

The world is in peril, both nature and humanity. Yet this cry of alarm is heard so often that it is now largely ignored. International conferences are routinely organized to debate global warming, sustainable development, water resources, destruction of forests, endemic poverty, the AIDS epidemic, housing needs and other facets of the global crisis. But the daily struggle for survival of the majority of humanity – and the appetite for comfort and profit of the minority – mean that, in practice, these fundamental problems are tackled only superficially. We have lost touch with the essence of life on Earth.

The modern notion that humanity and nature are somehow separate is absurd. Our relationship with nature – with ourselves – has broken down. As the most developed species, humanity may have a special, often dominant, relationship with nature, but is no less part of it. We cannot survive outside it. Yet accelerated urbanization over the past century has distanced humanity from the very animal and plant sources of life itself. We are living in disharmony with the elements that comprise the universe. We are disregarding the spiritual and instinctive qualities that until now have ensured our survival. We take grave risks when we distance ourselves from our natural roots, roots which in the past always made us feel part of the whole.

Only recently have we come to recognize the real possibility of nature's collapse. We live on a planet that can die. We use nuclear energy but do not fully understand the risks posed by secondary effects and by nuclear waste. We have accumulated unthinkable numbers of nuclear weapons that can be used in war or by terrorists. We are also threatened by environmental disaster. Industrial farming and large-scale cattle ranching are using techniques that decimate wildlife habitats. Soil and water are poisoned by excessive use of chemicals. What we produce is now merely a commodity to be traded. We are dam-



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Sebastião Salgado

Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado is embarking on another of his great photographic projects – seeking out places that are untouched by modern humanity. The Genesis project, supported by UNEP and UNESCO, is designed to highlight the beauty that still remains on the planet – and what will be lost if it is not looked after now.

aging the stratosphere and destroying the last portions of the tropical forests, with the parallel reduction of the photosynthesis that assures our survival. Our very existence is in danger.

This is tragically mirrored in the current state of humanity. Immense

wealth has been created through the labour of the entire world's population, but it is concentrated in the hands of all too few people, spawning tensions both within affluent societies and between a handful of rich countries and the rest of the world. We produce more food than ever and yet millions die of hunger. And in recent decades we have witnessed the worst acts of genocide of our history.

Throughout the 20th century, accelerating population growth and economic development destroyed the natural habitats of most of the temperate zones of the northern hemisphere. Now the focus of destruction has shifted to mega-diverse tropical regions. The 25 regions of the world (or 'hotspots', a concept developed by the British ecologist Norman Myers in the late 1980s) that account for more than half of the planet's species have already lost around 90 per cent of their natural habitat. And this extraordinary biodiversity is now facing its last stand in a mere 1.4 per cent of the world's land surface.

Only in wilderness zones does biodiversity still flourish. These drylands, coldlands and tropical forests, which represent around 46 per cent of the Earth's land area, contain as endemic only a tiny 1.6 per cent of the world's plants and 2.3 per cent of non-fish vertebrates. But they are crucial to maintaining regional ecosystems (such as water cycles) and even global ones (for example, carbon sequestration). These are also the last places on Earth where we can understand our origins as a species and find biological diversity in a pristine state.

Thus, for all the damage already caused to the environment, a world of purity, even innocence, can still be found in these wilderness areas. As an attempt to reconnect our species with our planet, I now intend to explore this world in order to record the unblemished faces of nature and humanity: how nature looked without men and women, and how humanity and nature long coexisted in what today we now call ecological balance ■



Top: Marine iguana (*Amblyrhynchus cristatus*), Rábida Island.

Above: Blue-footed boobies (*Sula nebouxi*), Roca Vicente, Isabela Island.

Right: Giant tortoise (*Geochelone elephantopus*) by the crater of Alcedo Volcano, Isabela Island.

These photographs were taken in January, February and March 2004, in the Galapagos, Ecuador.

Photographs by Sebastião Salgado/Amazonas images