

# I N H E R I T T H E D U S T

N I C K B R A N D T

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I grew up in England, home of the elk, lynx and brown bear, of the wolf and wolverine and cave lion, of the woolly mammoth and woolly rhinoceros. Glorious creatures, a wonder to behold as they roamed across the hills and forests of southern England. Of course, this was before my time.

This book is printed in Rhode Island, in the north-eastern United States, home of the saber-toothed tiger, giant ground sloth, and American cheetah. Also (ah, for a time machine), long before my time.

For each of us, wherever we live on the planet, animals such as these walked in the very place where we are sitting now. But - unless you are living somewhere certain to make me very jealous - most of these animals are long gone.

Meanwhile in parts of present-day Africa - albeit fewer parts by the day - sometimes even more extraordinary animals DO still roam.

East Africa. Where you can still cast your gaze across the plains, and see multiple species....

...elephants, giraffes, zebra, buffalo, gazelles, impala, hippos, lions, jackals, cheetah....

It's the primal glory of such a land, shared by so many different creatures, that has a visceral impact on most humans that see this, that has the ability to fill the most jaded of us with a profound sense of wonder.

But the destruction of these animals, of these African places, is not happening in the past where we grew up, but in our own immediate present.

If we follow our present path of development and destruction, in just a few years time, rural African children will be as uncomprehending that elephants and giraffes

once roamed the fields in front of their home, as we are that woolly rhinos once lived where our nearest shopping mall now stands.

Keep going at this pace, and the unique megafauna of Africa will be rapidly gone the way of the megafauna of America and Europe, which was wiped out by far fewer men, with far less technology, many centuries ago.

This was the genesis for this new body of work, *Inherit The Dust*.

Genesis. We are living through the antithesis of genesis right now. All those billions of years to reach a place of such wondrous diversity, and then in just a few shockingly short years, an infinitesimal pinprick of time, to annihilate that.

And East Africa is a microcosm of that. It just happens to be the microcosm where I photograph, and about which I know most.

However, perhaps the majority of us still think that the destruction here in Africa is to do with poaching, feeding the insatiable demand for animal parts from the Far East. Actually, as I've come to realize myself over the last few years, with a growing sense of foreboding, it's so much more complex and monumental than that.

Mainly, it's about all of us. Significantly, it's about the terrifying number of us, and the impact of the very finite amount of space and resources for so many humans.

I conceived this project in early 2014 - to photograph life-size panels of animals in locations where they used to roam but, as a result of human impact on the environment, no longer do. Initially, I wondered whether I would find the locations that matched my pessimistic imaginings of a world in environmental disintegration. I was concerned that I might be exaggerating, overdramatizing.

Over the years, I've driven through countless areas where just ten to twenty years ago there was animal life, but now has been relentlessly wiped out - sliced up and reduced to bush meat, leaving vast expanses of land devoid of any large mammals.

In many of those places, however, even the recent absence of animals in a landscape can still appear relatively undramatic. Of course, it's only when you know what was there before that the loss is more keenly felt: the herds of elephants, giraffes and gazelles that not so long ago quietly moved across the plains and amongst the acacia trees, the heart-stopping sound of lions roaring on the still air at dusk and dawn. All deathly silent now.

There are many other places where the absence of animals is much more comprehensible, especially where cities expand outwards, or completely new towns and factories rise up. It's in some of these places where I took the photos in this book. But when you look through the photos, they actually cannot begin to capture the sheer scale of man's astonishingly rapid and escalating expansion into, and destruction of, the natural world.

The point is, by the end of the shoot, I realized that my concern that I could be exaggerating or overdramatizing was completely unfounded. In fact, just the opposite: how on earth to capture the real scale and speed of destruction in a photograph? I still don't really have the artistic solution to that one.

As my crew and I moved from location to location during the shoot, I continued to be disturbed and depressed: Time and again, places where zebras roamed only two years earlier, now whole new towns had risen out of the ground at extraordinary speed. One of those places is in the photo, *Road with Elephant, 2014*. That scene may look like a town disintegrating back into the earth, but it is actually moving in the opposite direction, spreading upwards and outwards.

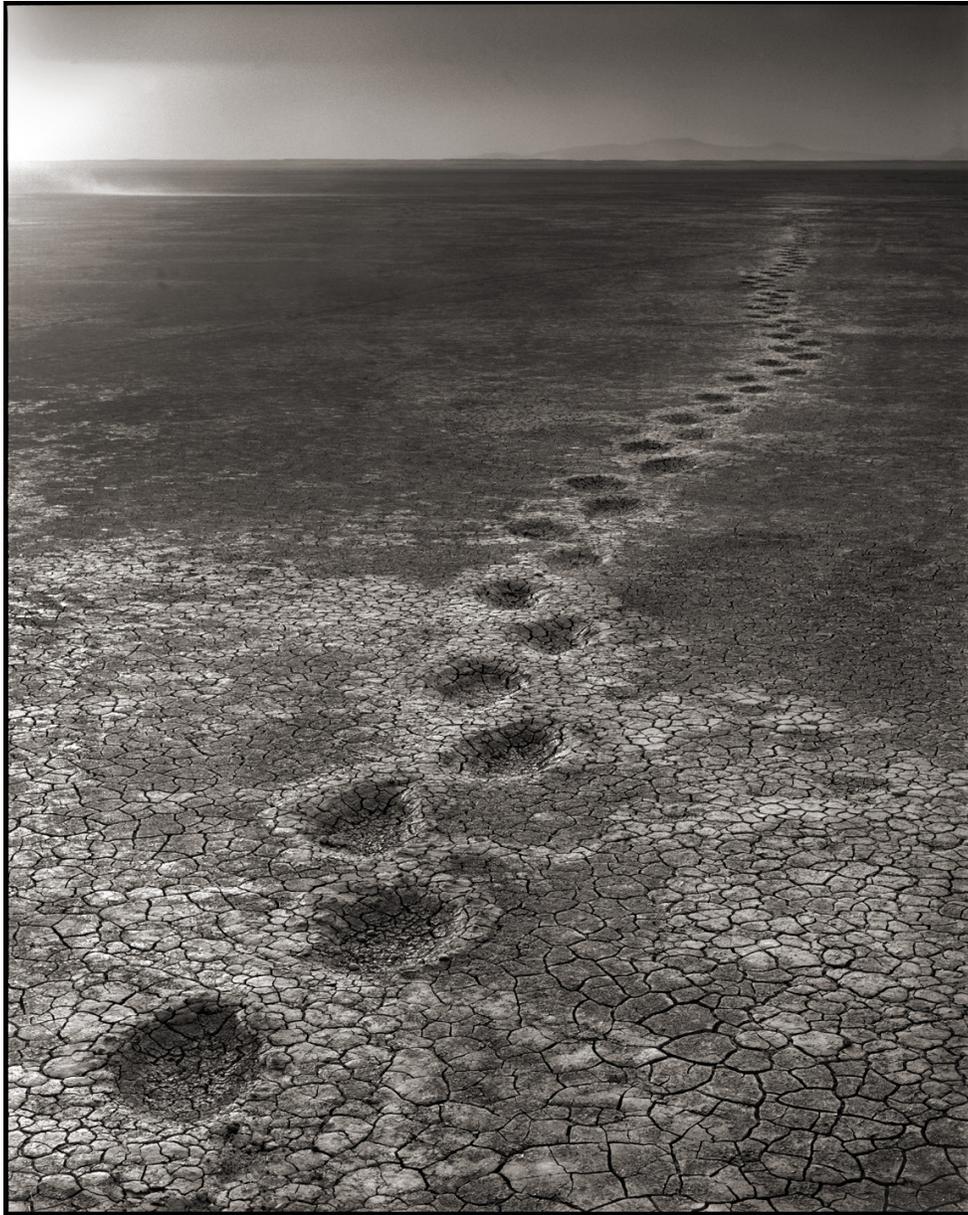
Frequently on the location scout before the shoot, I would select somewhere, only to return just four weeks later to discover it built up and out in such dramatic ways that it was quite fundamentally changed. In fact, the speed of development in this part of Africa reminds me of what I have seen in one other place in the world: China.

But then I had to stop and ask myself, am I just grieving for the loss of this world because as a privileged white guy from the West, I'll never again be able to see these animals in the wild?

Most African people would say that our Western societies trampled all over our own natural world centuries ago in the interests of economic expansion, and that in Africa, they never got much of a chance to develop economically until now. And so now it is their turn to economically grow. Why should they be deprived of the comfortable, material lives that we have in the West?

In some regards, it's a reasonable argument. But at what cost?

To state the obvious, protection of the environment and economic benefit do not have to be mutually exclusive. In fact, if you're smart, they go hand in hand.....



Three years ago, I completed the photographic trilogy, *On This Earth, A Shadow Falls Across The Ravaged Land* that over the course of a decade, catalogued the vanishing natural world of East Africa. The trilogy closed with the photograph above - a set of footprints belonging to a lone big male elephant walking away across a stark lake bed (out of the safety of a small park) towards the distant hills.

For me, these footprints left me wondering: Did he ever return? Is he still alive today? Or is he dead, speared by a farmer for raiding his crops, or killed for his ivory, with the tusks that grew out from his great beautiful head now carved into some trinket in the Far East?

However, this photo was taken in the Amboseli ecosystem. The bad part of this: once that elephant left the very confined and small Amboseli National Park and headed into those hills, he moved into a vast area of increasingly populated community land where there are no government rangers to protect him. In theory, any opportunistic poacher or irate farmer could kill him.

But the good part of this: also there, keeping a watchful eye day and night, are the rangers from Big Life Foundation, the non-profit that in 2010 I co-founded with conservationist Richard Bonham, in an effort to stem the tide of poaching in this region.

Today, five years since inception, Big Life protects more than two million acres with more than 300 rangers, 41 permanent and mobile outposts, 15 patrol vehicles, 2 planes for aerial monitoring, 3 tracker dogs, and a vast informer network across the whole region. Big Life was also the first organization in East Africa with co-ordinated cross-border anti-poaching operations, between the areas we patrol in Kenya and Tanzania.

The scary thing is that you can fit all 300 rangers inside a school gymnasium. How on earth can so few men protect so many animals, including that elephant, in all the isolated corners of such a large ecosystem?

The answer can be distilled down to one word. Community.

Conservation supports the community, and the community will support conservation.

This is the Big Life ethos. And so far, it is working.

When you look around much of Africa, and the apocalypse of environmental destruction, the lack of community support is one of the reasons why it can be so hard to protect ecosystems. For animal populations to survive, they need huge areas of land to roam. But there are few parks or reserves big enough for the animals to live out their lives safely. The animals don't just conveniently stay within any park's borders. And so frequently, when they leave those areas, they are killed.

So here, in this increasingly populated and developing part of the world, we believe that community support is the only way that the natural world stands a chance of surviving into the future. Because in parts of the world such as this - poor but teeming with natural wonders - ecotourism is the only truly significant source of

long term economic benefit. The land can only support so much herding or farming. Take away the animals, and there's almost nothing left of economic value.

Meanwhile, the economic value of these animals is astonishing. When an elephant is killed by poachers, the average sum earned by poachers and traders will be around \$20,000, with obviously none of it seen by the community. But it has been calculated that over the course of its lifetime, a single elephant will contribute more than \$1.6 million to the country's tourism economy.

So Africa is sitting on a veritable gold (elephant) mine. And as the continent-wide destruction continues, those ecosystems that do remain will become even more precious and highly valued.

We have a moral and humane imperative to protect the earth and its creatures. But from an admittedly unpoetic but pragmatic point of view, there is also enormous economic benefit.

That is partly why poaching in the Big Life areas has been so dramatically reduced since 2010. Those 300 rangers that cover over two million acres but would all fit inside a school gym? Every one of those locally employed rangers has a network of other eyes and ears - mothers and fathers, sons and brothers and sisters, who increasingly understand that the wealth of where they live is tied to the health of the ecosystem.

So you want to try and poach an elephant? Good luck, because the vast majority of the time, someone is going to see or hear you, and let the Big Life teams know.

However, with the best will in the world from local people, both they and the animals will be helpless in the face of the one thing that could render all our efforts ultimately for naught: Climate change. And let's not beat around the bush here: man-made climate change.

Sub-Saharan Africa is expected to be one of the world's worst-hit areas as the impacts of climate change escalate. As droughts intensify and become more frequent, many of the poor will have no choice but to take what depleted natural resources remain to stay alive.

However, as we all know, countries in the more developed world have the power to help, to mitigate the harm. Unfortunately, the anti-science crowd in the United States continues to willfully disregard the overwhelming scientific consensus on man-made climate change. Their greed, ignorance and obstructionism, and

deliberate dissemination of misinformation, is allowing, and will allow, many millions of people and animals to suffer and die, possibly for centuries to come. For me, these people are to be viewed as terrorists. And yes, I use the word "terrorists" deliberately. Because their actions are ultimately going to be the cause of much terror around the world.

Of course, many people may not care that man has killed all the animals and despoiled the earth, such is their focus on personal financial profit at the expense of all else. But as the environmentalist Judy Bonds once said, "There are no jobs on a dead planet".

Personally, I feel that if you are making an effort to do something, anything, to improve life on this planet - no matter how local, how small - it is good, it is important and worthwhile, and you should be thanked for it. Whether you are the President signing legislation for more renewable energy or designating a new national marine reserve, or you're deciding to no longer eat meat from factory farms, or you're collecting used cans to take to the recycling center, thank you for doing something.

However, if we continue to do nothing, future generations will be inheriting the sad remnants of a once-vibrant living planet. They will be inheriting dust.

As I write in November 2015, a three year old boy named Sainingo is living in the Chyulu Hills in southern Kenya.

Elephants and giraffes, zebra and gazelle, eland and oryx, lions and jackals and leopards also live here. Every day, Sainingo's father, one of the longest-serving Big Life rangers, goes to work to protect these very animals.

At least in one small corner of the continent. this is the Africa of today.

If we are willing to make the effort, it can also be the Africa of not just Sainingo's tomorrow, but of all our tomorrows.