Gulf of Alaska in the Pacific Ocean.

Nesting upon the rock and grass-covered walls adjoining the glaciers is a little seabird, Kittlitz's murrelet, with its penguin-like bark, graceful eyes, hearty countenance and flippant little butt. It is one of the most threatened seabirds in North America. National Park Service and US Fish & Wildlife Service biologists are monitoring the causes of the bird's dramatic decline; hard-to-obtain data suggests a combination of climate change and decreasing availability of fish species.

More than 200 other bird species, 48 mammals and scores of invertebrates share the habitat throughout the park, from grizzly bears that outnumber people, to whales, seals and bald eagles.

## **FARALLON ISLANDS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, CALIFORNIA, US**

Just 45km due west of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge appeared suddenly out of the mists as we sailed



**SHEER WONDER**

Mount St Elias (5489m) is the fourth highest mountain in the US and the heart of Wrangell St Elias, the largest and least frequented national park in the country.

towards these ghostly, bird-adored cliffs. These four protected islands are part of the 93 million protected hectares within the National Wildlife Refuge System begun by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903. They harbour the greatest abundance of seabirds and marine mammals in the US, outside Alaska.

More than 400 bird species have been recorded in the Farallones, however, perhaps the biggest conservation success here is the comeback of the northern fur seal, which had disappeared entirely from the region when hunting pressures wiped out approximately 200,000 in 1834. Now, with protection, their numbers are increasing and some estimate there could be as many as 50,000 of these creatures within a decade.

**CENTRAL SURINAME NATURE RESERVE, SOUTH AMERICA**

Covering 1.6 million hectares, Central Suriname Nature Reserve (CSNR) is a critical piece of Suriname’s conservation success. It is part of the Guyana Shield that comprises 60 million hectares of tropical rainforest in northern South America – the largest intact tropical forest remaining on the planet.

What makes Suriname so remarkable is the fact that the country’s half-million people, all living for the most part in the northern capital of Paramaribo, have not touched 95 per cent of the region’s pristine rainforest.

Joining the president of Conservation International, Dr Russell Mittermeier, who spent three years in the Suriname jungles researching primates for his Harvard PhD, and whose organisation was instrumental in establishing CSNR, we explored parts of this incredibly beautiful jungle, with its seven principal Amerindian tribes and bountiful other life forms: 722 known bird species, 185 mammals, 152 reptiles, 95 amphibians and 790 known fish vertebrates.

While visiting the cliff-girded mating grounds (leks) of the orange *Rupicola* bird, commonly known as cock-of-the-rock, a gigantic tree collapsed nearby, crashing into the forest like an avalanche on all sides. We couldn’t see the event but it seemed to be happening right over our heads. “That is by far the greatest danger of all in the rainforest,” Dr Mittermeier said.

**GUT AIDERBICHL, AUSTRIA**

Near Mozart’s birthplace of Salzburg is the animal sanctuary Gut Aiderbichl (Good Hill of Fire), the brainchild of Michael Aufhauser. Here we beheld a surreal panorama: a backdrop of lush forest framing a ring of exquisite chalet-style buildings bedecked with flower boxes, a large meadow at the centre.

Roaming freely here and on the many paths that meander through the estate are cows, ponies, miniature horses, sheep, goats, chickens, geese and donkeys. Besides familiar farm animals there is Basti, a wild baby pig, and Snoopy, a lovely beagle rescued as a result of Aufhauser’s negotiations with a chemical company.

Intermingling comfortably with this assemblage of creation are human families. Here, an autistic boy hugged a pony with passion and afterwards

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expressed his joy to his father, uttering his first word in two years: “Papa.”

Aufhauser’s promise to the animals that come under his protection is they shall experience no more fear or stress and will receive the best medical care available.

After Aufhauser invited politicians to visit the sanctuary, meet the animals and consider the value of the sanctuary’s work, the ministers of Salzburg voted unanimously to include a statement in their Constitution specifying respect for and protection of animals, making it a unique legal document.

Salzburg is home to one of the most progressive philosophies for animal

protection that we have encountered, in the person of Aufhauser and in the paradise that is Gut Aiderbichl.

**SOCOTRA ISLAND, YEMEN**

Yemen’s “Galapagos of the Indian Ocean” is an archipelago of six islands dominated by the Haggeher Mountains, which loom over the largest island, Socotra. Socotra is currently experiencing a renaissance in visitors from the outside world, many of them scientists uncovering new zoological discoveries almost daily.

With its 178 known bird species, Socotra has 22 Globally Important Bird Areas, including breeding sites for the rare Egyptian vulture. However, the island is most famous for its succulents, notably the mesmerising cinnabar trees. Seventy-five per cent of the island is national park, which is protected by its 30,000 denizens, and it rates as one of the oldest islands to be continuously inhabited by humans.

The Socotri mountain people, who have their own language, have been commended by the UN for their astute conservational instincts and practices. We met with a family living in a large grotto within one of the national parks; they were indisputable proof that a cluster of humans can survive with dignity in the 21st century, exerting one of the lightest ecological footprints imaginable.

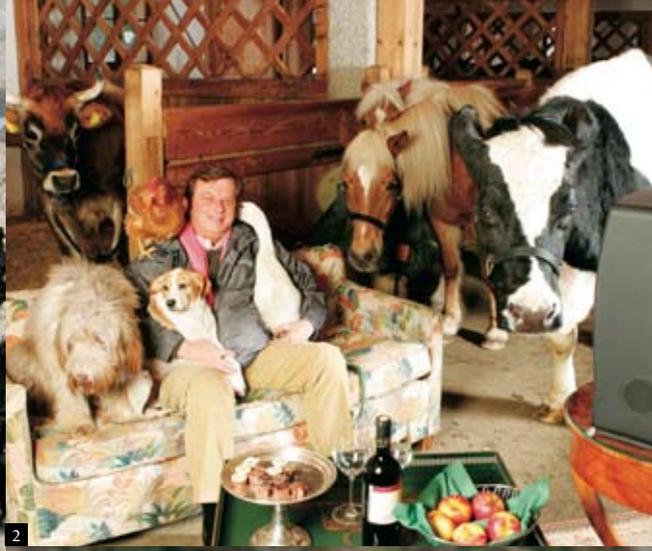
What was especially thrilling for us on our trip to Socotra was the discovery in the Homhil Protected Area of two wild donkeys that were members of a wild breed dating back to the earliest equines in biological history.

**HARNAS WILDLIFE REFUGE, NAMIBIA, SOUTHERN AFRICA**

In the late 1970s a brave ranching family living 320km east of Namibia’s capital Windhoek, near the beginning of the Trans-Kalahari Highway, began taking in orphaned wildlife. Marieta van der Merwe and her late husband, Nick, realised that African wild dogs, baboons, leopards, cheetahs, hyenas, caracals, jackals, lions and others needed their help. Farmers in the region thought nothing of poisoning and trapping these creatures to keep them from consuming their farm animals.

When the van der Merwes saved their first animal, a gorgeous vervet monkey they purchased from a neglectful owner

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF DANCING STAR FOUNDATION EXCEPT MICHAEL AUFHAUSER (COURTESY OF GUT AIDERBICHL) AND TODA (COURTESY OF DR TARUN CHHABRA)



**BIODIVERSITY**  
(1) Farallon Islands,  
(2) Michael Aufhauser at  
Gut Aiderbichl, Austria,  
(3) Dr Russell Mittermeier  
stands in his socks for  
better traction on slippery  
granite in the Central  
Suriname Nature Reserve,  
(4) Wild donkeys in the  
Homhil Protected Area of  
Socotra, (5) Toda man of  
the Nilgiris, (6) An orang-  
outang in the safe haven  
that is Tanjung Puting  
National Park, Borneo.





**SIMPLE PLEASURES**

A one-year-old male lion scratches himself on a tree in the Harnas Wildlife Refuge, Namibia.

for five rand (about a dollar), they didn't quite know what they were getting themselves into. Nor did they envision that within a few years their third-generation ranch would be overrun by animals in need.

Endless compassion, practical skills and perseverance enabled them to create the Harnas Wildlife Refuge, *harnas* meaning "shield" or "protection" in Zulu. With its international interns and local staff, Harnas today welcomes visitors from around the world to commune with rescued charismatic megafauna.

We arrived near nightfall to encounter honey badgers, hartebeest, elands, warthogs and kudu, their eyes glistening among the dusty acacia groves. That night, the eagle owl, the hoopoe and the last high-energy songs of the fork-tailed drongo and common waxbill were serenading us to sleep when, suddenly, nearby lions began their nightly conversations – happy roars by any other name.

The next day we were introduced to the largest protected pack of wild dogs in Africa and a stunning array of local residents – native mongooses Stinky and Monsieur Robert, baboons Booboo and Violet, and infant cheetah Cleopatra – and there was Marieta, rubbing the stomach of an adolescent lion, Zion, who knows her to be his true surrogate mother.

### THE TODA, SOUTHERN INDIA

The oldest mountain range in India, the Nilgiris (Blue Mountains), spans parts of the intersecting states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. It is within this mountainous nexus of several national parks and reserves that one of the last vegetarian tribes on Earth resides: the Toda, who number about 1200.

The Toda lifestyle, spirituality, ethics and economy centre on their love for a rare breed of river buffalo. The buffaloes are treated like royalty and their migrations and milk by-products are the mainstay of Toda life. When Toda die, they follow these bovines into the afterlife, climbing a high mountain into paradise. The habitat of the Toda is very much a living paradise, however, that is not to ignore the very real plights affecting them on all sides, as throughout all of India.

Dr Tarun Chhabra, a dentist, linguist and ethno-ecologist and the head of the

EBR Trust (a local NGO), is devoted to protecting the biodiversity of the Nilgiris and the Toda. He has been working for years with EBR co-founder Rami Singh and colleagues to document and conserve the rare endemic plants of the region.

The area was India's first UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, created in 1986, and is home to 684 vertebrates, including two Critically Endangered primates (the Nilgiri langur and the lion-tailed macaque), and the most robust population of Asian elephants and tigers in India. In addition, 3700 known plant species and at least 316 butterfly species flourish here.

### TANJUNG PUTING NATIONAL PARK, INDONESIA BORNEO

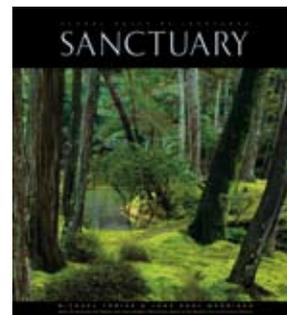
We arrived at Camp Leakey by small river craft, having travelled the labyrinthine blackwaters into the heart of Tanjung Puting National Park in Central Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo). We had come with Dr Biruté Galdikas, one of the world's foremost primatologists and the co-architect of this 390,000ha park created in 1988.

Dr Galdikas is a courageous woman who has spent more time in the field studying a single mammalian species, in this case the orang-outang, than anyone else. "Every time I look into their eyes I recall the original inhabitants of the Garden of Eden," she said.

The orang-outangs, who are strictly herbivorous (unlike chimpanzees), number no more than 50,000 between the populations on the islands of Borneo and nearby Sumatra. In fact, they are in serious trouble as a result of poaching; loss of habitat to palm oil, rubber and zircon mining interests; and out-of-control fires, the frequency of which is increasing with climate change.

Dr Galdikas' Orangutan Foundation International (OFI) has worked for many years to protect the orang-outangs' habitat, expand biological buffer areas and do fieldwork that has yielded insights into their physiology, disease and behaviour. Dr Galdikas has been a surrogate mother to several hundred orphaned orang-outangs. Her staff of mostly local Dyak people (she is married to a Dyak tribal elder, Pak Bohap) cares intensively for these vulnerable primates who, she reminded us, are our closest relatives. 

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### SANCTUARY

*Sanctuary: Global Oases of Innocence* by Michael Tobias and Jane Gray Morrison is published by Council Oak Books. Tobias is an American author, ecologist, anthropologist, historian, explorer and filmmaker. His 35 books and 100 films have been distributed to most countries. Many of his inspiring projects are collaborations with his wife, Morrison, who is an ecologist, musician, author, filmmaker and philanthropist. For more information on Tobias, Morrison and *Sanctuary* go to [sanctuary-thebook.org](http://sanctuary-thebook.org).



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