

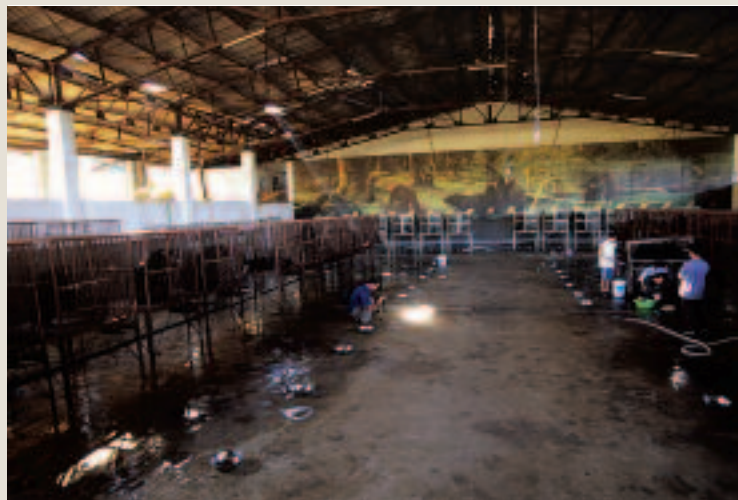
Masquerading as a tourist camera, the stealthy SLR of the environmental-activist photographer documents the byproducts of wholesale wildlife slaughter and incarceration that are on display in the markets of Southeast Asia

By Steven Werner
Photography By Karl Ammann



◀ The markets of Myanmar, from Tachilek on the Thai border to Mong La near China, display an alarming array of wildlife products. Most of it finds its way north to China, where the demand is great for traditional cures. The impact of exploding human populations, with newfound affluence, is devastating on fragile wildlife populations that can't withstand the onslaught. As a casual tourist, access is easy, but taking photographs attracts unwanted attention, perhaps a hand in front of the lens. A super-wide-angle, even a fisheye, makes it possible to shoot from the hip. ▼ The demand for bear bile is the impetus for large-scale businesses, where bears are captured, caged and "milked" regularly through permanent catheters. When the glands fail, the bears are killed for meat. ▼ The forests on the island of Borneo burn despite lip service given to their protection by government officials and claims of success by environmental organizations. The orangutan is the most politicized species destined for extinction.

THE WORLD ORDER



You could say that the thread for this rambling article began while on an East African safari in 1988 when I first met Karl Ammann. I had checked into the hotel in Nairobi and there was a message saying that he wanted to meet. Since the hotel was purportedly owned by a Saudi arms dealer and businessman, the natural word association that came to mind was with Amman, as in Jordan, leaving me wondering what this could possibly be about. (I later learned that it's a common Swiss surname with root in a feudal, administrative and/or gubernatorial title.)

Karl had found out that the editor of *Outdoor Photographer* was coming to Kenya. By way of a hospitality degree from Cornell University, a stint as a hotel manager near the pyramids in Cairo, then the Nairobi Intercontinental, then the Mount Kenya Safari Club, a year living in a tent in the Mara, and development of the first "luxury tent camp," Karl had also become an avid photographer. Who wouldn't in these surroundings? But what always has impressed me was how he had a knack for knowing people, knowing what's going on. His connections, acumen and mobility make him a more potent environmental photographer. The

fact that he found me was an example only significant to me. But the fact that he knew everyone from Mobutu's son (to grease a gorilla camp deal in Zaire) to Richard Leakey, Jane Goodall, the Maharaja of Jodhpur and the publisher of *Insight Guides*, to name a few, always has been intriguing. And then there are the attributes that could be considered political-correctness contradictions to outsiders: he has kept pet cheetahs and chimpanzees, yet is one of the most vocal animal protectionists that I know, a veritable burr under the saddle of many NGOs and do-nothing environmental causes.

From his home near Mount Kenya,

his primary attentions have been focused on the bushmeat and captive animal trade in West and Central Africa, the destruction of orangutan habitat in Borneo and elephant slavery in Myanmar (Burma). He has published books, contributed magazine articles, spoke at NGO meetings in Europe, set up a chimpanzee sanctuary in Kenya and more. There are those environmentalists, researchers and photographers who would say that Karl is too caustic, too abrasive, that you have to work carefully with despots in deteriorating countries or "they'll throw the lot of us out and then where would we be?" When Karl once asked me to join

him on a trip to West Africa, a *National Geographic* photographer friend said to me, "It could be dangerous. One day he's going to get himself killed." Karl would argue that we can't wait for soft-peddled diplomacy. It's all going to hell too fast to wait on the whims of dictators or for corrupt officials to be cajoled into having an environmental conscience. He has seen too many African and Asian officials give lip service to protectionism or set up national parks, only to covertly sell concessions or conveniently overlook incursions by exploiters.

In 1997, my family and I were sitting in a stifling little hotel lobby in

Pangkalanbun, Borneo, wondering how we were going to arrange a boat ride to Camp Leakey (the orangutan rehabilitation center) if Karl "Amang," as an Indonesian mispronounced, didn't show up. Then, up drove a dusty 4x4 and out stepped an unwashed Karl as if from nowhere, which is where he had been, to the north investigating, photographing and videotaping the incursions of "unofficial" farms into the habitat of the red apes. Subsequently, we saw the naturally clear Sekonyer River in the heart of supposed sanctuary forest choked with silt from a condoned gold mining operation, running with the color of café



◀ Primate prisons and cages hold everything from great apes to infant monkeys. Some become family pets or commercial curiosities; others are destined for the pot. Ammann moves innocuously through Asian markets, photographing the pleading eyes and drawn concentration-camp faces.

▼ Captive tiger breeding was a major issue for CITES. The animals are eventually “parted out” for the breakup value of their skin, bones and organs. Chinese authorities are laying off the issue while the Olympics are in the offing, but after that...? The still camera remains the most potent tool for gathering the visual evidence of such illicit trade. The photographer can go where no film or broadcast crews could go without upsetting the natural scene or creating a different reality.



au lait. Little kingfishers looked ridiculous trying to spot a meal in the murk. Forest-clearing fires were filling the skies with smoke from the so-called lungs of the Earth. Today, it's a popular expectation that China ultimately will strip the forests to support their economic buildup, then plant the island with coconut-oil palms. Still, one can see individual photographs published of blissful orangutans, some old, some newly taken at sanctuaries in the Malaysian north, but all fostering a sense that the orangutan world is in order.

Karl always has been an influential source of information, a touchstone for reality on the ground that's often glossed over by individuals and organizations presenting rosy pictures based on the need to show progress on projects where grant dollars must continually be renewed. A recent *Newsweek* (international edition) article on the rebirth of wildlife in the demilitarized region of southern

Sudan made the discovery of abundant elephants and herd animals—“to rival the Serengeti”—read as though it was a secret stash recently uncovered. Karl pointed out, “The herds of kob on the Boma Plateau have been documented for 50 or 60 years. In terms of diversity, however, this isn't the Serengeti. On the other hand, there was only little mention of the other parts of southern Sudan, where pretty much everything has been wiped out along the Uganda/DRC border.” He added with a world-weary note of cynicism that this is just another international wildlife organization's “starting shot to get their hands on tons of money to save whatever there is left to be saved and no provision for any kind of follow-up or auditing of any real success on the ground.”

Somewhere back in the '90s, Karl began to turn his photographic attentions from what he came to call the *world in order* images to the *world not in order*

counterpart. But the sales pitch to publishers was a difficult slog. Certainly, our magazine and the many accomplished photographers who we've interviewed and published over the past two decades of *Outdoor Photographer* have concentrated on the *world in order* sort. It's natural. We all want to find and record the beauty in the natural world, all the more so as our daily surroundings become congested and cast in concrete. Magazine and book publishers serve a public that wants to be refreshed, albeit vicariously, by pictures of solitude and natural wonder. Furthermore, there was a time when activist photographers could sway public and political opinion with beauty shots. We've covered these heroes in photo-conservation articles with the likes of Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter, and more recently, Robert Glenn Ketchum, Gary Braasch and others. (Some have organized themselves into the ILCP, the International League of Conservation Photographers; see

“Empowering Photography With Action,” *OP*, October 2006, on our Website at outdoorphotographer.com). The message has always been simple, repetitive and spiritual: Look at this beautiful landscape (Yosemite, Glen Canyon, the Galápagos). Society needs to preserve places like this or we lose a piece of our soul. Then, somewhere along the way, the environmental cause/benefit equation needed to be dumbed-down and made more self-serving like socialized medicine: We need to save the rain forest because some lost species could represent the lost cure for some human disease.

Now, as Earth seems to be racing toward hell in a handbasket, there's a growing sense that photographers and publishers need to be focusing more on the *world not in order* imagery. Karl broke his photo stories in the open-minded European press, but many of his shots from the dark medicine markets and poacher crime scenes have the raw look of reality TV. You can't show up sporting a press badge, a couple of SLRs hanging off your shoulders, and start popping fill-flash in these unfriendly conditions. Magazines like *National Geographic* were looking for the arty, composed image and in the late '90s finally began running the occasional outtake photo and mention of the African bushmeat plague. Their dilemma: with the magazine's stature, if they publicize the disaster, then the readership will want to know what's being done about it; readers will want to see results. Ultimately, staffer Michael Nichols was allowed to

show more grisly bushmeat photos in his articles on West and Central African forests. Still, the real-world crimes far outpace the limited media coverage.

From time to time, we've force-fed articles on depressing subjects by Karl, Robert Glenn Ketchum, Frans Lanting and others in *Outdoor Photographer*, though I wish we'd have done more. Karl's activism always makes us feel inadequate. We've run portfolios of clear-cutting root wads in the Northwest, devastating land erosion in Madagascar, slaughtered gorillas in the Congo. Of course, they're never reader favorites, but a few write and appreciate the point.

A few months ago, Karl e-mailed with a complaint relating to another favorite debate among photographers and our readership: reality in a digital photography world. Evidently, he had been trying to sell a book on elephants to a publisher and the question came up, “Why don't your photos look like those in *Elephant* [by Steve Bloom]?” which apparently makes liberal use of “digital enhancement” justified as artistic expression. In the past, we had stepped on some of these computer-art land mines at the outset of digital scanning and Photoshop becoming mainstream. Powerful digital tools were then available to those normally thought of as stewards of photographic truth. The ideal of truth, especially in modern media, has become the national subject of satire and skepticism, as parodied by Stephen Colbert's popularizing “truthiness” in the American vernacular. But truth in the still image remains sacro-

sanct with serious photographers.

I asked our editor, Rob Sheppard, if the *Elephant* book had caught any flak at the last NANPA meeting or if it was a hot topic with any contributors to whom he had been speaking. He replied in the negative, nothing was buzzing around it like the early experiments by Art Wolfe in his *Migrations* book back in 1994. Still, I wrote an editorial (“In This Issue,” February 2007) about the general subject of authenticity, and we subsequently received an e-mail from photographer Kevin Schafer reminding us that the “Last Frame” in the very same issue was a digital composite. This launched an impromptu conversation between Rob and I about one of our favorite water-cooler subjects: manipulating truth by digital means versus compositional means. I pointed out that, in reality, composition—as in how a photo subject is selected and/or cropped and/or presented and/or published (or not published)—constitutes a control of the truth that's far less easy to detect than digital manipulation and is perhaps more manipulative of the truth. Kevin Schafer has made one of his specialties rain forests, including Costa Rica. Rob recently had visited the country and remarked how surprised he was at how little rain forest there was compared to what he had expected. He had driven past miles and miles of plantations, only to find pockets of natural forest. Yet, for both of us (I've never been to the country), we always had based our

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impressions on the wondrous images that we've seen from Schafer, Michael and Patricia Fogden and others. Rob recounted an NPR program that referred to this sort of imagery as "nature pornography," one of those hyperbolic expressions to intensify the debate.

The photographic implication to the uninitiated is that the single image is representative of a larger truth. We've been conditioned to see that way as an audience and taught to create that way as photographers. If we see a photo of an oasis grotto in a Southwest slot canyon by David Muench or Jack Dykinga, we take this to be representative of many more like it. Seeing countless orange-eyed tree frogs clinging to bromeliad leaves and Froot Loops® tucans in trees has led us naively to assume that Costa Rica is carpeted with this primal and protected forest. The two photographs in *Newsweek*—an aerial shot of an elephant herd in Sudan and another of a kob herd, along with a few optimistic words of text—speak volumes about how the region will be perceived as an inadvertent Eden, a delightful accident of civil war. These herds could represent a vast population or a last stand. For right now, the former may be the case, but I wouldn't be surprised to see the same photographs published years from now to represent the latter. It all depends on how the caption reads.

As members of the print media industry, I've seen newspapers and news magazines take a serious economic and public-image hit in the new age of digital journalism, the World Wide Web and 24/7 television news. Ancillary to the jeopardy of print, which is now widely promoted in competing media, is the printed photograph as a foundation of investigative journalism—and nature photography is a form of photojournalism.

Karl sent me heart-wrenching photos and video from a recent trip to Myanmar, above the border with Thailand. China, to the north, is like a vast black hole sucking up all forms of wild-animal byproducts from Southeast Asia, much of it relating to what some might think of as a misguided association between certain animal parts and male virility or potency (with attempted black comedy, I joked why can't we just supply large

quantities of subsidized Viagra and Cialis that will deliver documented results and render the wild-animal placebos obsolete). Certainly, there are the dried tiger penises and tiger wine (bones and ginseng) that represent the demise of this spectacular species, and after awhile, you even start feeling sorry for the snakes that are skinned alive, but my heart broke when I saw Karl's take from a bear-bile farm, where animals are confined in cages like an oversized chicken farm. The bears are milked daily for their bile until the glands fail and then they're sold for meat. My hopes for worldwide attention were raised when CNN's Anderson Cooper aired an exposé on the animal trade in the area. But my heart sank when the coverage was superficial. As Karl explained, when CNN comes to town with their crew and cameras, the traders go into hiding. CNN just can't do what a single photographer can do with an innocuous tourist camera or a hidden camcorder—though traders are quickly wising up to the latter.

This made me think of the Walter Reed Hospital story of the recent past. It ran unrelentingly on TV, but it was *The Washington Post* that broke the story in the first place. You just couldn't get clearance for a broadcast crew to yield what a single reporter or photographer can ferret out. It's common knowledge that television news too often gets its leads from the print media. If newspapers suffer, I can guarantee that our overall newsgathering food chain will suffer.

Thus, the single photograph has the power to lead or mislead. It can be a celebration of beauty or "pornography." The survival of the still photo is essential to investigative journalism and environmental activism. And the *world not in order* genre needs to be an important part of our collective portfolio on the world. But making a regular practice of environmental tragedy can be depressing. Maybe I'm wrong, but I've sensed it wearing on Karl. He has made a lion-sized commitment and a big difference for one man, but it also has made a difference in him. In recent years, he has repeated to me that it's time to take a break and get back to the *world in order* photography for awhile. Even an eco-crusader needs to enjoy the healing powers of nature's remaining beauty. **OP**

You can see more of **Karl Ammann's** photography at www.karlammann.com.