

JOURNEY TO THE MIDDLE OF THE EARTH

with

SCENES OF TIME *photography*

Learn more about our efforts to raise eco-awareness and how we can all support local and international ecological protection.

Life and Times
Rural Ecuador



JOURNEY TO THE MIDDLE OF THE EARTH

Cover: Today, we are witnessing a climactic conflagration in our centuries-old conflict with Mother Nature. At the beginning of the rainy season, (top) spectacular storm clouds form above Quito, Ecuador, illustrating the power of two dynamic forces colliding. In a remote rural village, (bottom) the daily work of life goes on. As much as yours and mine, the lives of these rural villagers will be powerfully impacted by the environmental choices humanity makes over the crucial next decades.

The driving force behind Scenes of Time is the hope that today's environmental challenges can dissolve into collective solutions. Raising the eco-awareness of individuals may manifest a butterfly that impacts our entire species.

The week I spent in the Amazon Rainforest was one of those trips you never really “return” from—when the experience itself changes you or sharpens your world view in subtle ways that produce a butterfly effect and you’re never the same again.

I’ve been a photographer most of my life. I’ve been a semi-professional photographer for about five years. The scenes of time and nature I’ve captured have been growing steadily in quality and breadth, but I’ve always felt there was a certain coherent vision that was lacking.

I knew I was a decent photographer, but in the age of digital, a lot of us can stake that claim. But what made my photos anything special, anything other than some guy with a camera taking (better than average) pictures of his vacation? Until I could answer that, I couldn’t really “believe” in my photographs. Until then, I merely had the vague notion that my photos were documenting a vanishing natural world, and that was somehow important.

On our trip to Quito, Ecuador, one of the most biodiverse, fragile and threatened ecosystems on the planet, the vision for Scenes of Time finally coalesced.

Quito means “middle land,” in the language of the Quitus people who founded the city at the gravitational center of the Earth c. 980 AD. The Quitus pinpointed the precise location of the equator 1,000 years before Europeans ever did, and with much greater accuracy. In 1735, a French expedition “mis” placed the equator by more than 600 feet.

So we were headed to the middle of the Earth... an appropriate place for Scenes of Time (or any dream) to be born.

Our final destination lay inland of Quito, well off the beaten tourist path. We left the cultural capital of South America behind on a half-hour flight by small aircraft and after that, things really got interesting. A three-hour trip down the Napo River by motorized canoe was followed by a 20-minute hike down a boardwalk constructed over swampy jungle terrain and under a canopy so dense that the equatorial noonday sun was reduced to little more than muted twilight. When we came upon a stream, we piled into a paddle canoe for the final 20-minute stretch of our journey.

At last, we arrived. This was the interior of the Amazon Rainforest. Our eco-lodge in the jungle was so remote in fact that the ancestral lands of the legendary “Amazonian” headhunters (a tribe of cannibals) were less than a few dozen miles away. That part’s true—we really were that close. The part about them being headhunters, also true. Cannibals? Probably not. The real people behind the legends are ac-

tually two distinct groups of what we Westerners like to call “non-contact” people. They are known as the Tagaeri and the Taramenani (families) of the Huaorani (tribe). In total, their number has dwindled to several hundred, from a civilization that once included over a million individuals.

Through their stalwart perseverance, and across a 300-year timeline of Western influence, starting with the Spanish Conquistadores, and today morphing into the Oil Tycoon-adores, the Huaorani have managed to defend their lands against any unwanted contact with the West. To a man, they will gladly sacrifice themselves to defend their lifestyle for their children’s children.

We must consider the impact on the seventh generation.
—*Constitution of the Iroquois Nation*

The Huaorani have become known in recent decades for their guerilla raids on oil fields in the jungle. Wielding eight-foot long blowpipes knocked with poison arrowheads, and able to scale trees with the stealth of jaguars, the Huaorani materialize from the shadows, killing mercilessly and destroying everything and everyone of the West who

comes into contact with them or accidentally strays into their territory. They do so in self-defense. All of their brethren have long since been conquered, now wearing t-shirts and jeans from *Banana Republic* and wonder, as



they watch re-runs of *Gilligan’s Island*, “What’s the matter with these non-contact folk?”

Can’t they see what civilization can do for them? Why, yes, they can, actually. They see oil fires consuming their lands, rampant deforestation threatening their millennia-old lifestyle. Their world view and culture dates back 5,500 years, likely to the dawn of the Valdivia Culture, the oldest recorded civilization in the Americas. They have outlasted and outsmarted raids and conquering armies of some of history’s most formidable Empires including the Quitus, the Inca, the Spanish and today’s Oil Companies.

Yes, they have certainly seen what civilization can do to them.

On our trip to the Amazon Rainforest, we did not meet any Huaorani (you wouldn’t be reading this if we had), but we did witness something even more terrifying. On our three-hour motorized canoe ride, we passed an oil field where crude is extracted off the shores of the Napo River.

Natural gas from the same field is treated as an unwanted by-product, siphoned skyward through a long metal pipe where it fuels an eternal flame burning day and night.



Imagine the space shuttle blasting off from Cape Canaveral and you have a pretty clear idea what the flame billowing out the top of this metal syphon sounds like in comparison to the absolute stillness of the jungle. The fire will burn continuously day and night for at least five years. Only fractionally as valuable as “black gold,” extracting it would not be profitable. So they let it burn. Never mind the gross malfeasance of simply wasting fossil fuel, villagers living nearby suffer headaches, fatigue and a host of other chronic ailments, both physical and psychological. Yet as the oil companies see it, this is a small price to pay. And this is just one flame.

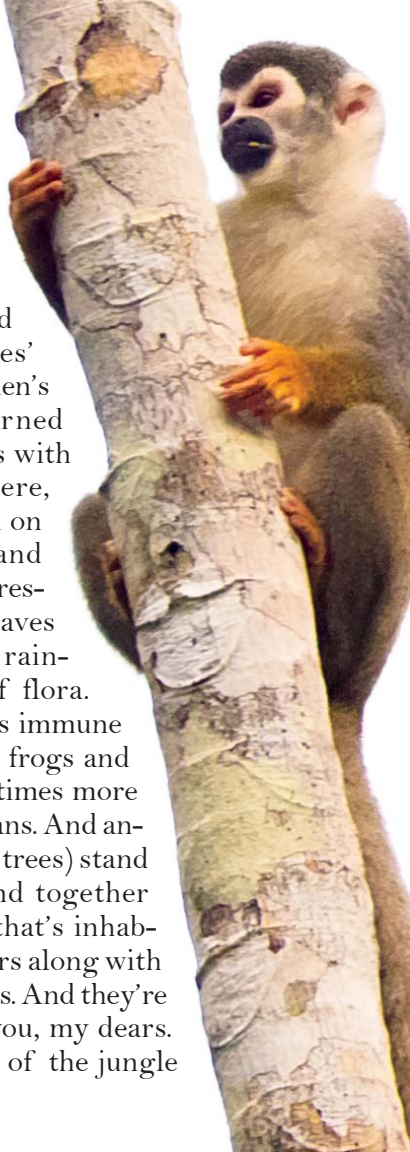
Our first night at the jungle lodge, looking out on inky black skies, there was a sort of light pollution I’ve never seen before on the horizon. On a country road leading into any major city in the U.S., you’re sure to see an orange cloud blanketing and consuming the night sky, hovering above the unseen horizon, constant as the (no-longer visible) northern star.

They’re coming to get you, all of you, my dears.
This is where oil companies don’t fear to tread.

On the Ecuadorian horizon, we saw a shimmering light, pulsing like a candle in a dark room, far, far away from the nearest electrically-lit human settlement. We learned this pulse was the aggregate light from a hundred such flames as the one we witnessed burning on the river. A huge oil field on land that used to be primary rainforest now scars the Earth not twenty miles from our lodge. A decade prior, that land had contained all the biodiversity we would experience

over the next few days in the trenches of the rainforest.

The lost world that emerges from the chrysalis of the jungle when one penetrates the interior truly is the proverbial ‘somewhere over the rainbow.’ It’s a world which morphs Jules Verne’s *Center of the Earth* and Tolkien’s *Middle Earth* into one. Horned spiders and nocturnal frogs with translucent bodies live here, alongside lizards who walk on water. Cures for tumors and asthma and malaria and depression can be found in the leaves of the most mundane (by rainforest standards) variety of flora. There are venomous snakes immune to the toxins of the poison frogs and sap from leaves a hundred times more deadly than cyanide to humans. And ancient kapoks (giants among trees) stand astride Walking Palms, and together weave a canopy overhead that’s inhabited by the regal Red Howlers along with five other species of monkeys. And they’re coming to get you, all of you, my dears. For these verdant trenches of the jungle



interior—home for a million billion other beings we’ve neither dreamed nor seen—are the front lines in the most horrific example of biological warfare humanity has ever waged. This is where oil companies don’t fear to tread.

I’m just some guy with a camera, but I’ve heard that some other guy once said, “to each according to his ability.”

The pristine, untouched stillness of a world which few humans will ever experience is likely not to exist at all in precious few decades if the corporations continue having their way. I fear the impotence of two families of non-contact Huaorani head-hunters against the insatiable thirst of the cannibal corporations that feed on the lifeblood of Mother Earth herself. We have become so far removed as a civilization that we have forsaken Nature. Our cities team with chronic illnesses, depression, anxiety and perhaps the most serious pandemic the modern world has ever seen—the “Green Plague,” Nature Deficit Disorder.

The frog does not drink up the pond in which he lives, so goes the Native American proverb. But we now do.

And all the while, as this is happening right under our noses, most people I’ve met, like amnesiacs, seem to be vaguely aware there’s something they’re forgetting. But they can’t quite put their finger on what. All of us, like the Huaorani, must draw a line in the oil sands. Much has been written about how it is not too late—how there’s still time to change our fate. But we humans don’t have all the

time in the world. (Only the Earth does.)

So what can we do? I’m not a political activist—I simply don’t have the stomach for it. And I don’t really want to hunt whaling boats from rubber rafts, either.

I’m just some guy with a camera. But I’ve heard that some other guy once said: *to each according to his ability*. The phrase has been attributed to everyone from Louis Blanc, Henri de Saint Simon, Jesus in the New Testament, and Carl Marx. (Imagine being a fly on the wall at that poker game.) No one knows for sure who coined the phrase. Personally, I like to think it was some guy with an eight-foot blowpipe after single-handedly routing the first scouting party from the first invading army of first World Empire. Actually, what he said was, “Oh, shit. There goes the planet.” But some things get lost in translation.

I don’t know how or why, but I happen to have the talent and ability for photography, and a love of nature. Meanwhile, launching my own successful web design company has afforded me the means to travel—the Perfect Storm.

It’s fair to say that Scenes of Time grew out of my reverence for the natural world as much as a love of photography.

Today, we are all witnessing humanity’s relationship with



nature approaching a critical threshold. If we blink, it may be gone. But when the shutter blinks, it’s frozen in time. Let’s hope that’s not the only way nature is preserved in a hundred years.

In Ecuador, there are no well-funded watchdog groups for the “untamed” jungle. That means local villages and farmers can too easily be “persuaded” to sell “their” land, or simply given the boot.

Yet things are being done. The United Nations’ program to reduce emissions from deforestation (UN-REDD) is meeting with some promising success. But we can’t rely on international groups to do all the dirty work.

The Earth does not belong to anyone; but everyone must do their part to defend it from the cannibals. If the series of global crises we face are to “dissolve into collective solutions,” as the documentary *The 11th Hour* so poetically puts it, those solutions must emerge not only from global powers, but the efforts and intentions of people like you

and me. *To each according to his ability.*

Traveling to the ends of the Earth isn’t a pre-requisite to re-ignite our relationship with nature. Many Scenes are captured right out my front door. Worldwide means right here, too.

The relatively new industry of eco-tourism is proving one effective means for individuals to help defend the environment. Eco-lodges like the one we stayed at are built sustainably from raw materials found in the jungle itself.

We met a native Kichwa guide building a new eco-lodge in the South of Equador. He and I shared a meeting of the minds. He told me the eco-tourism dollars his lodge brings in are returned to the local community, to protect the people and the forest. When I heard that, I was moved to say, “I believe making money isn’t a problem.

It’s keeping it for yourself that’s the problem.”



Wing span
Lake Renwick, Plainfield, IL



And in that moment, my vision for Scenes of Time coalesced. Scenes of Time's *raison-d'etre* is to raise our collective eco-awareness by helping others see what I see. If that vision resonates with you, consider purchasing a photo. My hope in selling my work is to raise money for eco-protection efforts of individuals worldwide.

butterfly effect of all will be the metamorphosis of our worldview, and the best way of achieving that is one person at a time.

—*Thom Tortorich, June 2011*

The most important butterfly effect of all will be the metamorphosis of our world view

Every threatened region has its own unique needs and concerned citizens like the man we met, so whenever possible, proceeds from specific prints you purchase will be donated directly to programs in the areas those photos were taken. Many Scenes of Time are captured right out my front door. If you'd like to support the local efforts being made, simply purchase a photo taken in your own hometown. Worldwide means right here, too.

Traveling to the ends of the Earth isn't a pre-requisite to rekindle our relationship with nature, either. All that's required is that everyone pays attention. The most important



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