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RAUNCHY ENCOUNTERS

ESSAY BY **BRANDI ROMANO & MIRIAM STEIN BATTLES**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **BRANDI ROMANO & LYLE KRANNICHFELD**

It was January 2022, a beautiful sunny day with calm seas and mild wind. The weather was perfect, with sunny skies and a warm breeze off the ocean. Our private boat had spent the morning whale watching off the southern coast of Maui. We were just northwest of Molokini Crater when a large dark object appeared in the water. Our first thought was that it was a massive log or piece of debris. As we slowly approached, the mysterious object “exhaled.” A humpback whale! Within seconds, there was another exhalation. Wow there were two. Possibly a mother/calf pair? The captain put the engine in neutral as required by law, as we were within 100yds. We watched and waited to see what the pair would do.

As they moved closer and surfaced for air, it became clear that they were both adults and one of the whales was strangely discolored (brownish/gray) and disfigured. We were all perplexed at what we might be seeing. Lucky for us, the whales decided to approach our boat. By law, we weren’t allowed to approach the whales but if they approached us, we were not required to leave.

Photograph by Lyle Krannichfeld.



A humpback whale authority, an underwater photographer with a specialty in Humpback whales and whale research, said these photos were “tremendous” and that he had never seen anything

AS CLEAR AS THESE PHOTOS, DEMONSTRATING MALE-MALE SEX IN HUMPBACK WHALES.

Excitement ensued and I grabbed my camera. Because of laws put into place to protect the whales, I wasn't allowed to slide into the water as I wished. But I got creative. I leaned over the swim step at the back of the boat. Wearing a snorkel, I contorted myself so that I could stick my head underwater. I submerged my camera and kept my finger on the trigger as the whales seemed to perform ballet underwater, locked together in what appeared to be a mating dance. On the other side of the boat, my friend Lyle did the same thing.

They were elegant as they swam through the water, locked together, twirling in the water and changing positions. The dominant whale, clearly a male based on a highly visible penis, was surprisingly tender, wrapping his flippers around what appeared to be its mate. Although humpbacks are one of the most studied of all whales, very little is known about actual humpback mating habits. I thought, “Am I the first person to witness this behavior?” I was dizzy with excitement and felt lucky to be seeing this magical encounter.

I was in awe of not just their size, but of the seemingly bad condition of the one whale. Even from above the surface, I could tell there was something seriously wrong. Their two massive bodies were within 6-8 yards of the boat. Once they had passed by, others on the boat who were keeping watch, informed me that the whales had turned around and were heading back to the boat. I prepared for round two with these two mysterious whales. Again, they passed directly by and elegantly circled once again. I was in utter disbelief and saddened. The injured whale was covered in lice and was devastatingly emaciated. With several more laps through the dirty lice-filled water, the whales moved on. I was exhilarated.

And then the moment of truth...I got up and looked at the LCD to verify what I had captured and my jaw dropped! I was stunned to see the two whales engaging in sexual behavior. It appeared they were mating, something never before seen or captured photographically in humpback whales, a major frustration to cetacean researchers. I wondered if I had just taken what could be scientifically important photos.

As I reviewed the photos, it was clear that one whale was critically ill and had a broken, festering jaw wound. Likely a ship strike. Tragic. It was so skinny that it probably hadn't been able to eat since it became injured and seemed to be slowly dying. Humpback whales have made a wonderful comeback from the days of whaling but they still face danger at the hands of humans. According to research carried out by the non-profit, Friend of the Sea, ship strikes kill more than 20,000 whales (of all species) every year. Humpbacks in both the Atlantic and Pacific populations cross dangerous shipping routes during their migrations.

Thoughts were racing through my mind at what was captured...an emotional encounter to say the least. My heart broke for the injured, starving whale's suffering. The other whale was perfectly healthy and seemed intent on sex. The injured whale couldn't seem to ward off the healthy whale's advances and he seemed oblivious to its condition and kept attempting to have sex with it. I believe the dying whale was trying to use the boat in an attempt to hide from its “attacker.” I will never know what happened to that whale but feel blessed to have experienced such a rare behavioral sighting.



Photograph by Brandi Romano.



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But wait! There's a twist! Interestingly, upon investigation with scientists over the coming weeks, it was determined by fluke patterns, that the injured whale was a male individual commonly seen in Alaska. It must have been ship struck during the migration to Hawaii. So now we know that it wasn't an actual mating because there was no female present but this raises all kinds of other questions.

Did the aggressive male know he was trying to "mate" with another male? Was he just too driven by instincts and hormones to be oblivious to the sick whale's condition and sex or was it another example of homosexual behavior in the animal kingdom? He pursued the sick whale and there was clearly sexual penetration...just like other species, male-male sex is possible in whales. Homosexual behavior has been witnessed in not just cetaceans, but primates too. But as in all mammals, all mating is sex but not all sex is mating.

To keep things interesting, sexual behavior towards a dying pod member has also been previously witnessed in humpbacks, narwhals and orcas. In 1986 narwhals approached a dying female with penises extended but nobody knows why. In 1996,

humpback males were seen approaching a dying whale with penises extended. I wondered if in this case, the aggressor knew it was having sex with a male or did it not care because this is something whales do as a form of protection to their dying kin? But if it was a protective position, why the sex?

As it turns out, male-male relationships are a big question in humpback whale research. An exciting video was taken in 2004 of what seemed to be a similar whale "sexy dance," but the video actually featured two males. Years later, photos got scientists excited because multiple whales with penises extended were visible, but it turned out that no female was present.

Researchers have never seen anything as clear as these photos that demonstrates male-male sex in humpback whales happens. But it raises so many more questions. These wonderful photographic moments in time are great but it will take years of research to find out how they fit into the bigger picture.

Perhaps someday scientists will know what the behavior in our photos indicates or means but I will cherish this encounter forever. **OG**



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A photograph of a forest floor covered in fallen autumn leaves. Sunbeams stream through the trees, illuminating the scene. The leaves are in various shades of orange, red, and brown. The trees are dark, and the overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

PORTFOLIO:
Minden Pictures
International
Year of Forests

PORTFOLIO

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FORESTS ARE MORE THAN TREES AT MINDEN PICTURES

Miriam A. Stein



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© Tim Fitzharris/Minden Pictures

Before European settlement, forests covered nearly one billion acres, or more than 50 percent, of what is now the United States. Today, about one-third of the nation is forested. The United States Forest Service defines 20 major forest cover types in the United States but the country boasts over 500 tree species, creating a diversity of landscapes. One such landscape is the Hoh Rainforest in Olympic National Park, Washington, shown here boasting mossy big-leaf maple trees.



Rainforests—this one in the Danum Valley Conservation Area in Borneo—are responsible for 28 percent of the world's oxygen turnover, the lush green foliage processing it from carbon dioxide through photosynthesis. The removal of carbon dioxide from the earth's atmosphere helps maintain an important yet delicate balance, the disturbance of which is commonly referred to as climate change. In addition to their global carbon sequestration services, rainforests are valuable sources of income on a more local level. Ecotourism and the trade of sustainable products benefit national economies and hundreds of native inhabitants. As of 2007, almost 100 such tribes live off the land deep within rainforests without significant contact with outside civilization.

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Minden Pictures is the first place I look for anything related to nature, so I wasn't surprised when the staff told me that 2011 is the International Year of Forests. Larry Minden started the agency 21 years ago, stocking it with world-renowned photographers, partnering with excellent international counterparts and keeping Minden Pictures alive when other stock houses were being absorbed by industry giants. As a whole, the entire staff at Minden is responsible for providing the photo, advertising and editorial community with the highest quality nature photography.

To compile a portfolio about forests using Minden photography was difficult due to the sheer wealth of options. The United Nations' goal in naming International Year of the Forests, is to raise awareness about issues and subjects pertaining to the "conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests." All types you wonder? Forests come in a multitude of classifications based

on geographic location and/or dominant tree species, creating a shocking variety separate and apart from what most people think of as "green, brown and autumn," colors. It seems there isn't a universally accepted system of global forest classification, but terms that one might recognize include rain, mangrove, broad-leaf, dry, deciduous, coniferous, tropical, temperate, old-growth, boreal, montane, cloud and more.

It is not the types of trees or forests that the United Nations wishes to bring awareness to but rather the issues surrounding forests and how they relate to the health of the planet and its human and non-human inhabitants. The official United Nations resolution cited the support of initiatives that include the Conventions on Climate Change and Biological Diversity and numerous Summits on Sustainable Development. In the declaration, the General Assembly aimed to strengthen the sustainable management and sustainable development as well as conservation of all forests for the benefit of current and future generations. The designation was celebrated with a launch at United Nations headquar-



© Pete Oxford/Minden Pictures

The Amazon, the world's largest tropical rainforest, represents more than half of the planet's remaining rainforests. Seen here is Coca Falls on the Quijos River. The Amazon is home to hundreds of indigenous tribes of people and constitutes the largest collection of living plants and animal species in the world. The rainforest is species-rich; 1,200 new species were discovered in the last decade and new species are discovered regularly. An important carbon sink for the planet, rapid deforestation threatens the rainforest's ability to absorb carbon from the earth's atmosphere.

Everything is intricately connected in the Amazon River Basin. As the world's second longest river and largest by waterflow, the Amazon River supports the rainforest so necessary for the planet's survival. The Amazon river dolphin, affectionately known as the pink river dolphin, elegantly navigates the Amazon's mangroves and floodplains. Threatened by habitat loss, river traffic, pollution and fishing, the dolphin's official IUCN status is ever-changing but the species is considered endangered by some conservation organizations.

ters in New York City, an international film festival and an impressive calendar of events scheduled almost daily worldwide.

While everyone has heard of climate change, some terms that might surprise people as being related to forests include desertification, deforestation, bushmeat trade, development, mining, river sedimentation, coral reef health, human poverty, survival of indigenous cultures, shrimp farming, fisheries collapse, global outbreak of disease, cancer-curing agents, biodiversity loss, primate orphanages, civil war, landslides, flooding and many more. Most impressive is that Minden Pictures has photos that could illustrate every one of the aforementioned subjects. Icing on the cake is that Minden's detailed captions could give anyone a cursory understanding of not only what is featured in the photo but how it pertains to environmental issues. This makes Minden not only a great resource for picture professionals in the field of natural history but anyone looking for an interesting visual story. And not just about trees. ●

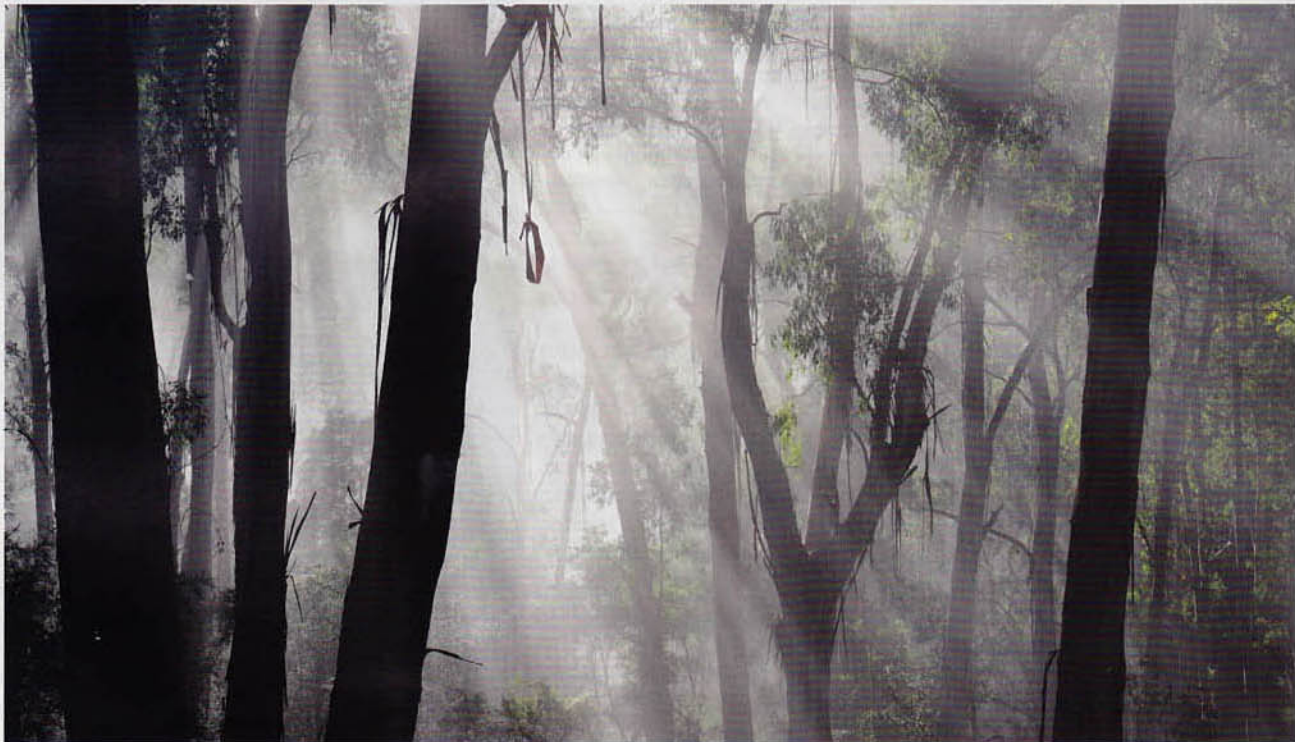


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32 China, the planet's most populous country, is estimated to have between 15-18 percent forest cover, declining rapidly due to population and industrial growth. Such decline threatens not only China's biodiversity but its human population. Desertification, erosion of farmland and loss of forest products all result from deforestation. Concurrently, endangered species such as the giant panda and golden snub-nosed monkey (female and young shown here) suffer the effects of habitat loss and forest fragmentation. China has launched reforestation efforts and the decline has actually slowed in recent years. Whether the growing country can strike a peaceful balance with its forests remains to be seen.



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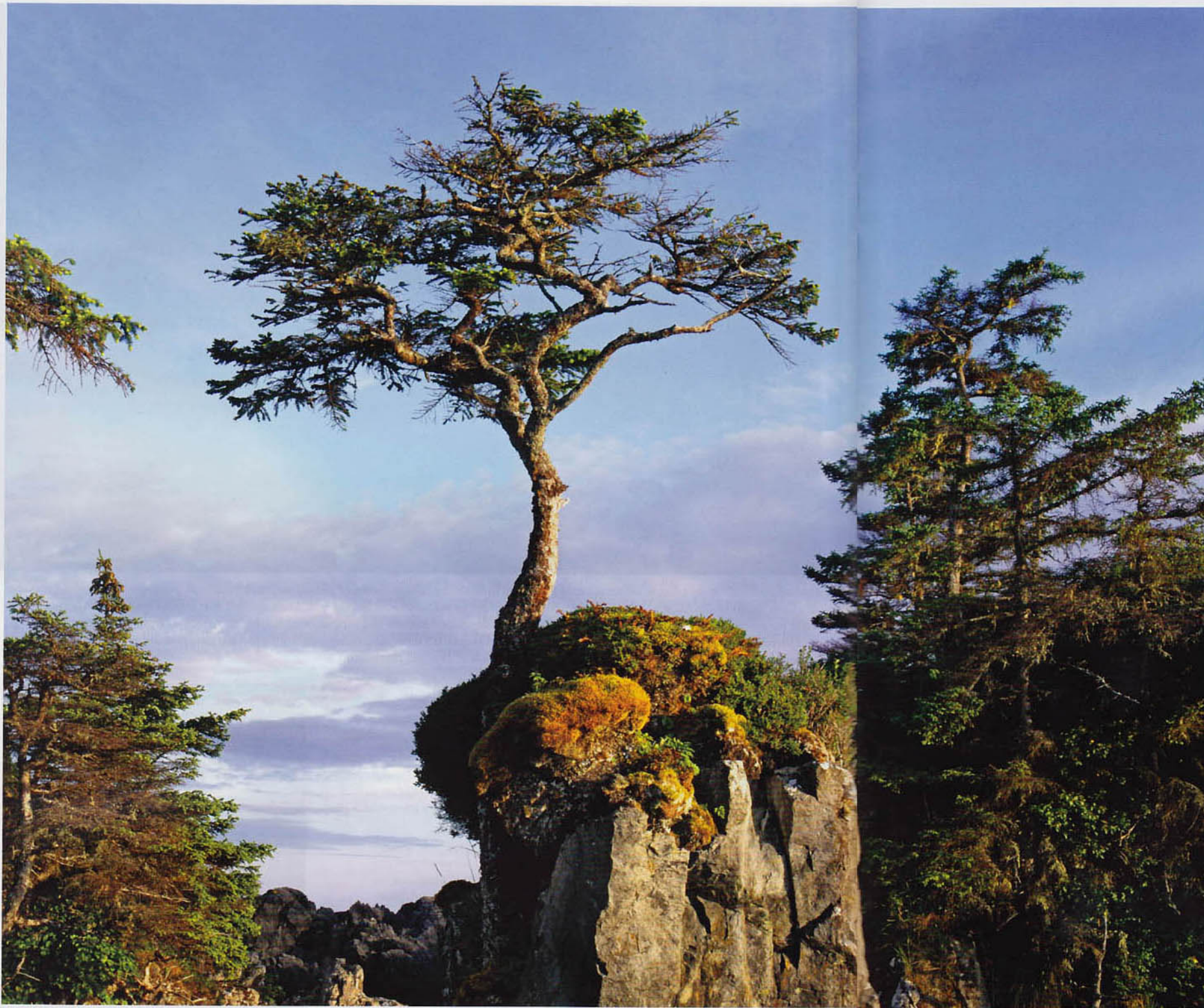
33 Forests are home to 80 percent of our planet's terrestrial biodiversity. The isolation of islands such as Madagascar produces thousands of species of plants, mammals, birds, amphibians and reptiles that can be found nowhere else on earth. For a country that is desperate to develop, forests make for an easy target. Madagascar has sought the help of developed nations and various organizations to reduce its dependence on the logging that threatens the country's unique biodiversity. Some of Madagascar's most interesting inhabitants include non-primate species such as colorful chameleons and frogs, like the Malagasy web-footed frog shown here, and chameleons.

At least 80 percent of the developed world's diet originated in the tropical rainforest. This includes fruits, nuts, spices and luxuries such as coffee and chocolate. West African countries are responsible for the production of 70 percent of the world's cocoa and the increased presence of "eco-friendly" chocolate companies has benefited many struggling communities. Sustainable practices of traditional cacao farming conserves forest biodiversity, while at the same time benefiting the livelihoods of cacao farmers. Here, a boy helps with the cacao harvest in Nigeria.

(Opposite page) During a period when Australia is plagued by drought and fire, Great Otway National Park remains a safe haven for a diversity of plant and animal species. Protected from logging and urbanization, the park's eucalyptus trees, shown here in early morning fog, support a strong population of Australia's charismatic koala. While their specialized diet and need for large foraging corridors threatens their survival in other parts of Australia, Great Otway's forests remain a koala stronghold.



© Cyril Ruoso/Minden Pictures



A single tree in the largest national forest in the United States can certainly make an impression. Tongass, Earth's largest remaining temperate rainforest, covers most of southeast Alaska, encompassing upwards of 18 million acres of forest, islands, mountains, glaciers, lakes fjords and muskeg. Tongass is home to 75,000 people who are dependent on the land for their livelihoods and dozens of unique species including five species of salmon and wolves that have learned to eat salmon.



One might picture bustling cities and landmarks in Europe but there survives a fair amount of forest cover throughout the European Union, with roughly 70 percent of it remaining in Sweden, Finland, France and Germany. European forests provide habitat to many rare species, including the European wolf and the European bison. Many countries in Europe have shown great creativity in preserving what's left of their forest inhabitants, providing road underpasses for endangered turtles and tennis ball nests for declining dormouse populations. Looking up into a leafless canopy in Jasmund National Park in Germany demonstrates that forests can be beautiful even in winter.



Not all forests are lush green and not everything important to a forest is found up in the trees. The majority of endangered Bengal tigers are found in India's forests where they roam large territories in search of food and mates; this tiger was photographed in Bandhavgarh National Park, Madhya Pradesh. The distribution and ecology of tigers puts them in direct conflict with the humans living in the planet's second most populous country. India's people rely on forest resources and products for their livelihoods but also clear forested areas for agriculture and development, leaving India's forests highly fragmented.