

Foreword

I am excited to hear that Spain's Altamira cave - the Sistine Chapel of Palaeolithic art - may be reopened to visitors. I want to go deep inside the dark cavern, admire face-to-face the extinct bison and feel the presence of those early artists. With the eye of a painter, hunter and conservationist, I have viewed cave art in the Americas and Africa and have wondered about the representation of animals on these ancient walls and the vision of their creators. These men and women were more than painters: they were shamans - in essence, communal healers - with a rare capacity to change the perception of reality.

Like shamans, the best nature photographers use their skills for a purpose. They have seen the diversity, the beauty and the drama of the natural world but also witnessed first-hand the increasing loss of wilderness and biodiversity. Over time, this fuels a desire to 'heal nature' and to open the eyes of our communities.

Every year for the past 16 years, I have eagerly awaited the results of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition. I have never been disappointed. The collection of what now amounts to 20 books is extraordinary. They allow us to see thousands of photographs that capture unique moments and provocative visions.

London's Natural History Museum serves as the temple where this worship begins. In collaboration with hundreds of galleries and museums, the competition images are displayed to societies all over the world in what is the modern equivalent of the caves at Lascaux, Pintada or Altamira. With the exhibitions and coverage by books, magazines, the internet and other media,

this brilliant initiative reaches millions of people, communicating one message: wild nature is our best ally in tackling Earth's environmental problems.

Imagine the impact that the cave paintings had on the minds of young initiate shamans. Imagine them walking into the darkness of a cave and seeing, for the first time and in the dim light of flames, the images of rhinoceroses and cave bears. I believe the competition has had a similar impact on the visual imagination of young people. Indeed, as a judge of this year's competition, it was the power of the vision of the younger generation of photographers that I found particularly inspiring. Their pictures were stunning - some even surpassing those of their older peers.

What an initiation! I strongly believe that this new generation of nature photographers will become effective warriors in the environmental battles. We need them.

In the future, people will look at these photographs with curiosity and with anger at all the vanished species and wild places lost. And they will point their fingers at our generation. But change can happen. Hand in hand, artists and natural scientists can help create a new era in which humankind reviews its values and re-encounters its natural roots. And the shamans among nature photographers have the skills to be at the forefront of this movement.

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